NOTABLE DHAMMA TEACHERS

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella

Precise, penetrating teachings on mindfulness of the mind, the hindrances, and not-self

Andrea Fella

SOURCED FROM DHARMASEED.ORG

Contents

THREE-MONTH RETREAT - PART 2

What Versus Why	53 min	0
Exploring Vedanā - Feeling Tone	51 min	0
Practice In Daily Life	59 min	0
Wise and Balanced Effort	1h02	0
Body and Mind	1h00	0
Not Self and Selfing	57 min	0
What versus Why	1h00	0
Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)	1h00	0
Equanimity	1h02	0
Relax, Receive, Allow and Learn	54 min	0
Knowing A Mind Affected By Delusion	1h06	0
The Five Aggregates	1h01	0
Wisdom at Work	1h01	0
Disenchantment and Dispassion	1h04	0
Practicing Freedom	58 min	0
Qualities Of Wise Mindfulness	1h01	0
Mindfulness of Feelings (Vedanā)	1h01	0
Relying On This, Abandon That	54 min	0
Neither Tarrying Nor Hurrying	51 min	0
Disenchantment and Dispassion	59 min	0
Aṅgulimāla's Journey	1h02	0
Words of Encouragement	59 min	0
Skillful Supports for Mindfulness	1h01	0
Supports for Continuity	58 min	0

Mettā Practice: Difficult Person and All Beings	58 min	0
Five Aggregates Review and Exploring the Sense of Self	1h01	0
Recognizing Delusion	1h00	0
Transcendent Dependent Arising	59 min	0

INSIGHT MEDITATION

Layers	1h00	0

PRACTICE IN DIFFICULT TIMES

Practice in Daily Life	35 min	0

FEBRUARY 2010 MONTH LONG

Energy and Effort	1h00	0
The Wandering Mind	1h01	0
Impermanence (Aniccā)	1h01	0
The Obvious	58 min	0
Not Knowing	52 min	0

DAYLONG IN THE STYLE OF U TEJANIYA

Part 5 of 5: Discussion (PM) — Daylong in the Style of U Tejaniya	29 min	0
Part 4 of 5: Working with Emotions	28 min	0
Part 3 of 5: Discussion (AM) — Daylong in the Style of U Tejaniya	29 min	0

CONCENTRATION RETREAT

Skillful Means for Concentration	1h03	0
From Stillness to Movement: The Place of Concentration on the Path of Insight	56 min	0
Factors that Hinder and Support Concentration	1h05	0
Using Concentration to See Things as They Are	1h06	0
Comfortable Breath, Comfortable Mind	1h02	0
Mettā Practice Day 4	38 min	0

Concentration in the Service of Liberation	1h02	0

MINDFULNESS OF MIND

Ordinary	46 min	0

WISE ATTENTION AND OPENING THE HEART

The Present Moment	59 min	0
The Skill of Meditation	1h00	0

THREE-MONTH RETREAT - PART 1

Faith, Wisdom and Doubt	57 min	0
The Five Aggregates	1h04	0
The Wandering Mind	1h03	0
Aversion and Insight	1h02	0
The Cycle of Suffering: Paṭicca Samuppāda	58 min	0
Crossing the Flood	58 min	0
Hindrances Can Wake Us Up	1h03	0
Recognizing Delusion	1h01	0
Investigation	59 min	0
Perception and Papañca	53 min	0
The Experience of Wisdom	1h00	0
Crossing The Flood	55 min	0
Supports for Continuity	57 min	0
Exploring Vedanā (Feeling Tone)	1h03	0
Untangling the Tangle	53 min	0
Not-Self and Selfing	1h02	0
Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)	1h03	0
Mettā Practice: All Beings	47 min	0
Not Knowing	59 min	0
Supports for Mindfulness	1h00	0

Relax Connection with the Breath	1h01	0
Awareness of Thoughts and Thinking	1h02	0
Understanding Delusion	1h06	0
Dependent Co-Arising (Paṭicca Samuppāda)	1h02	0
Non-Clinging and Freedom	57 min	0
The Simile of the Cloth	1h01	0

TUESDAY TALKS—2011

Travelling the Eightfold Path Towards Insight and Liberation	37 min	0

THANKSGIVING INSIGHT RETREAT

Wise and Balanced Effort	1h01	0

FELLA AND SCHARF

Opening Talk	1h16	0
Mindfulness	53 min	0
Guided Mettā (2)	45 min	0
Questions	11 min	0
The Hindrances	56 min	0
Guided Mettā (4)	47 min	0
The Eightfold Path and Freedom	53 min	0

MAY INSIGHT RETREAT

The Eightfold Path and Liberation	58 min	0

FEBRURARY 2013 AT IMS - FOREST REFUGE

Using Dukkha as a Guide	56 min	0
The Wandering Mind	1h01	0
Wisdom and Insight	56 min	0
Living the Eightfold Path	58 min	0

THREE MONTH - PART 1

Wise Mindfulness	58 min	0
Investigation	57 min	0
Mettā Practice: Working with Difficulty	58 min	0
Awareness of Awareness	59 min	0
Mindfulness of Feeling: Vedanā	1h02	0
Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)	1h01	0
The Path Reflects the Goal	58 min	0
Unpacking Right Mindfulness	56 min	0
Body and Mind	1h00	0
Patience	57 min	0
Mettā Practice: Self, Benefactor and Friend	44 min	0
Investigating Mindfulness Itself	1h00	0
Perception and Papañca	1h00	0
The Experience of Wisdom	1h03	0

THANKSGIVING INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT

Wisdom and Effort	1h01	0
The Experience of Feeling (Vedanā)	58 min	0

FEBRUARY MONTH LONG RETREAT - 2014

Understanding and Abandoning	59 min	0
The Disappearance and Reappearance of Mindfulness	1h00	0
Wising Up to Delusion	1h05	0

CONCENTRATION

Factors that Hinder and Support Concentration	57 min	0
Concentration in the Service of Liberation	1h01	0

MARCH MONTHLONG

Satipaṭṭhāna and Mindfulness	54 min	0
Attitude and Delusion	1h02	0
Wisdom is Happening	59 min	0
The Mindfulness Factor of Awakening	52 min	0
Deepening Trust	46 min	0
Qualities of Mindfulness	55 min	0
Feeling Tone (Vedanā) - Retreat at Spirit Rock	1h01	0
Brahmavihāra Practice - Equanimity (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	40 min	0

DPP5 AT ANGELA CENTER MAY 2016

Four Noble Truths	46 min	0
Non-clinging Part 1: Exploring the Aṭṭhakavagga	1h15	0

THREE-MONTH PART 2

Awareness of Hindrances: It Is Possible	1h01	0
Crossing The Flood	1h02	0
Compassion Practice	44 min	0
Core Truths and Core Wishes	53 min	0
Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)	58 min	0
Wisdom at Work, Taste of Nibbāna	59 min	0

CONNECTING MIND AND HEART

The Story of Aṅgulimāla	59 min	0

FEBRUARY MONTH-LONG RETREAT

Exploring the Comings and Goings of Mindfulness (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	59 min	0
Effort & Energy (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h01	0
Five Aggregates (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h03	0

MARCH INSIGHT MEDITATION 1-MONTH RETREAT

Qualities that Support Mindfulness	59 min	0
Exploring the Edges of the Wandering Mind	1h03	0
The Cycle of Suffering: Paṭicca Samuppāda (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h01	0
Perception and Papañca (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h00	0
Not Self and Selfing (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h02	0

JUNE 2018 AT IMS- FOREST REFUGE

Recognizing Awareness	56 min	0
Attitude	37 min	0
Trust	45 min	0
Recognizing Delusion	57 min	0
Awareness of Awareness	43 min	0
A Simple Mind	44 min	0
Mental Formations: Constructing Our Lives	48 min	0
Impermanence	43 min	0
Not Knowing	44 min	0
Teachings to Bāhiya	48 min	0
Spontaneous Vajra Song	5 min	0

FEBRUARY MONTHLONG

From Why to What (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	55 min	0
Day 6 Brahmavihāra - Mettā: Dear Friend (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	43 min	0
Exploring the Edges of the Wandering Mind	1h06	0
Day 20 Muditā Practice (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	44 min	0
Not Knowing (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h02	0

AWARENESS AND WISDOM: AN INSIGHT RETREAT IN THE STYLE OF SAYADAW U TEJANIYA

Checking the Attitude (Online Retreat at Spirit Rock)	39 min	0
Aware of Awareness (Online Retreat at Spirit Rock)	47 min	0

ANDREA FELLA ONLINE RETREAT

Retreat Opening Part Two	57 min	0
Retreat Opening Part One	17 min	0
Taking the Practice Home	32 min	0

FEBRUARY INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT: A RETREAT FOR EXPERIENCED STUDENTS WITH JAMES BARAZ, SALLY ARMSTRONG, KAMALA MASTERS, ANDREA FELLA, DAWN SCOTT, BOB STAHL, PHD, LOUIJE KIM AND MARTHA "RASIKA" LINK

Working with the Dear Friend	50 min	0
Exploring the Wandering Mind	1h02	0
Mindfulness of Thoughts	40 min	0
Practicing Compassion	52 min	0

MARCH INSIGHT MEDITATION ONE MONTH RETREAT

Mindfulness of Difficult Mental States (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h05	0
Guided Mettā Practice: Neutral Person (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	43 min	0
Dependent Co-Arising Part 1 (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h03	0
Choiceless Attention	56 min	0
Dependent Co-Arising: Part 2 (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h02	0
Disenchantment and Dispassion (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h04	0
Equanimity Practice	29 min	0
The Story of Aṅgulimāla (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h00	0

FEBRUARY INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT--1 MONTH

Mettā Practice: Self and Benefactor (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	47 min	0
Mindfulness of the Body and Exploring the Elements (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	58 min	0
Mindfulness of Feeling Tone (Vedanā)	1h02	0
Exploring the Five Aggregates and the Sense of Self	1h03	0
Wisdom and Freedom (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	59 min	0

JUNE 2024

Evening Talk: Five Aggregates and Studying Selfing	59 min	0
Recognizing Wisdom	22 min	0
Evening Talk: Five Aggregates and Emptiness	1h00	0

MAY 2025 AT IMS - FOREST REFUGE

Awareness with Thoughts and Thinking	1h00	0
Working with Difficulty	46 min	0
Supports for Continuity	1h04	0
Noticing Perception	1h00	0
Transcendent Dependent Arising	1h01	0
Wisdom and Trust	41 min	0
Awareness and Wisdom Doing their Jobs	41 min	0

THREE-MONTH RETREAT – PART 1 - 25PT1

Mindfulness	1h02	0
Untangle the Tangle	54 min	0
Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)	1h04	0
The Four Noble Truths as Direct Experience and Insight	1h04	0
Disenchantment and Dispassion	1h01	0

THE HEART OF AWARENESS: EXPLORING THE FOUNDATIONS OF MINDFULNESS

Opening to the Attitude about Experience	1h02	0

WHEN AWARENESS BECOMES NATURAL - AN U TEJANIYA-STYLE INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT - 26UTAS

Love and Wisdom	47 min	0

AUGUST 2026 AT IMS FOREST REFUGE

Retreat Opening: Establishing Mindfulness, Refuges, and Precepts	1h07	0
Supports for Continuity	47 min	0
Continuity	53 min	0

Recognizing Delusion	1h05	0
Awareness of Awareness	47 min	0
Allowing What Has Come to Be	45 min	0
Rhythms of Practice	49 min	0
Not Knowing	43 min	0
Aware... Just This...	43 min	0
The Mind of Freedom	54 min	0
Release - and Not Picking Up	46 min	0
What is True in This Moment?	47 min	0

STANDALONE TALKS

The Present Moment	51 min	0
The Ordinary That Transforms	52 min	0
Why vs. What	55 min	0
Hindrances: Restlessness	44 min	0
Practicing with Vedanā	38 min	0
Yathābhūta: Seeing Things As They Actually Are	54 min	0
Where Rubber Meets the Road: A Series on Mindful Living	38 min	0
Where Rubber Meets the Road: A Series on Mindful Living	38 min	0
The Rebellious Path of Freedom from Habits of Mind	43 min	0
Intention, Motivation and Purpose	37 min	0
Intention, Motivation and Purpose	37 min	0
Mindfulness in Close Relationships	43 min	0
Thus Have I Heard	44 min	0
Sustaining Relationships	44 min	0
Thus Have I Heard: Fear and Dread (MN 4)	46 min	0
Becoming Freedom	48 min	0
Becoming Freedom	48 min	0
Buddha's Practical Advice for Maintaining Material Gains and Wealth	27 min	0
Goals in Meditation: Commitment to Enlightenment	30 min	0

Goals in Meditation: Commitment to Enlightenment	30 min	0
Nurturing the Process	35 min	0
Cooling the Fire	43 min	0
Cooling the Fire	43 min	0
Milestones on the Path to Freedom: Assessing Progress in Practice Wisely	42 min	0
Refuge in Saṅgha with Andrea Fella and Amana Brembry Johnson	1h01	0

CHAPTER 1

What Versus Why

Andrea Fella · 53 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella draws a crucial distinction between two modes of understanding our experience: the intellectual exploration of 'why' things happen versus the direct investigation of 'what' is happening in the present moment. Drawing from the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), she explains the Buddha's teaching on wise attention (yoniso manasikāra), showing how attending to present experience through the framework of the Four Noble Truths differs fundamentally from ruminating about past and future.*
>
> *Through compelling personal examples—from embarrassment over forgotten lines in a play to the discovery that loneliness was triggered by a digital alarm clock—Fella illustrates how suffering and its causes arise in the present moment, not in history. She demonstrates that witnessing these present-moment conditions can powerfully decouple our reactivity from habitual patterns, sometimes more effectively than years of intellectual analysis.*
>
> *The talk culminates in Fella's account of working with deep-seated self-hatred during a three-month retreat. While psychological insight into the historical origins provided some relief, it was the precise moment-to-moment observation using the 'contact-unpleasant' technique that finally undermined the belief structure supporting this painful pattern. This teaching offers practical guidance for practitioners struggling with entrenched mental habits, emphasizing that freedom comes not from understanding why we suffer, but from directly witnessing the impermanent, not-self nature of present-moment experience as it unfolds.*

As human beings, we seem to be very curious about why things happen. Many good things have come from this tendency. Civilization itself really owes its origin to this quest for why—science, technology.

We also seem to be particularly curious about why things happen to me. And we have a lot of experience, especially in this culture, I think, of exploring, intellectualizing, thinking about why things are happening to us.

Looking at our experience, looking at our life through this framework of why things are happening can yield some intellectual understanding about our experience, about the causes and conditions leading to our experience. And this can be helpful. Sometimes, if we're reactive—for example, if somebody says something that we feel is hurt-

ful to us—we may know this person and know that it wasn't intentional. Having that understanding can mitigate our response, at least our outward response to the situation.

But sometimes we mistakenly think that this intellectual understanding will actually change our response, change our feelings about the situation—that we can, through intellect, through reason, tell ourselves not to feel a certain way because we see that it doesn't make sense. Actually, often this kind of intellectual understanding doesn't really cut through to the deeper aspects, the roots of our experience, what we might call—what I think the Buddha calls—the underlying tendencies of our experience, the latent tendencies.

It can help to tap into a different way of being, a different way of understanding our experience than through the thought process, through thinking back, understanding why things are happening. We have so much experience with the thinking, with the understanding of why, with the intellectualizing. We're very practiced at that. And we are much less practiced at an exploration of understanding through what is happening as opposed to why.

The Buddha taught wise attention as a way to understand our experience. I'll read you a little bit from one of the suttas about wise attention.

First he discusses attending unwisely. He says, "An untaught ordinary person does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he attends to those things unfit for attention and does not attend to those things fit for attention."

This is how she attends unwisely: "Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?" Or else she is inwardly perplexed about the present thus: "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?"

All of those questions—we could look at them as forms of "why is this happening to me?"

The Buddha goes on to talk about wise attention: "A well-taught noble disciple understands what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he does not attend to those things unfit for attention, and he attends to those things fit for attention."

She attends wisely: "This is suffering." She attends wisely: "This is the origin of suffering." She attends wisely: "This is the cessation of suffering." She attends wisely: "This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering."

When I first read this—this is one of my favorite suttas—I didn't really understand so much what this wise attention through the Four Noble Truths meant. I thought it was just a reflection on the Four Noble Truths. But then in looking at it a little more closely, I saw what he said is: "This is suffering."

This is the cause of suffering. *This*, what I am experiencing right now, is suffering. What I'm experiencing right now is the cause of suffering.

So I think the sutta is saying that we can use the Four Noble Truths as a framework for exploring our present moment experience. Suffering occurs in the present moment. It doesn't occur in the past or the future. If we are suffering over something that happened in the past, what's going on is that thoughts are arising right now, in the present moment, creating the suffering right now, in the present moment.

Some years ago, I was an actress in a play. And one night, I forgot my line during the performance. I tried ad-libbing, saying other things so that the other actors would realize, "She's forgotten her line, I need to jump in and help." After a few attempts, I realized they weren't picking up the cue. And I ran out of things to say.

There was this gaping silence. The wall between the audience and the actors broke down. I looked out and saw everybody staring at me, waiting for me to speak. It was a very embarrassing moment. Very embarrassing.

For many years afterward, when something triggered that memory, I would feel the embarrassment all over again. And on one three-month retreat, I remembered that moment many, many, many times. I got to really see what was happening. The thought would appear—I was on the stage looking out—and the feeling of embarrassment would come over me.

I began to recognize that the suffering, the embarrassment happening there in my room in the gym, was happening right now. The conditions for it had happened in the past: I had been on that stage, I had forgotten my lines, the embarrassment had happened in the past. But the suffering I was experiencing on the three-month retreat was happening right now. It was being constructed all over again, right in the present moment.

So not only does suffering occur in the present moment, but as the Buddha teaches, this is the cause of suffering—the cause also occurs in the present moment. The *why* occurs in the present moment. Why we are suffering, the direct cause of why we are suffering, happens in the present moment. When we can see this direct cause, the direct why, in the present moment, our suffering can start to fall apart. We see it as just conditioned phenomena arising and passing. As Carol said this morning, "empty phenomena rolling on"—which Munindraji said many times.

Another example: in the early years of my practice, one of my main practices was observing my emotions in daily life. At one point, after the breakup of a long relationship, I was observing a lot of loneliness. In particular, I noticed that when I went to bed at night, I was lonely. This didn't particularly surprise me. I figured I understood why I was lonely going to bed at night.

But I was in the practice of observing my emotions, so I just started noticing this loneliness as I would go to bed. I would just notice it. And one night, as I was getting ready for bed, I noticed that the loneliness began when I set my alarm clock. I thought this was kind of odd. But I just kept going, kept on getting ready for bed. For the next several nights I observed this same pattern: as I set my alarm clock, the loneliness appeared.

One night, as I was setting my alarm clock—a little digital alarm clock—I noticed a thought pass through my mind. I was with my ex-boyfriend in Disneyland, looking up at a marquee in Tomorrowland where there was a digital clock. I could see the connection between what I was doing and the memory. There was an associative link between the digital clock and the memory. And I could also see that the cause of the loneliness was a reactivity to that memory: "Oh, poor me, all of those good times are over."

It didn't actually have anything to do with, "Now I'm single, now I'm going to bed by myself," which is what I had assumed the loneliness was about. The actual cause of the loneliness in that moment was the reactivity to a memory triggered by a physical experience—seeing the clock.

Now, the loneliness was there anyway that evening. But I was kind of amazed at the way the mind could see how things were triggered, how things were caused. What amazed me even more was the next night when I went to bed—

I was setting the alarm clock, and of course the memory came back. The thinking about my ex-boyfriend returned. But what really surprised me is that the loneliness did not come back. And in fact, that regular every-night going-to-bed-lonely simply stopped. It was as if the seeing of the link—the loneliness being a reaction to a thought—had somehow decoupled the reactivity to that memory.

I had thought the cause of the loneliness was the whole history of the relationship and the breakup, but it was really just a reaction to a thought. That's all. That was the cause of that loneliness. Witnessing in the present moment what is happening, seeing that directly, can have a powerful impact on the deeper roots of our conditioning.

There's an important distinction between the "why" of history and seeing the "why" of the present moment. As I hope this example about the clock shows, the "why" of history had to do with a lot of "poor me, I'm single, I'm never going to be happy again, I'm never going to have a relationship again." But the "why" of the moment was seen in the experiencing of the moment itself. It was a thought, a reaction to a thought, the arising of an emotion—just this empty phenomenon rolling on.

So how do we look at what is actually happening? We've been talking a lot about this in the instructions. This is investigation—investigating our experience, investigating the present-moment phenomenon of our experience. What is happening right now? Emotions, bodily sensations. Often we want to understand why these are happening, but again, looking at what is happening in the present moment reveals a lot of information that we're not as often attuned to.

We have this wonderful opportunity on retreat to really attune ourselves to what is happening in our experience. Looking at the bodily sensations, looking at the emotional responses, noticing what thoughts are triggered, when things happen, when they arise, when they pass away. Paying attention to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. This is a wonderful place to explore what is happening in the moment and seeing how reactivity is born out of leaping off of pleasant or unpleasant.

A student came to one of my introductory classes a couple of years ago. It was the very first or second night he had come, and he told me that he was having panic attacks—a lot of overwhelming feelings of panic at just random times, not particularly traceable to any reason as far as he could tell. He was diagnosed with agoraphobia and severe panic attacks. Someone in his support group had suggested he go to an introductory meditation class, so he appeared at my intro class.

He told me about his experience. He was a scientist, trained in this exploration of cause and effect, in asking why. Why are things happening? He could see that the panic attacks didn't really have any kind of rational root. So he would talk to himself and say, "Why is this happening? There's no need for this to be happening," trying to use his intellect to help him ride out his panic attacks.

After listening to his story, I suggested, "I'd like to give you another question to explore. Rather than asking why or looking at the experience from the 'why' side, see if you can just notice what is happening. Ask, 'What is happening right now?'"

He was quite remarkably able to do this quite quickly. He said that he noticed the tension in his neck, the tightness, the constriction of the breathing. And just staying with the sensations, the panic did not build. After a very short time—a matter of a couple of months—the panic attacks lessened dramatically. He told me about a year ago that he hadn't had panic attacks in quite a while and has been free of them since then, through exploring what is happening as opposed to focusing on why.

When we look at the present-moment experience, this "what" of our experience, often the cause—the "why" of the present moment—reveals itself, as it did for me in the example of the alarm clock. Sometimes there can be many layers of present-moment causes underlying a particular experience that we have.

On one long retreat at Spirit Rock, I was experiencing a lot of doubt in myself, doubt about doing long-term practice. Why am I here? Why should I be doing this? I was doing walking meditation, and this was plaguing me. The thoughts were just overwhelming me.

Why? Why? Why am I here? Why? And I decided to see if I could just notice what was happening. It was primarily coming about through thinking. This overwhelming doubt attack was coming about through thinking.

So I would set myself in the walking to just do the walking meditation, focusing on my feet. But as soon as I saw a thought, I would stop and just notice what was happening in that moment—what the thought was, what the emotional response was. I did this for some period of time, maybe twenty minutes, and I saw a number of different layers through this process of exploring the what.

I started out with just this feeling of doubt, and then I noticed a fear of not measuring up somehow, of not being a good enough yogi. And underneath that—each time I would notice one of these thoughts, I would just notice it, in that case stop, feel the fear,

and then go back to walking. Settle the thoughts and go back to walking. Then as soon as the thought would arise, I would stop again. Often I wouldn't get more than one or two steps before the next thought would hit me.

After the fear, underneath the fear was this feeling of unworthiness—that I wasn't worthy to be dedicating my life to this practice, having given up my job to devote my life to this practice. Under that was an insecurity about my financial situation. Under that was an aversion to that insecurity. And then there was a vulnerability. Just this feeling of vulnerability. And when I hit that feeling of vulnerability, it was like, wow, this is truth. And I could stay with that feeling. Just rest in that space.

This was a way to explore the layers of our experience through just looking at what is happening. What is happening right now?

Sometimes in this kind of exploration, the why of history is revealed. It's shown to us. A thought will appear that clearly connects a historical incident with the present moment experience. And that can be interesting, but it's actually not necessary. It's not necessary to uncover the historical reasons. What's necessary is to see what is happening right now. How are the causes and conditions coming together in the moment to create our experience?

Actually, if we look for a why, if we think about or try to find a why of our experience, it can lead us to conclusions that may or may not be true.

There's a strong interconnection between mind and body, particularly where emotions are concerned. Emotional changes often produce strong changes in sensation in the body. And strong sensations in the body can trigger or produce an emotional reaction. It goes both ways.

As an aside, just as an interesting confirmation of this, there's a study done by Paul Ekman and Richard Davidson. Paul Ekman is a great student of emotions, and Richard Davidson has done a lot of research on the neurological basis of experience. This is what they said about the connection between the body and the mind: "In the course of our research, we found something that surprised us. If you intentionally make a facial expression, you change your physiology. By making the correct expression, you begin to have changes in your physiology that accompany the emotion. This was seen in both work on bodily physiology and some work with Richard Davidson on changes in the brain. The face is not simply a means of display, but also a means of activating emotion."

In other words, simply putting the face into a smile drives the brain into patterns typical of happiness, just as a frown does with sadness. Bodily experience can produce emotional responses.

I've often noticed when certain physical experiences come into the body, the mind starts trying to figure out what is happening and why they're happening. There's an inclination or a tendency to understand the meaning. I've discovered in my own practice the tendency to assign an emotion to physical experience. Our minds scan our history to figure out, to assign, based on this bodily experience, what emotion we're having. And this habit of scanning, I found, sometimes assigns the wrong emotion.

I had one experience with this on another three-month retreat. I was waiting for an interview with Joseph, and as usual, I thought at least, I was feeling anxiety.

The body was quivering. That seemed to be proof enough, and also I was in a context where I had been anxious in the past. You know, that familiar pattern: it's been three days, I haven't talked to anybody, what am I going to say? Is it going to look good? All of those things that go through the mind. But mostly I was experiencing this quivering in the body.

So I was noticing this quivering, and I was noting "anxiety." I was using the note "anxiety." And the interview ahead of me went on for a long time, so I got to observe this for quite a while. And I noticed, oddly I thought, that the anxiety didn't change much. That struck me as unusual because typically when I'm actually noticing what's happening in the moment and observing it with mindfulness, there's some shift around it. A little space opens up. But that hadn't happened in this case, and that made me curious.

So I started just opening up to what was actually happening in the experience. There's quivering in the body. And I very rapidly discovered that what was actually happening was rapture, not anxiety. After that, the sensations got very strong. The quivering became much more rapture-like.

So the body can produce sensations, and based on habit, we can scan and assign an emotion. We're in that mode of looking for meaning, asking why is this happening? It's helpful to just notice what *is* happening.

Sometimes a certain constellation of physical experience can be a habit in and of itself. We're so habitually attuned to a particular state that the physical experience becomes habitual, whether or not an emotion is actually present. So, for instance, a feeling of contraction and heaviness around the heart—it might be sadness. Maybe, maybe

not. It might just be a habitual pattern of the body without the sadness actually being there. So be willing to explore what our experience is without necessarily rapidly assigning a meaning or a "why" to what is happening.

There's a beautiful poem that speaks to this, by Fernando Pessoa:

The mystery of things, where is it?
Why doesn't it come out to show us at least that it's mystery?
What do the river and the tree know about it?
And what do I, who am no more than they, know about it?
Whenever I look at things and think about what people think of them,
I laugh like a brook cleanly plashing against a rock.
For the only hidden meaning of things is that they have no hidden meaning.
It's the strangest thing of all,
stranger than all poets' dreams and all philosophers' thoughts,
that things are really what they seem to be, and there's nothing to understand.
Yes, this is what my senses learned on their own.
Things have no meaning. They exist.
Things are the only hidden meaning of things.

We can also get seduced by looking for meaning around meditative experiences, not just emotional ones. Something happens in our practice—suddenly the mindfulness seems elusive. Why is that? What did I do wrong? We feel like we're a bad meditator, or maybe a good meditator, depending on what we're experiencing. As if it somehow means something about us.

The way through any experience is simply to notice what is actually happening. I had an experience with this at my first three-month course where for a period of time the mind got very settled, and it was pretty easy to be with the breath. The mind wasn't wandering much. Then one day I started noticing that suddenly the mind was wandering all the time. What's happened? Why is this? What's gone wrong? But I'd had enough experience by that point to recognize: well, this is what's happening.

Just notice what is happening. Paying close attention to my experience, what I saw was that when I first sat down, the mind connected very easily with the breath, and very rapidly the breath became very, very subtle, very quiet. So quiet, in fact, that it almost disappeared. And it was when the breath got that quiet that the mind would wander.

I began to see that the mind had settled to a point where the subtlety of experience was deeper than the mindfulness actually knew how to connect with. So I would simply stay with it as long as I could, as long as I could stay with the breath. Then I'd notice the mind had wandered, and I'd come back and just notice again. Over time, the mindfulness caught up with the subtlety of the experience.

So it wasn't necessarily a problem that the mind had started wandering. It was an indication of something shifting in the practice. No matter what is happening, that is the instruction: What is happening right now?

I'd like to talk a little more about the cause and effect that becomes apparent as we look at what is happening in the moment—the why of the present moment getting revealed to us. As we see what is happening, it's almost automatic that we start to see the cause and effect nature of our experience. An image arises, a reaction to the image, an emotion following the reaction, another emotion following that emotion—and there is a chain. There's a clear link between them. The arising of one experience leads to the arising of the next experience.

As we start to see this cause and effect relationship, we see that it's really just impersonal experience, impersonal phenomenon. No "I" doing anything, no "me" actually creating the reaction, but just an experience followed by another experience.

This chain of cause and effect in the present moment is not deterministic. In the present moment, we also have the opportunity for choice—choice of how to be with our present moment experience. And one of the most powerful choices we can make is to simply observe the chain of events that are unfolding, simply witness what is arising with mindfulness. This witnessing can start to have a deep impact on these underlying latent tendencies, on the stream of unfolding experience.

I have another example that I'd like to share, one that ties together many of these different things I've been talking about this evening—the different kinds of whys of experience, the why of history, the why of the present moment. It concerns one of my deepest habits, one of my deepest ruts in my mind.

I'm sure most of you have this sense of some pattern that's so deep, so deeply conditioned that it's like a rut in our mind with a magnetic pull to it. If we get anywhere near this rut, the little ball drops in there, and it just rolls around, and that rut is so deep it seems impossible to get that ball out.

For me, one of these deep ruts was self-hatred. Through years of therapy, I had seen or understood to some extent that this pattern of self-hatred was connected with a particular relationship in my life. So I understood that to some degree, although I hadn't

seen any direct evidence of it. It just made sense—kind of like it made sense to me that when I was going to bed at night alone, I would be lonely. Yes, that makes sense. This is why this pattern is there. But the years of therapy hadn't really touched the pattern or the habit, that rut.

On one three-month retreat, something happened. I had noticed this feeling of self-hatred arise on many, many retreats. But on this particular retreat, it was very prevalent, and I began to see the more direct connection, the more direct link between that relationship and the present moment experience of self-hatred. As I described a little while ago, sometimes as we're observing our present moment experience, we can see an image or a thought from history that makes a clear link to our experience.

I could see that this relationship was central. I actually experienced the centrality of that relationship to the self-hatred. And I felt a huge opening around that. A lot of compassion came up for this person and for the suffering they experienced—suffering that made them treat me in such a way that I would end up with such low self-esteem. There was a huge release around that, and I actually thought it would have some effect, some impact on that rut in my mind.

But the rut was just as deep. It actually surprised me. The next time the self-hatred came up, it was just as strong. Because I felt like, wow, I had this real huge release around this—shouldn't this have done something?

What it did do—I would call that a psychological insight, that recognition of the connection in our present moment experience to a historical event. What it did do for me was allow me to be a little less threatened by the experience of self-hatred. I could see that it was a pattern of conditioning. So it was less threatening. There was less resistance to the self-hatred because of that psychological insight. That was a benefit of that psychological insight.

But I still got to experience that self-hatred over and over and over again during that retreat. I would see it come, I would be in it, and sometimes it would be so painful that I couldn't do much with it but just feel the self-hatred. But I would see that it came and went. There'd be times when it just wasn't there at all, and then I would experience that it came back. Just watching it come and go, seeing that it was impermanent.

And then one evening in the hall, I think Joseph was doing a question and answer, and he talked about a technique for when we get really stuck in something. The technique when we get really, really stuck, when the experience we're having is really

sticky and hard to see through—he talked about using a double note. The double note is contact and then feeling tone. So for me, in this experience, the self-hatred was unpleasant, and so "contact unpleasant" would be what I would note.

I just heard this instruction in the hall that evening. As I left the Dharma Hall, I wasn't particularly in that mode of self-hatred, but as I walked up the stairs, I felt it descend. And I felt powerless. It was so strong, and again, that rut is so deep—it's like there's almost no way to pull yourself out. But having just heard this instruction, I went back to my room and just started seeing if I could notice the moment I felt any additional movement towards that self-hatred. Just contact unpleasant, contact unpleasant. I tried to have that note come right at the moment when I felt that movement of "you're no good."

I usually used a little alarm for myself to tell me when a sitting was ending. My beeper went off at some point, but I was right in there just noticing the movement towards this self-hatred. And I just realized, this isn't the time to get up. I'm just going to keep looking at this.

Maybe about ten minutes later, noticing contact unpleasant, seeing "this is just a thought"—the ephemeral nature of that thought was shown by looking at it just so precisely. Contact unpleasant. The next moment, there's this moment of seeing the ephemeral nature of that thought: this is just a thought. The next moment, split second, the body was flooded with bliss. The next moment, the mind recognized: ah, this too is impermanent. There was a recognition that even though I had seen this, it didn't necessarily mean that the self-hatred was gone. The feeling of the bliss was "oh, never again—I figured this out." But the next moment was just this: this too is impermanent.

That recognition, that seeing into the ephemeral nature, the anatta nature of that thought, cut really deeply into that habit of self-hatred. It was like the rut went from this deep to that shallow in the space of an instant.

I didn't trust it for years, actually. It was a long time before I felt self-hatred again.

But what I began seeing after a while was simply this: the thoughts are still there. *You're no good.* But the belief is what's been undermined. There are still tendrils of the pattern hanging about, and I think we need to watch for those tendrils. They can take root again.

So looking at what is happening, no matter what is happening—we often need courage to stay with present moment experience. It can be really frightening. It can feel very counterintuitive to stay with something that feels so threatening, like self-hatred. But we can witness suffering and its cause in the present moment.

Looking at what is happening in the moment can decondition our deep habitual tendencies, the deep patterns in our mind. And it can open us, no matter what we're paying attention to. It doesn't matter what we're paying attention to. We can be paying attention to self-hatred. We can be paying attention to the most sublime states of bliss. What's important is noticing what is happening to them—what it is, and what happens to it as you observe it.

This leads us to the discovery of impermanence, of unsatisfactoriness, of not-self. This is the path to freedom from suffering.

Let's sit for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 2

Exploring Vedanā - Feeling Tone

Andrea Fella · 51 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella illuminates vedanā—the feeling tone of experience—as one of the most pivotal yet often overlooked aspects of Buddhist practice. She traces the chain of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), showing how every sense impression passes through the gateway of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling before triggering our habitual patterns of craving and clinging. The Buddha identified this link between feeling and craving as a "weak link" in the chain where mindfulness can interrupt the automatic movement toward suffering.

Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), Fella explains that vedanā constitutes an entire foundation of mindfulness, highlighting its importance in the Buddha's teaching. She offers practical guidance for recognizing feeling tone in physical sensations, emotions, and even thoughts, noting how easily we skip past this subtle quality into reactivity. Through personal retreat experiences—from discovering unexpected pleasantness in anger's initial arising to exploring how neutral feeling can slip into boredom—she demonstrates the rich territory available for investigation.

The talk includes illuminating passages from the suttas, including one stating that "all things converge on feelings" and another describing how seeing the impermanent nature of vedanā leads through disenchantment and dispassion to liberation. Fella concludes with the poetic observation from a dialogue between a bhikkhunī and her former husband: pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists but painful when it changes, while neutral feeling is pleasant when there is knowledge of it. This teaching offers practitioners a precise tool for understanding how suffering arises and how freedom becomes possible in each moment of clear awareness.

Tonight, I'd like to explore a quality that we've spoken about quite a lot in the last weeks, and that is the feeling tone of experience. In Pali, this is called the vedanā of experience. It's whether our experience has this quality of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, often called neutral feeling tone.

The other night, Guy spoke about the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth that craving is the cause of suffering. But in his discovery of this second noble truth, the Buddha discovered something that went beyond this simple statement that craving causes suffering. He actually discovered an entire chain of caus-

al conditions that lead us through our typical reactivity in our lives. Sally spoke about this some last night—the chain of dependent origination, or sometimes called dependent co-arising.

I won't cover this in complete detail tonight, but I really want to go through the links of this chain that are relevant to tonight's talk on the feeling tone of experience.

Basically, because we have a mind and a body, we have these six sense doors: the five usual physical senses and the sense base of the mind. Through these sense doors, we experience contact with objects. We experience sight, sound, smells, taste, and touch with our physical senses. And we experience emotions, moods, mind states, and thoughts with the sense door of our mind.

Each of these sense impressions has a flavor to it. This is the feeling tone of experience. Each of our sense impressions is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. So this is the feeling tone—very simple, very basic in our experience.

Based on that feeling tone, when something is pleasant, we typically like it and we want it. We want to get more of it. When something is unpleasant, we don't like it; we want to get rid of it. If something's neutral, we probably don't even notice it.

Eating ice cream is pleasant. We tend to like to eat it. We eat more and more of it, and then at some point we get full. If we start to overeat ice cream, our experience becomes unpleasant, and we tend to stop to avoid the unpleasant. It's kind of like we're this simple automatic machine, this very simple automaton that tries to increase pleasant experience and decrease unpleasant experience.

Based on the feeling tone, this wanting arises—either wanting to have or wanting to get rid of. And we often automatically react to that wanting, reaching out to either grab onto what we want to have or to push away, to actually move out of our experience the thing that we don't want to have. This is called clinging. Whether it's the movement to hold something to us or to push it away from us, it's called clinging.

Once an object is clung to, typically some kind of identity forms around it. It becomes mine, or it becomes me. This might take an obvious form such as "this is my sitting spot," or it might take a more subtle form such as "I'm the kind of person who likes to hike in the woods." It can take a range of manifestations, this quality of becoming.

In terms of this chain of causal conditions, we like becoming. There's something about that crystallization around something that feels good, that feels right. There's something we like about a sense of knowing who we are or what kinds of things define us. We like this brief moment of satisfaction, this becoming. Sometimes it takes the form that we feel like we're in control or that we know something.

From this point of becoming, according to the Buddha, even though we've just experienced this moment of satisfaction with this becoming, from this point suffering is inevitable. That suffering might result from the obvious form of separation from something we consider mine. Like if you have a beautiful vase that you're very fond of, and it breaks—there can be a feeling of sadness or loss, or perhaps anger if somebody else has dropped the vase. There can be that kind of suffering that results when something that we think of as ours goes away. We might experience a feeling of loss if a relationship ends or at the death of a loved one.

But the suffering can also result from the fact that the moment of satisfaction we get when we crystallize around something doesn't last very long. It fades. And then there's this sense of wanting more, that "wanting to want" that Joseph talks about. We actually think that happiness in our lives consists of stringing together these little moments of happiness, these little moments of satisfaction. But that's what we think happiness consists of. And this is a form of delusion. It's a form of ignorance.

So in our untrained minds, suffering—this kind of suffering that results when a moment of satisfaction ends, or a separation from something we love—usually leads us toward ignorance, which conditions our habitual patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion. And these patterns then condition how our mind perceives other experiences. The cycle goes around and around.

Basically, mind and body conditions our sense bases, which conditions contact, which conditions feeling, which conditions craving, which conditions clinging, which conditions becoming, which conditions suffering, which conditions ignorance, which conditions these habitual patterns of mind. And so this goes round and round in our experience.

Sally talked last night a little bit about this chain of dependent origination, and she mentioned that it is not deterministic. It's possible to move out of this cycle, this habitual cycle of samsara, this wheel that keeps samsara going. It's possible to exit this chain. She talked about one way of breaking the chain between suffering and ignorance—that with wise attention to suffering, with the understanding of suffering, we can move away from ignorance toward faith and on toward the chain she spoke about last night: the transcendent dependent origination.

But there's another link in this chain that the Buddha recognized as a weak link, and that's the link between feeling and craving. This is the movement of the mind from pleasant to wanting, from unpleasant to wanting to get rid of, from neutral sensation to not noticing—or maybe we could say, not wanting to notice.

If we bring mindfulness and wise attention to the feeling tone of experience, just to whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, we can actually short-circuit this movement of the mind toward wanting. It's possible to experience something as pleasant without wanting it. It's possible to experience something as unpleasant without wanting to get rid of it. If we can just notice this pleasant or unpleasant without the movement toward wanting, the suffering will not arise. This is the movement away from suffering. But the only way this can happen, the only way we can see this cycle break, is if we can actually see the feeling tone of experience—to bring mindfulness to the feeling tone, to whether in our experience there's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

The Buddha described mindfulness of feeling most prominently in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The feeling tone of experience, this vedana, is the second foundation of mindfulness. It's given an entire foundation all to itself. I think that highlights the importance the Buddha put on this quality of mind. This very fine, very simple quality of mind is an entire foundation of mindfulness.

I'll read you part of the instructions the Buddha gave. He's speaking to his monks here, so he's addressing bhikkhus. But in other places in the commentaries, it says that the term bhikkhu refers to anybody who is practicing the Dhamma. So this is speaking to all of us:

"And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating feelings as feelings? When feeling a pleasant feeling, a bhikkhu understands, 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' When feeling a painful feeling, he understands, 'I feel a painful feeling.' When feeling a neither painful nor pleasant feeling, he understands, 'I feel a neither painful nor pleasant feeling.'"

It's that simple. But it's not easy.

The part that's not easy is that we really need to recognize that we're feeling pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. Usually when we experience something pleasant or unpleasant, we're quickly either moving toward it or away from it. We've hardly noticed there's an experience of pleasant or unpleasant before we're moving to get it or moving to get rid of it. We quickly spin into thoughts of planning—how to get it, how to

have more of it, how to get rid of it, how to never have it again in our lives. So stopping this momentum from the pleasant to the movement toward wanting, and all of the thoughts around it, is very difficult. To actually see the pleasant itself is challenging.

But it's helped by simply knowing that this is a really good quality to pay attention to. Until I heard these teachings, nobody ever told me it's a really good idea to notice in your experience when something's pleasant or unpleasant. Nobody said that to me. But it's a crucial place to highlight in our experience.

This feeling tone can be quite subtle. As I said, it's not something we've been trained to notice. Typically, we've been trained to react to it. That's how we've lived our lives—reacting to pleasant, trying to get it, pushing away the unpleasant. But when we start to actually pay attention, and when it's been highlighted for us that this is a quality useful to pay attention to, it can become quite obvious.

For instance, if you fall down and bump your knee, it's unpleasant. If you're attuned to checking out pleasant and unpleasant, it will probably be pretty obvious that that's an unpleasant experience. When we eat a food that we like, there's often quite a bit of pleasant experience. Again, that's quite easy to see once we've gotten attuned to actually noticing the pleasantness.

What's hard to do is to stop there, at that moment of pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. We're trained to respond to it. But if we start seeing the feeling tone and seeing our response to it, we're beginning to see deeply into how the mind functions.

Every experience we have, as I mentioned in talking through the chain of dependent origination, whether physical or mental, has this quality of feeling tone. This is usually most obvious or easiest to see in our physical experience. It's pretty easy to know when we're experiencing unpleasant bodily sensations—unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, physical contact. But mental experience also has a feeling tone. Anger, for instance, typically has an unpleasant quality to it. Joy has a pleasant quality. Thoughts themselves also have a subtle feeling tone.

More often, though, when we think we understand the feeling tone of a thought, it's because there's been a subtle reaction in the mind to that thought. For instance, right now, just imagine that you're lying on a warm, sunny beach. Is there some kind of pleasant experience? Most likely it's the reaction—the emotions and moods that were called up by that thought—that created the pleasantness. Now imagine somebody running their fingernails on a blackboard. If you're like me, that's an unpleasant thought. But when I feel through it, when I examine what's happening in my experience, there's a visceral feeling through the body that's unpleasant—a reaction to that thought.

Actually, this type of reaction underlies the belief that certain physical sensations are unpleasant as well. For example, often if I wake up in the middle of the night and have trouble going back to sleep, I'll get up to meditate. One night, I woke up and went to meditate, and partway through the meditation, I heard a tapping noise. My experience of the tapping was that it was unpleasant. But I just kept paying attention, noticing, being mindful. I began to notice that when I heard the tapping noise, there was a contraction in the body, and that contraction was definitely unpleasant. When I further paid attention to that contraction as I heard the tapping, I felt a very subtle fear arise. The fear was clearly unpleasant. And as I paid attention to the fear, when I heard the tapping sound again, I realized that the tapping sound itself was neutral—actually even slightly pleasant. It was the reaction to the sound, the subtle fear, that made me think the sound itself was unpleasant.

This can be a very interesting exploration of our experience.

The fact that all experience, mental and physical, has a feeling tone also explains a little about why it's so hard to break out of this cycle, why it's so hard to break out of this chain of dependent origination that we cycle around. In the cycle, feeling leads to craving, which leads to clinging, which leads to becoming, which leads to suffering or dissatisfaction. But if we attend to the feeling tone of the links themselves, we notice that wanting is an unpleasant experience. Wanting feels like a deep sense of being unsatisfied. Our typical movement is to want to satisfy that desire, to get rid of this unpleasant feeling. We want to satisfy the desire—that's the way we've been trained. We satisfy the desire, and the unpleasantness of the wanting goes away. In that satisfaction of the desire, we also have that brief moment of becoming, that crystallization, that pleasant experience.

So we learn through repeated experience that when we get what we want, we get a double hit: getting rid of something unpleasant, and getting that feeling of becoming, which is pleasant. The cycle tends to reinforce itself.

There's one sutta I like that points to this fact—that feeling tone is a weak link in the cycle of dependent origination. I'll read it to you; it's relatively short. It's a kind of chain of events, although not a causal chain, but it describes a way our experience can move as we pay attention:

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

There are a couple of things I like about this sutta. One is that it highlights how all things converge on feeling. I think that wording emphasizes the importance of understanding this feeling tone. In our experience, we encounter a wide variety of sense impressions—color, sight, sound, smells, tastes, and an endless stream of thoughts, moods, and emotions in our mind. We think we respond to the sense impression itself. We think, "I like blue," or "I don't like the way hot roofing tar smells," or "I don't like it when my partner says that to me." But all sense impressions converge on feelings.

For some of us, blue is pleasant. Hot roofing tar is unpleasant. The example of not liking what our partner says to us is a little more complex, but it might unfold something like this.

When our partner speaks to us, there's the sound of the voice. Depending on the tone of the voice, that might be pleasant or unpleasant. But if what the partner is saying brings up an idea in your mind or a belief, there may be a reaction to that idea or belief which might be unpleasant. In that case, the unpleasantness of that belief or idea is why we don't like what our partner says to us.

So from the wide variety of sense impressions, our reactions to those sense impressions actually just comes down to this very simple quality of whether the sense impression is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. It's like a springboard, a narrow gateway through which we react to all of our experience. All things converge on feelings.

The other thing I like about this sutta is that it talks about *all* things. All things converge on feelings. The foremost of all things is concentration. They are mastered by mindfulness. All things converge on feeling, and through concentration and mindfulness on the feelings—on whether they're pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, on how they are coming and going—through this we find that feelings are impermanent. With mindfulness, we can break this movement towards wanting. The concentration and mindfulness on the feeling leads to wisdom. All things have liberation as their essence, merge in the deathless, and culminate in Nibbāna.

All things. It doesn't matter what we're paying attention to. It might be the pleasantness of our hands on a mug of hot tea. It might be the unpleasantness of the cold as we walk outside. It doesn't matter. All things culminate in Nibbāna.

There's another sutta that offers a more causal link, showing how attention to feelings leads to liberation. I'll read this to you as well. This passage highlights attending to the impermanent nature of feelings as being the key to our liberation:

"Pleasant feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Painful feeling too is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Neither painful nor pleasant feeling too is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Seeing thus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes disenchanted with pleasant feeling, disenchanted with painful feeling, disenchanted with neither painful nor pleasant feeling. Being disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, his mind is liberated. When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge, 'It is liberated.' He understands: birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being."

This is the typical statement of liberation of mind—the attention to feeling leading through some of these same links that Sally talked about last night: disenchantment, dispassion.

So the key really with mindfulness of feeling is to become familiar with what this feeling tone is. I'd like to talk for a while about how to engage with an exploration of feeling tone.

Probably the easiest place to attune to this quality is in our physical experience. Our touch sensations, particularly the contact of our skin, seem to be highly attuned to the painful, pleasant, and neutral aspects of experience. So simply exploring in your physical experience whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral can be very illuminating. You can do this any time of day. It's actually a really great exploration through the non-formal part of our meditation—doing the yogi jobs, brushing our teeth, getting ready for bed. What parts of the experience are pleasant? What parts are unpleasant? You'll notice a flow of changing experience. Washing the dishes, the warmth of the water, the weight of the dishes—are they pleasant or unpleasant?

One commentary to the suttas, the Visuddhimagga, states that while this touch sensation, the physical experience of touch, can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, the other four physical sense doors—sight, sound, smell, and taste—actually produce contact that is all neutral. Any sense we have that the experience at those other sense doors is pleasant or unpleasant has to do with a kind of reactivity in the mind, a very subtle movement of reactivity.

I'm not sure if I completely believe this, especially where taste is concerned. I kind of think that there may be some tastes that are revolting because they're not good for us to swallow. But I do find it to be a really interesting exploration.

To look and see when I am seeing something that appears pleasant—is there some kind of reactivity in my mind? A thought, a construct, causes and conditions that have come together to create that pleasantness?

I had an exploration of this on one retreat. It was tea time here at IMS, a very simple tea. I had bean dip and an apple. I took a bite of the bean dip—it was kind of tart and creamy. Then I took a bite of this apple, and it was the most pleasant apple I'd ever eaten. Really, really delightful. It was like these bubbles of delight came up through my body while I ate this apple.

I thought, "Wow, that's cool," and I took another bite. It was pretty good too, but not quite so delightful as the last one. Then I began exploring—maybe it was the bean dip. Maybe it was the bean dip before the apple. So I took a bite of the bean dip and then a bite of the apple, and yes, that was pretty pleasant. But over the meal, I began to realize that the apple kind of lost a little bit of its allure. Even alternating it with the bean dip, it wasn't as delightful as it had initially been.

I could see that the causes and conditions coming together to create the quality of delightfulness, the level of pleasantness essentially—it's not just a valence, an on-off kind of thing where it's either pleasant or not pleasant. There are gradations of these pleasant and unpleasant experiences. So feeling often comes about as a result of these causes and conditions.

An excellent place to play with mindfulness of feeling is with eating, because it engages all of our senses. We see our food—it may be beautiful on our plate, the different colors. We smell it before we eat it. We taste it, the texture on the tongue, the sound as we're chewing and swallowing, and all of the thoughts that we have around the food. It's a great place to play with this mindfulness of feeling, especially if what you're eating you enjoy.

Another good place to pay attention to feeling tone is when there are strong emotions present. Just see if you can recognize whether the emotion is pleasant or unpleasant. What feeling tone does anger have? What feeling tone does lust have? Happiness, sadness. It can actually be kind of surprising when we pay attention.

I had one experience on retreat where I was paying attention to anger quite a lot. Something had come up that had made me angry, and this thing kept coming back up in my mind over and over again. So I kept experiencing the arising of anger. Generally, the experience of anger was unpleasant. But at one point, I saw the very beginning, just the

very beginning of that feeling in the body. And it was a feeling of warmth and fullness. And it was pleasant. It really quickly went to heat and pressure, but that initial hit was pleasant.

I was kind of shocked. But I thought, "Wow, I wonder if this is part of the hook of anger—this initial pleasant feeling." So explore in your experience. There can be some surprises, not necessarily what you'd expect with pleasant and unpleasant.

On my first three-month retreat, Carol was here as a teacher, and she gave the instruction: if you're feeling aversion in your experience, if you're experiencing aversion, there's something unpleasant in your experience, probably unnoticed.

On that particular retreat, doing walking meditation, I was experiencing a lot of aversion to the other people who were walking nearby. I don't know if you've had this experience, but it was very common for me in doing walking meditation to have strong aversion to the people walking near me. So that evening, not too long after hearing that dharma talk, I was doing walking here in this upper walking room and somebody came up and started doing walking meditation right next to me.

Immediately this feeling of aversion arose. And I remembered Carol saying, "Okay, aversion—there's something unpleasant in your experience." So I started exploring. What in my experience is unpleasant? I checked my sight—the person did not particularly look unpleasant. Nothing unusual about how they looked.

They didn't smell bad. And they weren't bumping up against me, so there weren't any unpleasant physical sensations. I thought, well, there must be something in the mind then. Something's going on in the mind.

I didn't particularly notice any thoughts that were unpleasant. The mind felt pretty quiet. But I just attuned my attention toward noticing what might be happening in the mind while continuing the walking back and forth. And then this thought erupted: "He's weird. He's weird."

I thought, well, that's a thought. But I didn't quite get the connection between unpleasantness and that thought. It didn't sink in. So I kept doing the walking. At some point, another thought erupted: "He's got bare feet on, and it's freezing cold outside." This was my justification for the fact that he was weird. And I could see that a whole complex had been created in my mind—one that I thought was unpleasant, that I was reacting to. When I saw that, on the next walking path, the whole thing fell apart, and I was spontaneously doing metta for the person. It was quite remarkable, exploring feeling tone in this way.

It's also really interesting to explore how we react to neutral—the neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience. This can be more difficult because neutral feeling is pretty subtle, and often we just skip right over it. We don't even notice it. But as the mind settles down, we start experiencing more of that neutral quality. And in that space of the neutral, it's a really interesting place to see how identification gets created.

On one retreat, I was experiencing quite a bit of time in this neutral place, so I got to explore it extensively. Most of the time I could be there right in the neutral, but I would begin to see it slipping off into boredom or indifference. The feeling tone of those was slightly unpleasant. So it was a nice exploration in that neutral to see when it just tipped, just slightly tipped off. Because in that neutral place, often not much is engaging us, and we'll either get bored or space out into that kind of indifferent place.

Also on this same retreat, I was experiencing the neutral feeling tone and noticing sometimes a subtle leaning into that experience, or waiting for something to happen. Because I had the idea that this neutral place was a good place in practice and that something was supposed to happen from it. There was this leaning into the neutral, this waiting, this expecting something to happen. And when nothing happened, the mind got judgmental: "You're a failure."

This has been one of my strongest habits. I talked about it in my last talk—this self-judgment and movement from "You're a failure" to self-hatred, to this feeling of unworthiness. And here it was being created out of nothing, out of neutral experience and an idea that something was supposed to be happening. So this place of neutral can be a really interesting place to explore how our identity gets constructed out of this very balanced place.

Another really interesting place to explore feeling tone is around the wandering mind—when the mind goes off and when it comes back. Often I find that there are a number of ways the feeling tone operates here. We can leap off of an unnoticed pleasant feeling tone into "Oh, this is so nice, I'm going to come back next year to this retreat, and I'm going to have a nicer shawl next time." We construct a whole fantasy because we didn't notice that subtle feeling of pleasant.

So the wandering mind can go off of pleasant feeling tone, or neutral feeling tone—it can just space out when things get neutral, drift off because there's not much holding our attention. Or an unpleasant experience. Sometimes with unpleasant experience we launch into fantasy to experience something pleasant. We construct a pleasant thing in our minds in order to avert, to get rid of the unpleasant experience in our bodies.

Noticing how the mind goes from feeling tone to wandering off can be a really good place to explore this. And likewise, coming back—waking up from being lost in thought. Is the feeling tone pleasant? Is it unpleasant?

I often find that the drifting of the mind, if it's just drifting, if it's not an actual fantasy or a judgment of some kind—I don't know if you're familiar with that, where the mind just isn't thinking about much in particular, just drifting—that can be a kind of pleasant experience that perpetuates itself because the pleasantness is not noticed. So when you come back from the wandering mind, check into the feeling tone. I found that when I started doing this, it actually helped the mind keep from wandering, because I realized I was missing the experience—particularly in that drifting, that pleasantness of drifting.

I wasn't noticing the pleasant. It wasn't apparent. It was just kind of lost in the fog of the drift.

As you become more familiar with feeling tone, you'll start seeing it more naturally rather than having to actively look for it, as I've been suggesting in this discussion. But it's helpful initially to actually attune yourself to this quality because it can be difficult to see. It's so subtle, and we so quickly move off of it into reactivity. But as we start to get attuned to it and familiar with it, it becomes much more obvious, and then we can practice as the Satipatthana Sutta instructs: when something is pleasant, we know that it's pleasant; when something is unpleasant, we know that it's unpleasant; when it's neutral, we know that it's neutral.

When you can notice this feeling tone, you have the opportunity to actually witness the birth of reactivity—to see your mind moving from pleasantness to wanting, from unpleasantness to the desire to get rid of. This begins to really show us how suffering is constructed. We start to understand the nature of suffering as that movement of reactivity from pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. And in that understanding of suffering are the seeds of freedom.

The last thing I'll say about feeling tone is that it can have this yin-yang quality to it. In the pleasant are the seeds of the unpleasant, and in the unpleasant are the seeds of the pleasant. When pleasant experience ends, it's unpleasant. When unpleasant experience ends, it's pleasant.

The way neutral fits into this is quite interesting. I want to read you the sutta that describes this. I particularly like this sutta because it's a woman speaking—a nun—and the man talking to her is her ex-husband. He's asked her a number of very detailed questions, and he comes to questions about feeling:

"Lady, what is pleasant and what is painful in regard to pleasant feeling? What is painful and what is pleasant in regard to painful feeling? What is pleasant and what is painful in regard to neither painful nor pleasant feeling?"

"Friend, pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists and painful when it changes. Painful feeling is painful when it persists and pleasant when it changes. Neither painful nor pleasant feeling is pleasant when there is knowledge of it and painful when there is no knowledge of it."

Let's sit for a few moments in silence.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 3

Practice In Daily Life

Andrea Fella · 59 min

> *In this practical and personal talk given during a transition point in a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella addresses one of the most common concerns practitioners face: how to maintain mindfulness practice when returning to daily life. Drawing from her own experience of beginning meditation practice while working as a Peace Corps volunteer, she offers concrete strategies for cultivating awareness outside of formal retreat settings.*
>
> *Fella introduces the technique of choosing specific "mindfulness projects"—both neutral activities that occur regularly throughout the day (like switching between computer programs) and challenging emotional patterns (like working with anger). She describes how consistent resolve to notice these chosen activities gradually brings mindfulness closer to the present moment, eventually transforming ordinary activities into "mindfulness bells." Her powerful account of observing the arising of anger while cutting an apple—and discovering she had a choice not to engage with it—illustrates how daily life practice can lead to genuine insight into the nature of suffering and freedom.*
>
> *The talk explores working with the pāramīs (perfections) as daily life practice, including creative approaches like using a grocery store as a "mettā monastery" or placing written reminders of qualities like truthfulness and patience in relevant locations. Fella also introduces a reflective meditation practice taught by Ajahn Amaro for contemplating one's relationship to these qualities. The teaching concludes with an emphasis on mindful speech—using the practice of pausing before speaking to observe intention and motivation—and working with the five precepts as opportunities for awakening compassion and wisdom in ordinary moments.*

We're at a real transition point in the retreat right now. I noticed as I came into the hall that there were quite a few yogis huddled around the board looking at the schedule change for tomorrow. This is the outward manifestation of the shift that's happening. The schedule is going to be changing. Speaking is going to begin after three months or six weeks of being in silence. That's a huge shift.

It's an interesting time in the retreat. I'm sure many of you, if not all of you, have seen your thoughts shift to what's going to be happening next—future thoughts, planning. What are the next few days going to be like? What is it going to be like when I go home? Often at this point in retreat, people wonder: How am I going to take this practice home with me? How can I bring some of what I've learned here into my daily life?

The structure of retreat is ideal for cultivating mindfulness. It's ideal for the concentration and continuity of mindfulness. And our daily lives are not that way. The other night, Sally talked about the eight worldly winds, and we get blown around by all of those conditions—the conditions of praise and blame, gain and loss, pain and pleasure, fame and disrepute. Truly, this practice is going against the current of our culture. So it's challenging to bring this practice into our life outside of intensive retreat.

That's what I'd like to talk about this evening. This is a topic that I really love. It's been a very integral part of my own practice. In fact, when I began my practice, I wasn't at all interested in sitting meditation. I didn't even think I would ever do that. I thought, why would anybody do that?

But I was having a great deal of difficulty, particularly with some overwhelming emotions, and I was very interested in understanding my mind. As I began my practice, I started looking at my mind in my daily life using mindfulness techniques that I read about. After about three months of this, as I began to have some real insights into how my mind functioned, I realized maybe the reason they call it practice is because it helps to practice sitting on a cushion, and then you can take it more into your daily life. So that's why I began sitting. Daily life mindfulness was my first practice.

I'd like to share with you some of what I've learned about bringing this mindfulness practice into daily life through examples of ways that I've practiced myself. It's going to be a really practical talk.

In those first few months of my practice, I read a book by Joko Beck called *Everyday Zen*. I had another one by her around that same time called *Nothing Special*. In one of those two books, she talked about working at bringing our practice into daily life and said it's not such a good idea to think that you're going to be able to be continuously mindful throughout the day. Don't even try for that because it's just setting yourself up for failure. She suggested instead picking a few projects, mindfulness projects to work on where you could begin to see yourself connecting with those things, giving you a sense of progress.

I really connected with this idea of not trying to be mindful throughout the day. In my early twenties, I had read a book which many of you have probably heard of: Thich Nhat Hanh's *Miracle of Mindfulness*. I loved this book. I read it every evening before I went to bed and thought, wow, this sounds so cool, this mindfulness stuff. I'm going to do this tomorrow when I go to work. And the next time I would remember would be when I picked up the book the next night. After some nights of that, I thought, well, obviously I can't do this. I put the book aside and didn't meet mindfulness again for another fifteen years.

When I did meet it again, I was in a highly motivated state because I was in some very difficult emotional states that were making me almost non-functional at times. I was very motivated to see what could be done. How could I meet these states of mind?

After reading these books by Joko Beck, I decided to pick two projects in my day. One was an emotion that was just completely out of control for me, one that was making my life quite difficult at times—a very strong anger I was experiencing. The other was a very neutral experience that happened throughout my day. I was a Peace Corps volunteer at the time, working at the development bank in the country where I was assigned as a computer volunteer.

One of the things I did regularly throughout my day was to switch between DOS and Windows on the computer. So I picked this as my other project. I'm going to notice. I'm going to be mindful when I switch between DOS and Windows.

Now, I didn't know much about mindfulness at this point. I had had no instructions, no teachers telling me what to do. I had read this book. So I didn't have a lot of tools for these projects, but just this idea of being mindful. I didn't actually know much, but I began working with this.

With this neutral event, initially I often found that I remembered long after the events had happened many times. I would be going to bed at night and I'd remember: I had told myself I was going to pay attention when I switched between DOS and Windows, and I didn't remember it once today.

Well, fortunately, to my credit, this time I didn't say, "Obviously I can't do this." I just said, "I'm going to try again." And this is one of the keys to practice in daily life—this "I'm going to try again," just noticing when you have not been mindful and making the resolve to try again. So fortunately, I had this somehow. This resolve came up, and I just continued saying to myself, "I'm going to notice this. I'm going to pay attention to this."

And when I look back on it, actually, that moment of remembering—that's the first moment of mindfulness beginning around that particular thing. So even though I didn't remember right while I was switching between DOS and Windows, even though I remembered when I was going to bed at night, that was the beginning. The mindfulness was starting in that moment of remembering. It's just like coming back to the breath. Just like waking up and realizing, "Oh, I've forgotten. I'm not with the breath." In that moment, there is mindfulness, and we come back.

In this case, I couldn't come back to switching between DOS and Windows because I was going to bed at night, but I made that resolve: I'll keep trying. And what happened is that over time—over days, even weeks—of making this resolve, I began to notice that

I was remembering closer to the event. I would remember at the end of the morning, for example, right before lunch. "Oh, I forgot." And then it got to the point where I'd remember a few minutes after it happened, and I could begin to see: this resolve is actually getting me closer to the event.

At some point, I remembered right after it happened. Just right after. "Oh, it just happened." The other thing I was doing in this whole exercise was that when I remembered, I was just noticing: I'm mindful now. I remembered now. What's happening right now? Just taking that in, in a very light way.

And at some point, right as I was switching between DOS and Windows, I remembered. Right around that point, that event—the switching between DOS and Windows—became like a mindfulness bell for me. As I switched between DOS and Windows, it triggered the mindfulness to just do that activity.

So this is one technique that I really like to suggest to people in practice in daily life: picking something neutral that happens regularly throughout your day and resolving to pay attention to it. Bringing the mindfulness to that over and over again. It will begin to function as a mindfulness bell for you. And as you are in that experience of whatever your chosen activity is, just in a very light way, notice what's going on. What's the attitude in the mind? What's the bodily posture? Is there tension? Is there tightness?

This is not something to try to hold on to. It's not like trying to grasp onto the mindfulness at this point and say, "Okay, now I'm going to stay mindful." Just in a really light way, noticing what's happening right now. If you pick something that happens regularly throughout your day—I picked something that was happening every fifteen or twenty minutes for me during my workday.

It begins to bring a thread of mindfulness throughout your day—just a few brief moments of check-in, check-in, check-in to what's happening. So that's one way I worked with one of these projects.

The other project I picked was working with my strong anger. This unfolded quite differently. In this case, the anger was so powerful, so strong, and I was really out of control around it. Basically, the anger would just get stronger and stronger until at some point I would remember, "Oh, I said I was going to pay attention to this." And by the time I remembered, I was in a full-blown rage.

I remember the first few times I did this. It was like, "Oh yeah, I said I was going to pay attention to this. What am I supposed to do with this? Wow, this is really unpleasant. Yeah, I'm angry." I had no tools for paying attention to the body. I hadn't had any

meditation instruction at all, but I knew I was angry. I could tell the unpleasantness of it. But beyond that, I didn't know what to do. "What does it even mean to be mindful of this?" I really was kind of clueless.

But simply that recognition—anger, I'm angry, this is anger—just that simple recognition actually ended up being extremely powerful. Because over the course of several months of continuing to resolve to wake up for this anger, I noticed an interesting pattern. I began to wake up a little bit earlier in the process.

I'm sure most of you are familiar with the escalating nature of anger—how it can kind of start and then, if we're caught in it or hooked in the story, it just gets stronger and stronger and builds. It's like the snowball effect of anger rolling. I began to notice that I was waking up a little earlier in the process, that I would remember I wanted to pay attention to this anger before I was in such a full-blown rage. I remembered when I was more at a normal state of anger. And I could at that point again recognize, "Okay, I'm angry." I also noticed it wasn't quite as unpleasant as the full-blown rage.

Just keeping that vow to come back, come back, I began breaking in earlier and earlier until it was more like just an irritation. Simply beginning to see how the mindfulness was giving me some space around this anger—it was huge. It was huge for me not to be in a rage when thoughts around this particular person I was angry with came up in my mind.

And then one day, a few months into my working with mindfulness in daily life, I was cutting an apple in my kitchen. I was fairly present. I think the techniques I had been using—noticing the switching between DOS and Windows, paying attention to the anger—had created a kind of base of general mindfulness. I was cutting the apple, and I noticed a thought appear in my mind. The thought was being with the person I was angry with at a fruit stand. I could see the connection between what I was doing, the cutting of the apple, and the memory.

And I could also see in that moment that I was not angry, that anger hadn't come up. But what I felt was this—it was like a freight train of wanting to jump on that thought and think more thoughts to become angry. I was kind of amazed. "Wow, the mind actually wants to be angry." But I also saw in that moment that I had a choice. I don't have to get on. I don't have to think those thoughts.

And I stood there waiting to get angry. Because I had never had this—in the last several months since I started this practice, I had not had this person arise in my mind and anger not arise. I thought there was no way to decouple them. I stood there waiting to get angry, and I didn't get angry.

I was so blown away by that moment. That moment is the one that really convinced me of the power of mindfulness. This is a path. This is a path that we can use to free ourselves. It was so clear to me in that moment—the freedom from suffering that was apparent.

This can happen in our daily lives. This kind of mindfulness can free us from patterns. We don't actually have to always be sitting on retreat for this kind of work to happen. It can happen in our daily lives.

I teach what I call a householder retreat, based on the model of the sandwich retreat taught at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center. In this retreat, we meet Sunday and Saturday for a half day and a day long, then morning and evening every day during the week to support this practice of daily life mindfulness. I encourage people in this retreat to pick some projects to pay attention to. I definitely encourage them to pick something neutral that happens throughout the day, and some other kind of project—something that might be up for them, something they have some juice for, or just some other kinds of activities.

There are so many things we can bring into our practice. And it's helpful to make them practices, to pick things, to actually choose practices to do, as opposed to just saying, "Oh well, I'm going to be mindful." In losing the structure of retreat, it's helpful to create some kind of structure in our daily life practice. So choosing some projects.

There are so many different things you could use. I've used quite a few of them over the course of my practice. I'll mention a few. Noticing getting up from my desk at work, the act of standing. Waiting for three rings of the telephone before picking it up—this one is good. I got it from Thich Nhat Hanh, and it's good because when you actually pick up the phone, you're mindful and there for the person on the other end. It's a nice practice.

The whole process of going to the bathroom. You do that probably four or five times a day at least. Three or four minutes of paying attention to that whole process—from the getting up, the knowing, the awareness of needing to do that, to the whole process of walking into the restroom, doing everything, washing your hands, coming out. I did this at work for a while. I had noticed that when I went to the restroom, my mind was racing as fast as it had been before when I was doing my job. I realized that it wasn't particularly necessary. So I started doing this practice, and I began to see that when I connected with my experience, in that three or four minutes after I came back from the restroom, I felt like I'd had a little mini vacation. Three minutes. I didn't actually need to be thinking about my work in that time. It's a great thing, this mindfulness.

Chores are a really great place to bring mindfulness practice to. And again, it's really helpful to pick something, to choose it, to actually say, "Okay, for the next two weeks, this is going to be my daily life practice activity." Chores—chopping vegetables, making your bed, brushing your teeth—all of the things we do here in daily life that we've become familiar with bringing mindfulness to. It will dissipate as you leave the retreat. That's not anything you've done wrong; it's simply the way it is. But we can consciously choose to bring mindfulness to certain things. And with a resolve, with a determination, with patience, we can cultivate this mindfulness.

I found that the yogi jobs here on retreat were a great support for the transition to daily life practice. Whatever yogi job you've had here—chopping vegetables, cleaning the bathrooms, vacuuming, sweeping, whatever it is—when you go home, that might be one of the tasks you choose to have be one of your projects. I've learned so much about mindfulness in daily life through the yogi jobs, just ways to be present.

It doesn't have to be the kind of really detailed, precise mindfulness. Sayadaw U Tejaniya speaks about a fifty-fifty mindfulness: fifty percent of your attention on what you're doing and fifty percent of your attention on the awareness of what you're doing. It can be really light. Know what you're doing while you're doing it. It doesn't have to be broken down into the impermanence of every single movement. Just knowing you're pushing the vacuum cleaner while you're pushing it, and a sense of whether there's tension or ease.

I'd like to restate one of the pieces I said a little bit earlier. When you choose to do some of these practices, you're not going to remember right away. You're going to forget.

When you first remember that you've forgotten, that doesn't mean you've failed. That's the first moment of success. That's the first moment it begins. So just resolve again: "I'm going to do this. I'm going to keep trying."

For me, this practice of cultivating mindfulness through these projects has been very helpful. You can pick something for a couple of weeks or even a month and then move on to another thing. I find it helpful to keep refreshing or picking new projects because the old ones get a little stale. We kind of think we've figured it out and then it gets a little bit lost. So picking something new keeps things fresh, but I find that when I pick new projects, the old ones don't completely go away. If I picked going through doorways for one week and turning on light switches another week, when I'm turning on light switches, I'm also noticing the going through doors. It begins to thread this mindfulness throughout our day. This has been the foundation for me of just beginning to get mindfulness into daily life.

Another area I have worked with for practice in daily life has been around the paramis. We've mentioned these a couple of times. These are qualities of mind that we cultivate as we practice the path—the qualities that the Bodhisattva was said to have cultivated for many, many lifetimes before he became the Buddha. The stories of the Buddha cultivating these qualities are told in the Jataka tales, a few of which you heard last night. These qualities are cultivated as we practice, and they are also said to be necessary for awakening. They are also the qualities of the awakened heart: generosity, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, resolve, loving-kindness, and equanimity.

In Asia, these practices are considered to be the realm of daily life practice. So these are really good qualities to look at in our daily lives. There are several ways we can work with these qualities—kind of two basic approaches to working with any quality of mind. One way is to find ways to practice cultivating the quality of mind, the parami itself: the generosity, the virtue, the loving-kindness. Another way is to look at what's opposite to it—what gets in its way. Look at when we're not feeling kind, when we're feeling impatient. So we look at it from both sides.

One of the main ways I began working with these qualities was just to help myself remember to pay attention to them, to remember the qualities themselves and to highlight them in places where I might otherwise forget them. I took little pieces of paper and wrote the qualities, the paramis, on these pieces of paper and put them around my house in places where they might be helpful. Truthfulness went on the telephone. Generosity went on the door as I walked out, to remind myself to bring a generosity of heart to the people I met. Equanimity went on the computer. Patience went on the bathroom mirror because I noticed that impatience arose frequently when I was brushing my teeth. Little things just to help me remember the qualities in places where they would serve me.

With the paramis practice, I find creativity is really wonderful. For instance, loving-kindness has a very formal practice of cultivation with the phrases. We have been working with some of those practices—the loving-kindness practice, the mudita practice, the compassion practice, the equanimity practice. We can use these practices in our daily life, not simply on the meditation cushion but moving out into the world. At one point, I decided that I would use the Safeway as my metta monastery. Every time I walked into the Safeway, I would just start wishing loving-kindness to whoever I saw. There's a lot of suffering in the grocery store. It felt like a really good thing to do, to bring that quality into the grocery store. So we can be playful and creative with these paramis.

Come up with your own practices.

Generosity. My teacher Gil Fronsdal likes to suggest putting a twenty dollar bill in your pocket with the intention of giving it away, and watching what happens around that exploration. See where there's resistance, what the judgments are that come up around it. When you finally choose to give it away, what is that inspiration? What is the motivation?

So creativity—we can get really playful with coming up with ways to cultivate these qualities. And then again, sticking to them for a little while. When I practiced the Safeway meditation, I think I probably did that for a couple of months, just using that practice.

One of my favorite practices that brought both mindfulness and loving kindness into my day regularly is taking a walk. I take a walk most days when I'm at home in California. I've not been able to do that here so much—the weather is not quite so friendly as it is in California. On this walk, I would tend to take it at about the same time of day, and I saw the same people. I would try to be generally mindful on my walk, but I really wanted to be present when I passed somebody. So that was my practice: to be present and to connect with whoever I met.

Sometimes the person clearly didn't want to say hello or look me in the eye or anything. I certainly didn't want to push it or make them uncomfortable. So in those moments, I would just do metta for the person. But over the course of the weeks and the months, as I took the same walk and began seeing the same people, they began to get familiar with me and I began to get familiar with them. We began exchanging a smile and a hello. Just practicing with that connection, that kind of kindness, openness, the metta quality of simply connecting with somebody—I began to experience a lot of happiness in that connection.

It was quite astounding, actually. I remember this one older man who had to shuffle along, kind of unsteady on his feet, and he had the most beautiful smile when I met him. Just radiant when he smiled. As I did this practice, when I would see him, I would begin to feel happy just in anticipation of his smile. And then I began to check into how long does the happiness last? Not trying to hold on to it, but just curious. I noticed that it lasted like thirty or forty seconds after seeing him—this great upwelling of joy and appreciation and happiness and connection. Thirty seconds for a smile. It was such a joy to bring that into my day.

Play with it.

Observing the opposite quality of mind is also very interesting in terms of looking at these paramis. For a time, I noticed, as I was paying attention to these paramis, that patience was one I did not seem to have very much of. So I started looking at impatience—just noticing it, noticing when it came up, noticing what it felt like when it happened.

I began to see there were kind of two flavors of impatience. There was the impatience to get over something unpleasant, and the impatience of wanting to have something pleasant that I was expecting or anticipating. There was an impatience around brushing my teeth, a sense of, "I've got better things to do than to brush my teeth." It was everywhere, actually. When I began looking at it, I began to see how pervasive it was throughout my day, coming up over and over again. It could be just little tiny things, but this movement of impatience.

And one day, about two months into this practice of looking at the impatience, I was walking down the street and I felt this surge of impatience come up about—I don't know what at the moment—but just the surge of impatience. And the very next moment or thought was, "I've been looking at this impatience for two months. When is it going to go away?" Oh, there it is again. More impatience.

I just had to laugh. It's like, oh well, this is just the mind. So looking at all of these things from both sides—very helpful in our daily life.

Another practice I'll describe now involves working with the paramis, but it's more generally applicable, actually.

It's a reflective practice. We can use it to reflect on our relationship to these qualities, our relationship to these parami qualities. But it can also be used to reflect on pretty much anything in our daily lives in a meditative way. So it's an actual reflective practice, but it uses a meditative stillness to hold the practice. This practice was taught to me by Ajahn Amaro.

The practice is to basically settle and still the mind for five minutes or so. Quiet the mind. Pay attention to the body, the breathing. And have a topic before you move in, before you sit down. Pick a topic that you want to reflect on. Have a phrase in your mind, a word that you want to use as the seed for that reflection.

So if you want to reflect on these qualities of the paramis, at one point I did this with the quality of virtue, of sila. I wanted to understand or to reflect on what the benefits of sila were. So that was the phrase I chose, the question I chose in my mind: What are the benefits of sila?

Settle your mind for about five minutes and then drop the question into the meditation. Simply ask the question in words in your mind. And then the practice is to not think about the answer, but to simply see what bubbles up. It's kind of like dropping a stone into a clear, settled pool and watching the ripples. Drop the question into your meditation and see what happens. What does the body do? Do thoughts appear? Just notice what happens. And then let go of that. Don't chain off of that. Don't think about that in the moment. Just come back to the silence. Come back to the breath. Come back to the body. Drop the question in again. See what happens.

When I did this with sila, I chose to do this for about ten minutes a day, asking this question about what the benefits of sila are. After that ten minutes, I had a pad of paper next to me, and I wrote down what I had experienced. No thinking about it particularly, just noticing, writing down what I had noticed. I noticed loneliness. I noticed contraction. I noticed an opening. I noticed a feeling of flow. Whatever it was, I just wrote down what I had experienced. Then after a couple of weeks of that, I reviewed my notes and began actually thinking about what I had seen, bringing the thinking process in.

This kind of practice can be used to explore our relationship to the paramis, or it can actually be used to explore our relationship to anything that we want to bring a meditative, reflective quality to—a choice that we have to make. This kind of practice can be very supportive for that.

So, cultivating mindfulness in our day, bringing awareness of the paramis. The third piece I'd like to talk about is intention. We've talked about intention here quite a bit. It's that subtle movement or energetic impulse that precedes any act of body, speech, or mind. We can know we're going to move before we move. We can know we're going to speak before we speak. We can know we're going to think before we think, or know that we're inclining to an emotion before the emotion appears—as I described in that example of the anger, the apple, seeing the memory, seeing the inclination towards the anger, and seeing the choice.

We can see this in our daily lives as well as on retreat. It's more difficult, I grant you. It's quite a bit more difficult, but it is possible. So it's a really good place to explore.

Now the intention itself, as we've mentioned, is neutral. It's a neutral event. But accompanying it are the factors of mind that give it its direction and its momentum.

Whether wholesome or unwholesome, these accompanying factors give the intention its direction. The karmic results of intention are determined by whether there are wholesome or unwholesome factors in the mind accompanying that intention, and whether we act upon it.

As we get in touch with intention, as we develop the capacity to know what's going to happen before it happens, we can see motivation as well. In that moment of knowing "I'm going to get up to get a glass of water," I can know the motivation. It might be many things—it might simply be because thirst has arisen, or it might be because I'm really frustrated with what I'm doing and just want to get away from my computer. So in that moment of seeing "I'm about to get up," we can see the motivation. This is very, very helpful information.

One excellent place to practice with this is in the area of speech. I imagine everyone in this room has had the experience of wishing they could take something back that they had said—of realizing just after something came out of their mouth, "Oh, I shouldn't have said that."

Paying attention to speech is a vast area we can work with in daily life, and it has come up in questions several times—bringing awareness to our speech. It's extremely challenging. At least for me, this has been one of the most challenging places to bring mindfulness. Much of the time, we speak almost automatically, without even knowing what we're going to say, much less having any sense of how it will impact the person we're speaking to or understanding the motivation behind our words.

One of the most powerful ways to break into this pattern is to pause before you speak. That in itself is challenging—simply remembering to pause. If you can remember to pause before you speak, you have caught the intention to speak. You know you're going to speak before you speak. In that pause, you will probably know what you're going to say before you say it. And you will also probably have a sense of why you're going to speak. This simple practice of pausing can reveal many things about our speech.

Getting in touch with our motivations for speech can be quite humbling. We really begin to see how often we speak out of wanting to make ourselves look good, or wanting to subtly put somebody else down, or even outright hurt someone. Most of the time, though, at least in my experience, it seems to be this little bit of me, me, me, me—this motivation to present myself, to make myself seen.

Beginning to see this through the pause, just noticing this pause—when you break silence tomorrow, I highly recommend this practice. You have enough mindfulness to do this. I highly recommend it. You can even remind each other about this when you start talking. "Let's try this. Let's try doing this pause."

As I mentioned, it can be humbling. The first time I tried this with a friend, we sat down for a meal together and decided we were going to work this way with each other in our speech. I saw a thought, saw I was going to say something, and saw the motivation. I thought, "No, I'm not going to say that. Unwholesome motivation." The next thing arose—nope, not going to say that. The next thing—nope, not going to say that. At some point I had to tell him, "I'm sitting here ruling out things to say because of unwholesome motivation."

It can be quite interesting. It's helpful to do this with another practitioner when you try it, because it can put some gaps in the conversation.

Speech is one powerful place to examine intention. But if you're doing some of the other practices I've recommended—like picking something you do regularly throughout the day, clicking send for an email, opening doors, extending and bending your arm—if it's some kind of action that you perform regularly, you can begin to see the intention associated with that action.

When I was playing with standing up at my desk at work, I reached the point where I knew I was going to stand. I could see that I was going to stand before the standing happened. I could see the intention to stand. I could see why I was going to stand.

Most of the time it had to do with just something around work—I need to go get a copy from the printout. But we can begin to connect with this intention on a regular basis and connect with observing the motivation that goes with it. So this is not simply a practice that is accessible to us on retreat. It is possible to experience and see these things in our daily lives.

Another large area of practice in our daily lives is around sīla, around ethics. And this is one way to work with motivation, to work with seeing our intention. The way I like to work with the five lay precepts in my daily life is to use them as mindfulness bells, kind of as I was describing these other activities. If I'm making a movement towards wrong speech, if I'm making a movement towards killing an ant, looking at what's going on—it's kind of like a wake-up bell. What's happening? So looking at the motivation if there's a movement to break one of these precepts.

Working with these precepts, I'm sure you've all noticed that they're stated in the negative—actions to avoid. Refrain from killing, refrain from stealing, refrain from sexual misconduct, refrain from lying, refrain from intoxication. But they're also paired, I think Guy mentioned this, they're also paired with a positive quality, a wholesome quality that is cultivated as we refrain from the action.

So refraining from killing is paired with compassion. Refraining from stealing with honesty and contentment. Refraining from sexual misconduct is said to be related to fidelity. Refraining from lying to truthfulness. Refraining from intoxication is cultivating clarity of mind or heedfulness.

There's a mutual connection between our mind and our body. The act of abstaining from certain actions through the precepts has like a rebound effect on our mind. And the point of interconnection between the mind and the body is this intention and the qualities of motivation that go with it. So in the intention to refrain from killing, there can come along this intention towards compassion.

And I saw this myself, actually. At one point, I was really working with the ants in my kitchen and not wanting to kill them, and so I had this elaborate way of working with the ants when they came in. I would corral them with soap so they wouldn't go outside the line, and I'd slowly work them back to the hole that they were coming from. After a while, I noticed I got a little impatient, and I'd start scooping the ants up and putting them by their hole so that I could move them along a little more quickly.

I began observing the ants pretty carefully as I was doing this. And I saw at one point near the hole where they were coming in, one of the ants on its back legs, with its front legs up in the air, doing the scanning of the environment like this. I could just see the panic. Maybe this is anthropomorphizing, I don't know, but it seemed like there was this kind of alarm going on in the ant population around this event. And I just felt so much compassion. It was quite startling to see that. Just this act of wishing to not kill them brought a connection between me and these beings.

Sometimes people question, particularly in California where I live, why are these precepts stated in the negative? Why can't they be stated positively? California is a really happy place. We talk about vowing to cultivate love and generosity. So sometimes there's that question about why they are stated in the negative.

I read a wonderful response to this question that I'd like to share with you to close this evening. It's written by Bhikkhu Bodhi, who is one of the main translators of the suttas. He is just a wonderful, thoughtful being.

"One reason why the precepts are worded in terms of abstinence is that the development of positive virtues cannot be prescribed by rules. Rules of training can govern what we have to avoid and perform in our outer actions, but only ideals of aspiration, not rules, can govern what we develop in ourselves. Thus we cannot take up a training rule to always be loving towards others. To impose such a rule is to place ourselves in a double bind, since inner attitudes are just simply not so docile that they can be determined by command. Love and compassion are the fruits of work we do on ourselves inwardly, not of assenting to a precept. What we can do is to undertake a precept to abstain from destroying life and from injuring other beings. Then we can make a resolution, preferably without much fanfare, to develop loving kindness and apply ourselves to the mental training designed to nourish its growth."

CHAPTER 4

Wise and Balanced Effort

Andrea Fella · 1h02

> *In this comprehensive talk, Andrea Fella illuminates the Buddha's teaching on wise effort as essential support for the practice of letting go. She begins by acknowledging that while letting go may sound simple, our deeply ingrained habits of clinging require substantial effort to unlearn. Drawing on the Pāli term vīriya (energy/courage), she defines it as "the inner strength of heart to venture, persevere, and withstand difficulty."*
>
> *Fella systematically explores the four aspects of sammā vāyāma (right effort): avoiding unwholesome states before they arise through mindful sense restraint, abandoning unwholesome states that have arisen through mindfulness and skillful techniques, cultivating wholesome states through practices like mettā and ethical conduct, and maintaining wholesome states by appreciating and resting with them. She emphasizes how mindfulness itself encompasses all four efforts simultaneously—when we mindfully attend to anger, for example, we prevent further reactivity while cultivating concentration and equanimity.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance on balancing energy, using the Buddha's analogy of tuning a stringed instrument—neither too tight nor too loose. Fella shares the Buddha's teaching from the Ogha-taraṇa Sutta: "Without tarrying and without hurrying did I cross the flood." She encourages practitioners to focus on just this moment rather than overwhelming themselves with thoughts of sustained effort, comparing practice to lifting progressively heavier weights. The teaching concludes with the liberating reminder that we cultivate conditions for awakening but cannot force results—when the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree.*

The other night, Annie talked about letting go as being the whole of the path. And the Buddha, in fact, said all phenomena are unworthy of attachment. Or another translation: nothing is worth clinging to.

Why is that? Why is nothing worth clinging to?

Well, with clinging, when we cling to something, we are essentially trying to hold it in place, trying to stem the tide of ever-changing experience, ever-changing phenomenon. Even if for just a moment, we're trying to hold something into place, and things change. So when we cling, we suffer.

But it's not so easy to simply let go. Letting go sounds like such a lovely thing. Oh, yes, just let go. But how easy is that to do?

Our strong habits and patterns of holding onto things, trying to manipulate, to change, to fix, to control the world—these patterns have from time to time given us a sense of control, given us a sense of security, and have given us a sense of what feels like some kind of satisfaction. And so they're very deeply ingrained patterns, these patterns of holding on, the ways that we try to find happiness. We are fighting against, in a way, or struggling against very strong ingrained tendencies—maybe not ingrained but practiced, very practiced tendencies to hold on.

So it takes quite a bit of effort to learn to let go. Letting go sounds like something that should be easy, but no. We need to train our minds so that we can let go of clinging. A key aspect of this training is wise and balanced effort. We need effort, courage, energy to walk this path of letting go.

This is what I'd like to talk about this evening: effort and energy. These are two very closely related qualities of our practice. I'd like to start by talking about energy.

The Pali term for energy is *virya*, usually translated as energy. This energy itself is a neutral quality of mind; it takes on the flavor of however we are directing that energy. So this energy can be directed towards unwholesome states of mind, such as resentment, anger, frustration, pride, desire for power or money. Or it can be directed towards wholesome states such as generosity, kindness, happiness, and concentration. The flavor of the energy comes with how we are using that energy. So it's really important in our practice to understand and know how to direct that energy.

The quality of energy appears in quite a number of the Buddha's teachings. I'm sure that many of you are aware that the Buddha was a great list maker. The quality of energy is actually in more lists than, I think, any other quality of mind. It may be equal to the number of lists that mindfulness is in, but I actually think that energy is in more lists than mindfulness. So it's a really important quality to cultivate, to understand.

In one of those lists, the list of wholesome qualities to cultivate on the path to awakening called the *paramis* or the ten perfections, the quality of energy follows the quality of wisdom. In one way of understanding that list, it is a kind of sequential progression, where each one supports the cultivation of the next and helps perfect the next quality. And so it's a really interesting teaching, I think, that energy follows wisdom in that list.

So what is wisdom? There are actually several definitions of wisdom in the Buddha's teachings. I'm going to offer a couple as a frame for how I'm going to talk about energy and effort in this talk.

One of the definitions of wisdom is a very simple understanding of what qualities of mind support our movement away from suffering and towards freedom—a simple understanding of what is skillful with respect to moving away from suffering, and understanding also what is unskillful, what qualities move us towards suffering. Essentially, we want to cultivate those qualities that move us away from suffering. So it's important to understand that energy as a quality, as a spiritual faculty on the path, is energy directed towards cultivating wholesome qualities, energy directed towards letting go of unwholesome qualities.

Another definition of wisdom is the understanding of the Four Noble Truths. And this is very similar in a way to the definition around understanding what's wholesome and unwholesome, what's skillful and unskillful. The Four Noble Truths: understand suffering; let go of the cause of suffering; realize the release from suffering; and cultivate those qualities of heart and mind that lead to the ending of suffering. So the definition of wisdom is very connected with understanding what leads us away from suffering.

This was the problem the Buddha was trying to solve. How can we be free from this dukkha, this suffering, this dissatisfaction, this endless sense of wanting things to be other than they are, wanting to hold onto things, wanting to fix, to change, to manipulate?

So the energy of our practice, the spiritual faculty of energy, is energy directed towards the purpose of awakening. It's the fuel of our practice. There's one text, I believe it's the Treatise on the Paramis, in which the author says that it is entirely through the spiritual faculty of energy that all the requisites for enlightenment succeed. So we need energy. We need this skillful energy that is imbued with wisdom to lead us away from suffering, away from this dukkha, this dissatisfaction with our experience, our lives.

This understanding of the spiritual faculty of energy being directed towards freedom from suffering brings me to another translation for this term virya, which is courage. Tonight as I was preparing this talk, I looked up the English definition of courage. I typically think of it in terms of bravery, but I came up with two aspects from two different dictionaries and put them together into one definition that I feel truly captures the sense of this quality of virya. And that is: courage, the inner strength of heart to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty. The inner strength of heart to persevere in the face of difficulty.

That's what we do here. A lot of the time, that's what we're doing—meeting our suffering, not running from it, not turning away, not rejecting it, but meeting it with that inner strength of heart.

Energy and effort are very closely connected. Effort might be thought of as the application of energy. One way in which energy is described is as the factor behind right effort—this energy directed towards moving away from suffering, towards cultivating the wholesome, letting go of the unwholesome. That energy is the factor behind effort, and so we use energy to make effort.

There's an interesting two-way link between these two, because not only do we use energy to make effort, but making effort creates energy. In fact, the suttas describe this. The Buddha says, "What is the faculty of energy? The energy that one obtains on the basis of the four right efforts. This is called the faculty of energy."

This can be a little counterintuitive. We usually understand the notion of using energy to make effort, and we think about energy getting used up as we make effort. Sometimes that's the way it feels. There's precedent for that in terms of our physical energy. We use energy to make effort to go for a run, for instance, and we can only go for so long. Then that energy runs out and we need to stop and rest. We carry that model into our practice and think we need to accumulate some energy, then we use that energy up, and then we have to rest and stop practicing for a while because we're too tired to practice.

This teaching turns that on its head. It says actually, if you make effort, if you make wise effort, it creates energy. Part of the way I understand this is that there's an awful lot of energy bound up in clinging. When we direct our energy towards the letting go of that clinging, it frees up a whole lot of energy. So there's this connection between energy and effort: making effort cultivates energy.

I'd like to talk about the Buddha's teaching on wise effort. Many of you are probably familiar with this teaching. The teaching on wise effort also takes as its foundation this aspect of wisdom—the understanding of what is skillful and unskillful with respect to suffering. The simplest definition I know of skillful or wholesome qualities of mind are those qualities that are based in non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion. Those qualities of mind that are not based in greed, aversion, and delusion are wholesome qualities of mind. These are states like compassion, kindness, joy, tranquility, peace.

Unwholesome qualities of mind are those states that are based in greed, aversion, and delusion—states like anger, frustration, pride, boredom, restlessness, desire, despair. These are the states of mind that lead us into dukkha, into suffering.

The teaching on right effort uses this understanding as a foundation. The Buddha talks about four kinds of right effort: the effort to avoid unwholesome states that have not yet arisen, the effort to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen, the effort to arouse or cultivate wholesome states that have not yet arisen, and the effort to maintain wholesome states that have arisen.

Now, if some of you are unfamiliar with this teaching, this probably sounds a little confusing or complicated. So I'm going to go through each one of these and talk at some length about each.

The first is the effort to avoid unwholesome states that have not arisen. This is basically about understanding, learning through the process of observing our experience with mindfulness. We cannot look at this quality of wise effort without also including mindfulness.

Understanding and looking at our experience with mindfulness, we start to see that certain causes and conditions lead us into suffering, into distress. As we begin to understand that certain causes and conditions lead us to distress, we can learn to avoid the suffering by avoiding the causes.

This is an interesting teaching, and we have to be really careful in applying it. Because at first glance, it might sound like a kind of aversion—avoiding things that will lead us to suffering as a kind of aversion. So we need to be really careful that this avoidance isn't coming out of aversion, isn't coming out of the desire to get rid of something or out of a fear of that suffering. This definition of avoiding can have some subtle meanings.

For example, if you notice that you find yourself judging and comparing when you're standing in line for the meal—which I think happens quite a lot—looking at how much other people might be taking, what they're taking, all of the judgments that arise in proximity with other people. You notice that this judging mind comes up while you're standing in line in the dining hall.

At first glance, you might think that this teaching would mean something like: well, if it's standing in line that's causing the judging, maybe I should wait until everybody else has gone through so I don't have to stand there and watch what other people are doing. That is one way to avoid that kind of judgment. But that might be motivated out of aversion to the judging mind.

Another way to engage with this would be to get interested in understanding not just the simple causes and conditions of that judgment arising—the fact of standing in line—but with a little more depth, understanding how it comes to be in your own mind.

Perhaps you see somebody taking a very large serving of something and have a moment of fear: there's not going to be enough for me. And then the judgment follows: they're taking too much food. Noticing that fear, noticing the underlying causes, observing very carefully what the causes are so that we can begin to understand them. As we begin to understand the causes, the meaning of avoiding changes for us.

Perhaps the meaning of avoiding, while standing in that line, is rather than just reacting to what happens to us, we start to notice: we see somebody taking some food, and then we notice that we start thinking about it. The initial seeing of somebody taking the food isn't where the judging comes from. The judging is coming out of the thinking. It's coming out of the belief that there might not be enough food. It's coming out of the proliferation of thoughts. And so if you can be mindful of the seeing and just know that you're seeing, that proliferation of thoughts might not arise—which would avoid the arising of the judgment.

This is a teaching on sense restraint. Often we think of sense restraint as just blocking our senses off—not looking, not hearing, putting earplugs in, or looking down at the ground two feet in front of us to avoid seeing people. Another way to engage with sense restraint is to restrain the senses through mindfulness, through knowing: seeing, knowing hearing. It's restraint in that you know seeing is happening, and in that knowing there is less opportunity for the mind to, in its habitual way, leap out of that situation and start to think, start to proliferate, judge, become frustrated, angry, hopeless. So using mindfulness, we can avoid unwholesome states that have not arisen.

The second kind of right effort is the effort to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen. This means that we notice when we're caught up in some kind of difficult, unwholesome mind state, and we make the effort to let go of it.

This letting go can have a kind of active quality where you actively recognize: wow, this state of mind—this anger or despair or loneliness—isn't very helpful. Maybe I can let go of it. It can have an active quality in which we see the unskillfulness of that state of mind and begin to let it go. Sometimes even just through simple recognition: Oh, this is happening again. I don't need to do this. Sometimes it can go away.

Often it's not quite that simple. There are some techniques we can use to support a kind of active letting go of difficult states of mind. One technique the Buddha taught is replacing the thoughts that surround a difficult state of mind with more wholesome thoughts. If you're angry at someone, for example, or finding a lot of judgment arising, there are thoughts that go along with that state of mind: they shouldn't be doing that. If you can recognize those thoughts and replace them with thoughts of mettā—may you

be happy, may you be at ease—actively replacing thoughts is a way of abandoning, of letting go of that anger. It can lead us out of the anger. Again, this can't be done out of aversion to the anger.

Another way to let go is to redirect our attention. Sometimes when there's a difficult state happening like loneliness, if it's a strong state and you find it difficult to be mindful of it, if it feels overwhelming, sometimes it can be helpful to set it aside. Not with aversion, not with the sense of "this is unacceptable," but with a sense of compassion.

I see that this difficult state of mind is overwhelming my mindfulness. So I'm going to turn my attention to something else right now and let that be in the background. This is a way that supports our letting go of difficult states that are sometimes overwhelming for us. This is what I call the "not now" mode of ignoring our experiences.

I had a time in my practice where I found that anger was particularly overwhelming for me—an anger at a particular person. And when I tried to bring mindfulness to that anger, I found myself just spiraling down into the pattern of anger over and over again. I began to realize it wasn't the time to try to be mindful of it, that my mindfulness wasn't strong enough to meet that anger. So I began to recognize this, and not out of aversion but really out of compassion for myself. I began to acknowledge: there's the anger. I see you. This is not the time. Not now. I actually made a kind of bargain with it. I said, I'll pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger. Meeting it and saying, I see you. I see you're asking for attention, but this is not the time. Not now.

That's a way of letting go. It's a letting be, but not a letting be with the experience right in the field of our attention. It's a letting be in the background, just letting it be.

This letting go of the second kind of right effort can also be this turning our attention to experience with mindfulness. Mindfulness itself helps to disengage us from the way we're stuck to these difficulties. I think of it this way: when we're engaged in spinning in some kind of difficult state, it's like the gears are engaged, and they just keep each other going, fueling the cycle. When we bring mindfulness into the picture, if we can be mindful of the difficult states, it's like disengaging the gears. It doesn't stop the gear from spinning, but it's no longer adding to that momentum. What mindfulness does is allow that state to wind down on its own in a very natural way through simply meeting it with this nonjudgmental, nonreactive mindfulness that Rebecca talked about so beautifully last night.

Meeting these difficult states with mindfulness, using this energy, this courage, the inner strength of heart to meet difficulty—this is actually a movement towards the abandoning of that unwholesome state of mind. Because we're no longer fueling it, we're no longer encouraging it, and it will settle out in time. This is a true letting be of the experience.

This is much of our practice. This aspect of wise effort is a lot of where our practice lies. We see difficulty come up. I remember sitting in this very hall suffering with so much pain and distress and seeing that the mind was doing it, that it was clinging in the mind. And I remember saying to myself, I'd let go if I knew how to. Sometimes we don't know how to let go. But we can be mindful of that experience and it will let go. This is much of where we practice.

So fortunately in his teaching on wise effort, the Buddha didn't just say it's all about looking at suffering, abandoning suffering, avoiding suffering. He also talked about the beautiful states of mind, as equal partners to this practice. The third kind of right effort is the effort to arouse wholesome states that have not arisen. This is a practice of cultivating those states that we know are skillful with respect to leading us away from suffering—cultivating states of kindness, of compassion, of patience, of concentration.

To cultivate wholesome mind states that are not present, we need to first of all—and I think this is why the Buddha puts the first two right efforts first—abstain from those states that oppose those wholesome states. If we're trying to cultivate kindness, we need to abstain from anger and hostility. And we need to learn how to put ourselves in situations that will cultivate the conditions for that state, cultivate those qualities of mind.

Abstaining from situations, abstaining from qualities of mind that oppose wholesome states of mind—the precepts, the ethical component of our practice, is a big part of this. If we think about the precepts as just being about avoiding—avoiding killing, avoiding stealing, avoiding lying—it can give us some sense of joy to be engaged in that way, knowing that we're not harming. And each of those precepts also supports the cultivation of a wholesome state of mind. Refraining from killing cultivates compassion. So we can recognize and appreciate the precepts from that perspective as well.

Refraining from lying cultivates honesty and truthfulness. Refraining from stealing cultivates contentment. So when we engage with these practices of avoiding and abstaining from unwholesome states, we can also recognize that they're supporting the growth of these beautiful states of mind. Recognizing that helps to nurture those qualities. It's like planting seeds—to recognize, yes, this is cultivating compassion. It's kind of like planting a seed of compassion.

We can also cultivate these wholesome qualities through active practices. The practice of metta is one of these—the practice of loving-kindness. We actively direct our attention towards cultivating thoughts of goodwill. This is an aspect of right effort: cultivating wholesome states that have not yet arisen.

We also cultivate mindfulness. My Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Pandita has said that mindfulness is the most wholesome mind state. And so the act of bringing mindfulness to our experience is cultivating mindfulness. As Rebecca said last night, each moment of mindfulness cultivates future moments of mindfulness. By being mindful now, you are creating the conditions for mindfulness to arise in the future where it may not have come up if you had not been mindful. So this is also a big part of our practice of right effort—cultivating mindfulness, cultivating the wholesome quality of concentration.

The fourth kind of right effort is the effort to sustain wholesome states that have arisen. When I first heard this teaching, I thought, why would you need a teaching about that? Wouldn't this be natural? Why would you have to try to sustain wholesome states that have arisen? Well, when I started looking at my mind, I realized that I actually did have to work at this.

I found myself sitting at one point in my first three-month retreat, finally getting to a place of calm. The mind was settled, it was quiet, and the first thing I did with that was like, "Oh, calm—that's nice. This is a perfect time to pay attention to that pain in my back." So rather than resting with the calm, I agitated the mind by trying to use it to do something. I began to understand that it does take some inclination and effort toward sustaining wholesome states that have arisen.

Another time I found myself feeling joy arising, and it was getting very strong. There was a sense of it being almost overwhelming—like, whoa, I can't handle this. And there was a kind of movement to try to push it down. This is the opposite of cultivating that wholesome quality of joy. Fortunately, a little bit of wisdom passed through my mind, and it said, "Don't worry, it'll pass." With that the mind let go and the joy got really intense. But then it crested and moved into a place of just peaceful happiness.

Allowing these wholesome states, being mindful of them, is actually one of the most powerful ways to cultivate them. Mindfulness is an interesting quality. It has the power, when we pay attention to unwholesome states, to make them less likely to occur in the future. And when we pay attention to wholesome states, it makes them more likely to occur in the future. It's as if the unwholesome states shrink in the brightness and clarity of the light of mindfulness, while the wholesome states bask in its warmth and light. Mindfulness is a very powerful tool in this practice of right effort.

So be mindful. Appreciate these wholesome states when they have arisen. That actually supports maintaining them, supports their cultivation. It's also really helpful to recognize the beautiful qualities of mind that come from the practice. Sometimes as we are practicing, we're in the midst of attending to some experience—a pain in the knee, or a feeling of loneliness or frustration. And we're not really recognizing that along with that attentiveness of mindfulness is coming perhaps some confidence that we can engage, some concentration through the ability to sustain attention, some cultivating of interest in exploring our experience. All of these are wholesome, beautiful qualities of mind that almost come along for the ride as we pay attention to our experience. Recognize these beautiful qualities. It will support their cultivation.

So we can look at right effort in another way. We've talked about four different aspects, but they can actually also be seen as four sides of a single process in our minds.

So for example, if you are cultivating mindfulness with the object of your attention being anger, you're paying attention to anger with mindfulness. This supports the letting go of that unskillful quality of anger—that letting be the second kind of right effort. It helps prevent the arising of further reactivity to that anger. If you're mindful of the anger, it's helping to keep it from spiraling out of control. This is avoiding unwholesome states that have not yet arisen. It is also cultivating and supporting the mindfulness, the concentration, the equanimity. Many beautiful qualities are both cultivated and maintained as we bring mindfulness to this practice. So being mindful encompasses all four right efforts in the very act of mindfulness.

The other aspect of the Buddha's teaching on effort is that it needs to be balanced. Energy and effort both need to be balanced. When there's too much energy in the system, there tends to be restlessness. When there's too little, there tends to be dullness, sleepiness. So we need to monitor our energy, know when we have too much energy, when we have too little energy, and find ways to balance that energy. This energy will change from day to day, even from hour to hour or minute to minute. So it's a continual kind of tracking in a way. It doesn't have to be an intense kind of project, but we need to have a sense of where our energy level is.

In one teaching, the Buddha compared the quality of energy needed for practice to the tuning of a musical instrument. If you're tuning a stringed instrument and the strings are tightened too tight, they'll break, they'll snap, and won't be able to make music. If you're tuning that instrument and the strings are too loose, there won't be enough tension in the string for it to make a beautiful sound. In a similar way, our energy needs to be neither too tight nor too loose.

Another teaching along this way that I love—one that for me has been a beautiful metaphor and an inspiring thought to help me when I'm either pushing too hard or falling behind—is this: Somebody asked the Buddha, "How did you cross the flood?" The flood being the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion, the flood of suffering. And the Buddha responded, "Without tarrying, friend, and without hurrying, did I cross the flood." The person responded, "But how did you, without tarrying, without hurrying, cross the flood?" The Buddha said, "When I tarried, I sank. When I hurried, I was swept away. And so without tarrying, without hurrying, I crossed the flood."

To me, this is a great metaphor for just meeting this moment. So often we are tumbling ahead, trying to be mindful of future moments before they've come. That's hurrying, pushing too hard. Or we're sleepy, we're dull, we're not connecting. That's when we sink. I had this image almost of just walking on water. And without tarrying, without hurrying, just at the right pace—just this step, just this step—that is the pace that allows for that balance of energy.

So one way to balance the energy is through balancing our effort, because of that connection between effort and energy. Effort makes energy. So a balanced effort supports a balanced energy. This is really what you might call the art of meditation: learning how to navigate moment by moment, to meet each moment, to just meet each moment, to not push too hard into it and to not disconnect from it, but just to meet it.

In a moment, it's not too hard to be mindful right now. Can you feel the sensations of your buttocks on the cushion or chair or bench? Can you feel the sensations of your hands? Can you feel your lips touching? How hard is that to do as I mention each thing? Usually it's not too hard. It's not very hard to be mindful for a moment. What's difficult is to sustain it over time. That's where we lose that balance of effort. We push, trying to gather up moments and be mindful of multiple moments at a time. At least that's the way I see my mind working.

I'm going to be mindful of this whole sitting. But it doesn't work that way. You can only be mindful of a split second. That's it. That's all the effort that needs to be made—enough effort to be mindful of this moment, and then do it again. And again. And again. Over and over.

That "over and over" part seems overwhelming if we think about it. But if we just do it, it's not overwhelming. It's just this moment. It's just meeting this moment. And it's not very hard to meet this moment. So it's best not to think about trying to sustain effort and sustain mindfulness over a long period of time.

Another of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, talks about the practice of mindfulness. He compares it to lifting weights. We start with light weights, the ones we can handle. If we start by trying to pick up fifty or a hundred pound weights, we're not going to be able to do it very easily, and we'll strain ourselves. We start with one pound weights—that's not so hard. Do one pound weights for a while, then we can pick up two pound weights, then five pound weights. With mindfulness and effort, we start by just being mindful for a moment. Mindful for half a breath, and then another half a breath, and then another half a breath. Just enough energy to make it through half a breath. How hard is that? And then do it again. And then do it again.

This is really a powerful way to practice—letting go of the idea of the future and just meeting now. That's all there is anyway, is now. The future is an idea in our minds. So just meeting this moment.

We can do this in walking practice as well. I've found sometimes when my mind is very scattered during walking practice, if I pick a spot—say two steps out on the ground—and say, "Okay, that little spot, that grain, that place in the wood, maybe I can be mindful to that place." I'd take those two steps, and I could be mindful for two steps. And then I'd pick another spot and do it again. It kind of felt like pulling myself along, just gently pulling myself along. The mind could stay for a very short time. If I tried to force my mind to be present for an entire length of the path, I would invariably lose it. But if I just tried to be present for a step and then again, that helped with the continuity of mindfulness.

With this kind of practice, we need to learn how to monitor ourselves and learn just how frequently we need to make that reminder. Essentially what I'm talking about here is reminding yourself: pay attention, just be aware. Can I be mindful for a moment, and another moment, and another moment? At some point, mindfulness begins to gain momentum. And if you're continuing to remind yourself at that point, it's going to get in the way.

There's an analogy I like to use about this momentum that builds. It's like riding a scooter—those scooters that kids ride on. You start on the scooter and you have to tap your foot on the ground frequently in order to get that momentum going. But after tapping for a while, you can ride for quite a ways. You don't have to tap so frequently. Less effort is needed to move because the momentum has built up. And as you're riding that scooter, you begin to get a sense of when it's wobbling, when you need to tap again. It's like that with our mindfulness practice. As the momentum builds, you begin to get a sense of how frequently you need to remind yourself, how frequently you need to engage with that efforting.

Sometimes as mindfulness begins to gain momentum—and my own pattern is a habit of strong effort, of over-efforting—I began to ask myself: how little energy, how little effort do I need to make to be present right now? This was a great counter to that over-striving pattern. The counter to the opposite tendency, to the tendency to just lay back in laxness, is reminding yourself: can I be mindful for this next breath? Mindful again. So, how little effort do I need in order to be mindful in this moment? Backing off, backing off. At some point the mind will wander.

Then you know you need to bring the effort back in.

Another aspect of this balanced effort that has been very helpful for me in my own practice is to remember that there are times of the day when the energy seems to get lower. We all go through cycles of energy. Practice isn't so much about trying to push when that low energy is there, but rather making the best effort that you can given the available energy. It may not feel like the mind is very clear. It may feel like the mind wanders a lot. But you're making the best effort that you can—just keeping trying to be present, just reminding yourself to be aware, reminding yourself to be mindful as best you can given the circumstances.

As the energy levels naturally shift and change, if you have been making that effort, the practice will naturally come together again. If you let go of trying to make effort in those places where there's low energy, you'll have to work harder as the energy cycles through the day. So just make the best effort that you can given the circumstances. No need to berate yourself for not having a strong level of energy all the time. None of us do. We all go through these cycles. So we need this patience.

A key piece around making effort is realizing that what we're doing is cultivating the conditions for freedom. We have to use the energy skillfully to cultivate the conditions for freedom. We cannot make freedom happen. We cannot make insight happen. We cannot make concentration happen. We can use the energy and the mindfulness to cultivate the conditions, and then let go. The results are out of your hands.

One way to look at this is through an analogy of ripening fruit. One teacher said that her teacher told her, "When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree." We can create the conditions for supporting a tree's growth—giving it light, water, nourishment—but we cannot make that fruit ripen. That's a different process, a natural process of nature that has that fruit ripen. But we can support the conditions for that fruit to ripen.

And that's how our practice works. We make the effort to support the conditions towards cultivating the wholesome and letting go of the unwholesome. And then we let go. The results naturally occur in their own time.

I'll finish with a quote by Piyadasi Thera, a great Sri Lankan scholar monk and practitioner: "We must, by our own resolute efforts, rise up and make our way to the portals of liberty. And it is always, in every moment, in our power to do so. Neither are those portals locked and the key in possession of someone else from whom it must be obtained by prayer or entreaty. That door is free of all bolts and bars, save those that we ourselves have made."

CHAPTER 5

Body and Mind

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this guided meditation and instruction from the Three-Month Retreat, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of the intimate relationship between body and mind, particularly as it manifests through emotions. The session begins with a systematic approach to relaxation—scanning through the body's muscles, relaxing the core and internal organs, and even treating the brain as a muscle that can soften and release.*
>
> *Fella provides detailed guidance on working with emotions in meditation practice. She explains how emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations form interconnected cycles: emotions produce thoughts (often as a way of seeking attention), thoughts generate emotions, and emotions manifest as physical sensations. She offers practical advice for the noting practice, suggesting that precision isn't necessary—simple notes like "emotion," "chaos," or "confusion" suffice when experience is complex or unclear.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is her instruction on distinguishing between physical sensations and their associated emotions. When attending to the bodily correlate of fear, for instance, one should note "contraction" rather than "fear," recognizing that the physical sensation is not identical to the mental experience. The talk also addresses the common question of self and choice-making, suggesting that choices arise from conditions—either from greed, aversion, and delusion, or from wisdom—rather than from a fixed self. Fella briefly touches on the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga), noting how mindfulness supports investigation, and how energy can arise through spiritual urgency and reflection on impermanence.*

Settling into the present moment, allowing your body to relax.

It's often helpful to begin a period of meditation by checking in to see if the body and mind are relaxed. It can be helpful to scan through your body, checking for areas of tension and consciously relaxing the muscles—particularly in places where you may hold tension, around the eyes or the jaw, in the neck and shoulders, throughout the torso. Check into whether there's any tension held in your buttocks and hips. Sometimes we unconsciously tighten that area. See if you can relax those muscles, scanning through and checking into whether there's any obvious or subtle muscular tension in the body.

Having relaxed the muscles of the body as much as possible, I often find it helpful to relax the core of the body, allowing an opening to relaxation behind your eyes. Relaxing inside your throat. Relax your heart and your lungs. Let go of tension in your stomach, your intestines, all the organs inside your abdominal cavity.

And see too if you can relax your mind. One way to approach this is to think of your brain as if it were a muscle. See if you can relax your brain, letting go of thoughts of the past, the future, even thoughts of the present moment in favor of connecting with actual felt experience here and now. There's nowhere to go, no one to be, and very little to do right now.

Having relaxed your body and mind as much as you have access to in this moment, allow your attention to open to the experience of hearing. Receiving the sounds—subtle sounds and obvious sounds, distant sounds and sounds nearby. Allowing the sounds to come and go. Receiving them almost as if you were listening to music.

Letting go now of directing the attention to hearing, allow the attention to settle into the body, connecting to the sense of the body sitting here, receiving the sensations in the body almost as if you were listening to them. Within the body, connect to your anchor—the breathing, the sense of the whole body, hearing, whatever your anchor is. Receiving, relaxing, and allowing the anchor to come to you rather than having a sense of going out and looking for the experience. Settle back and see if you can allow that experience to find you.

As you rest with this anchor for your attention, other experiences will arise and be known. Other body sensations—pressure, heat, tension, coolness, tightness, lightness, heaviness. Thoughts, sounds, smells. There's no need to hold tightly to the anchor as if that were somehow a better object. Any experience can be used to cultivate mindfulness. We can open to any experience. So as other experiences arise, allow mindfulness to connect with those.

One experience that may come up from time to time is emotion. When emotions arise, it can be helpful to acknowledge them with a gentle, soft note—whatever the emotion is: happiness, fear, loneliness, sadness. Just a quiet whisper in the mind, acknowledging the emotion.

You might recognize an emotion because of a strong pattern of thinking. We often understand emotion through thought. If you notice that a strong pattern of thinking is recurring, check in and see if there's an emotion underneath. Often if that emotion is acknowledged, the thoughts will diminish.

When emotions are strong, it's very helpful to recognize how the emotion feels in the body. There's a very strong connection between the mind and the body, especially around emotion. So if there's an emotion, check into how the body experiences it. Emotions will come and go as all other experiences come and go.

Being open in your meditation to whatever arises for you—sights, sounds, smells, moods, emotions, thoughts. And if ever it seems helpful, use the anchor for attention to ground and connect with mindfulness.

I have a few more thoughts to say about emotion. If you're using the noting practice and using that to support your mindfulness, it's not necessary with emotions, if you don't know what the emotion is, to figure it out or to have a precise label for the emotion. If you know that you're having some kind of an emotion but don't really know what it is, a simple note of "emotion" or "feeling" is fine. You don't need to figure out what the emotion is, and I encourage you not to try to figure it out, in fact.

Sometimes too we have experiences with emotions where it feels like there's a chaotic flow of many different emotions—anger and frustration and fear and loneliness and sadness. It can feel just like this chaos of emotions.

And it feels a little odd to try to pick out one of those to name that complex of emotions with the noting. So you could just use "chaos." Chaos is happening right now. Or "confusion." It's not necessary to have a precise note.

Actually, for the noting in general, if you're experiencing hearing, or in daily practice seeing, it's not necessary to be detailed about what you're hearing or seeing. Just a simple note of "hearing" or "seeing" is sufficient. Simplicity with the noting—whatever is obvious for you is helpful as a note.

I wanted to say something about how thoughts and emotions work together. There's a very tight connection between thinking and emotions, it seems, at least in our culture. When we have strong emotions, they often produce a lot of thoughts. It seems as though the emotion is trying to get our attention through producing thoughts. So there's a very tight connection. If we're having strong emotion, thoughts will manifest.

If you're having a strong pattern of thinking, you may well have an emotion underneath it—especially a pattern of thinking that comes up repetitively. There may well be an emotion underlying it. A lot of planning thoughts, for instance, may have some anxiety underneath. If you can, in noticing a pattern of thinking, recognize an emotion beneath it, the emotion may be trying to get your attention. Actually bringing the atten-

tion to the emotion in that moment is what the emotion wants. And then it doesn't need to rattle the cage and start producing all these thoughts. The thoughts can often quiet down if you attend to the emotion itself.

So emotions produce thoughts, and thoughts produce emotions. You may notice this in your sitting. You're sitting quietly and suddenly a memory arises—this often happens. A memory arises in our experience, and we react to that memory, as Joseph was mentioning last night. If a thought arises that we have a feeling about, that feeling can arise because of the thought. There's a very strong link between the two. So explore this in your experience.

There's also a fairly strong link between emotions and bodily experience. I don't know that I'd go so far as to say that all emotion is experienced in the body, but there's often a physical correlate to emotion—very, very often. Anger perhaps feels like pressure and heat. Loneliness may feel like heaviness. Sadness may have constriction in the throat or in the heart. So there are often physical sensations that come along with emotions.

This is a great place to ground our attention if the emotion is strong. It helps to bring us out of the mental world into the physical. It's very grounding to bring the attention into the body when we're paying attention to emotions.

If you are using the noting and you bring the attention into the body when attending to emotions, I encourage you to let go of the note of the emotion. If you're noting fear, for example—noting fear, fear, fear is happening—and then you notice there's a contraction in your abdomen associated with the fear, when you turn to that experience, use the note "contraction" rather than "fear." The physical sensations are not the emotion. They are the physical sensations. Contraction is contraction. The fear is a mental experience, and you're attending to physical experience. It's very helpful to clarify what you're actually paying attention to—to use the note of the physical sensations you're experiencing as opposed to the emotion.

This also points to another cycle that happens for us. Body sensations arise because of emotion. When emotions arise, there's a physical correlate. But physical sensations can also arise in the absence of emotion. A contraction in the throat, for example, can arise just because a contraction in the throat is arising. And if there's a familiarity with contraction in the throat being linked to a particular emotion, sometimes what the mind will do is feel that contraction and then start to assign an emotion to it, actually constructing the emotion.

So it's very helpful to be attuned to the difference between the body and the mind here. If you're feeling heaviness and pressure in your heart, maybe it is sadness, maybe there's a sadness there—maybe not. Hold an open mind about the fact that an emotion may or may not be present with particular body sensations.

I often find that if I end up with a particular sensation in the body—a feeling similar to frustration, for instance—I will notice the mind starts scanning the environment to find out what I'm frustrated about. So be aware that this kind of cycle also happens in our minds and bodies.

A question arose about the sense of self around decisions, choices, and actions. The questioner could see that there's an intention arising and then action taken on that intention. But in the teachings, we're told we have a choice whether to refrain from unwholesome actions or negative actions, and that still feels like "me." It still feels like somewhere along the line, "I'm the one who's making the choice."

This is a very common question, particularly around choice and intention. This is a very powerful place where we identify. The way I'd suggest working with it is simply to notice that there is a feeling of "me" or "I" doing that. At least in my own experience, the way to begin to study no-self is to study the self—to study what feels like self. So anytime it feels like there's a sense of self, get familiar with that. What is it that you are calling self there?

The other piece about who's making the choice: I've had times in my practice where I've seen choice being made, choices are made, and it's clear that the choices are coming out of conditions. Those conditions either have the habit of greed, aversion, and delusion behind them, or wisdom behind them. So choices are made by greed, aversion, and delusion, or choices are made by wisdom. There's no "I" making the choice. The choices are made by the confluence of patterns and mind states that are arising in the moment.

If it feels like you have a choice, choose skillfully.

Another question arose about the seven factors of awakening—specifically about the proximate causes for investigation, energy, and also the joy that leads to concentration. Aside from the order they're listed, what conditions support the arising of these factors?

This is a huge topic. The main thing I would encourage is to remember that the seven factors are in that order because they do each support each other in that sequence. When we bring mindfulness, it supports interest and investigation. Investigation can also be generated through a little more precision of attention—bringing closer attention to experience, but not a tight attention.

Energy arises through the application of our energy. Energy can also arise from a sense of spiritual urgency. For instance, a reflection on your own impermanence can bring energy into the system. There are many, many factors that support it.

In your own experience, as you're noticing the arising of these factors, can you notice what is supporting that arising in the moment?

CHAPTER 6

Not Self and Selfing

Andrea Fella · 57 min

> *In this talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of anattā (not-self), the third of the three characteristics of existence alongside anicca (impermanence) and dukkha (unreliability). Drawing from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta—the Buddha's discourse on the characteristic of not-self—Fella explains how the Buddha systematically examined each of the five khandhas (aggregates) to demonstrate that nothing within our experience can be identified as a permanent, controllable self. She illuminates how our inability to command our body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, or consciousness to be as we wish serves as evidence for the not-self nature of experience.*
>
> *Fella distinguishes between psychological insights about our patterns and the liberating insights into the three characteristics, noting that while impermanence can feel unsettling when directly experienced, the insight into not-self actually brings relief. Using analogies of rivers and rainbows, she illustrates how what we call 'self' is actually a process—a flux of conditions arising and passing—rather than a fixed entity. She references the Kaccānagotta Sutta to explain how correct wisdom transcends both existence and non-existence, seeing instead the dependent arising and cessation of phenomena.*
>
> *The practical guidance offered includes studying what we take to be self, particularly during moments of suffering or when our views meet resistance from reality. Fella shares personal examples of observing the 'good yogi/bad yogi' pattern and witnessing rapid shifts between different senses of self. She concludes with the Buddha's teaching to Bāhiya: 'In the seen is only the seen'—pointing to how simple, direct awareness of experience, without adding a sense of self, leads naturally to liberation.*

As we practice meditation, we begin to see our experience more directly. We've been talking a lot about this in the instructions, encouraging you to meet the elemental nature of our physical experience, just meet the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality of the experience. Meeting the emotions, thoughts, just as they arise without getting caught by the content of those experiences. So the meditation instructions encourage us to drop below the realm of concepts to meet our experience more directly.

We begin this exploration and start to get familiar with this more direct experience. That's part of the meditation instructions that we suggest: learn how to meet this experience more directly. In getting familiar with our experience, we get familiar with what we might call the specific characteristics of our experience. We get familiar with the pressure, the vibration, the tingling—we get familiar with all of the sensations.

The other part of the meditation instruction, another aspect that we offer, is to not only pay attention to that level of experience, what is happening in that sense realm, but also to start noticing what happens to it when you pay attention to it. This part of the instruction begins to point us not to the specific characteristics, the wide variety of characteristics of experience, but the more common characteristics of experience. By noticing how our experience changes, we begin to recognize that all of our experience is impermanent.

As Joseph talked about last week, not only is it impermanent, all of our experience is also unreliable as a place for lasting happiness. Some of you may recognize these two—anicca, impermanence, and dukkha, unreliability—as being two of what are called the three general characteristics of all experience. The third being not-self, anatta.

Tonight I'd like to talk about these three as characteristics and discuss how they interrelate. But primarily I'd like to talk about this third one, the characteristic of not-self, and also a little bit about how we might begin exploring this directly in our experience. Directly connecting with these three fundamental characteristics of experience, directly realizing not just the idea of impermanence but the direct recognition of seeing things change in our experience. Directly seeing the unreliability—how because it's impermanent, it is unreliable. And directly seeing the insubstantiality, that's another way to express this not-self nature, the insubstantiality, the transient flux of experience. These have a deep impact on our minds when we directly experience them.

These three characteristics, seeing these three characteristics, actually perceiving them in our experience, is insight. And this is what gives insight meditation its name: the seeing into these three characteristics.

There are different kinds of insights. Sometimes we can, in meeting our experience, come to some understandings about how our psychology came to be, some of the patterns and habits that we are very familiar with, how those came to be for us. Those kinds of realizations I would call psychological insights, and they are very powerful also. In my own experience, that kind of recognition—seeing that my own patterns are just impermanent and subject to causes and conditions, just created by causes and conditions, and seeing how they formed, the patterns from history that put them together

—that kind of recognition has allowed me to more easily meet those patterns. There's not so much fear, so much identification. There's not so much investment in those patterns. So they can be simply met with mindfulness.

The insights into these three characteristics are the insights that really liberate us. They not only teach us something about how our psychology is put together, but they deeply change our mindstream. When the mind deeply understands that things are impermanent, it won't bother to pick things up. It won't bother to cling to them. When it deeply understands the unreliability of our experience, it knows that clinging will lead to suffering. And when the mind deeply recognizes that there isn't anyone here to defend or protect, no self to defend or protect, there's no need for reactivity.

In the Buddha's second discourse called the Anatta-Lakkhana Sutta—the words meaning anatta, not-self, and lakkhana, characteristic, so the Discourse on the Characteristic of Not-Self—in this discourse, the Buddha described these three characteristics in terms of each other. I'd like to go over this discourse with you a little bit.

The discourse is primarily aimed at helping us understand this not-self characteristic. The first way the Buddha goes about pointing to this for us is to point to the aspect of control. Often as we consider or relate to a sense of what we think of as self, there's an aspect of having some kind of control around it—the one who chooses, the one who decides. That's often a place where we feel like our self is, that there is someone who chooses, there is someone who decides, someone who seems to have some sort of control over this being, and that is what self is.

So the Buddha begins the discourse by speaking to that. He does this exploration through the framework of the aggregates that Joseph talked about last week also. Essentially, looking at our experience through this framework of the aggregates, we see as we begin to look that there's nothing in our experience that lies outside of this framework. Everything that we experience falls into one of these five categories. Sometimes this term "aggregate" sounds like a complicated technical term, but the Pali term is khandha, and it simply means something like heap or bundle. It's a very non-technical word in the Pali.

And so these five heaps of things—heaps of stuff, as Guy Armstrong sometimes says, five heaps of stuff—describe all aspects of our experience. Nothing falls outside of them. When we look at our experience, everything we encounter falls into one of those five categories.

The Buddha uses this framework as a way to help us deconstruct this idea of self. He says, "Form is non-self." In this translation, Bhikkhu Bodhi renders *anatta* as "non-self." "Form is non-self. For if form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of form: 'Let my form be thus. Let my form not be thus.' But because form is non-self, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to determine of form: 'Let my form be thus. Let my form not be thus.'"

This is referring to our body. He's saying the body is not self because we cannot command it: "Body, be this way. Body, don't age. Body, don't have that pain." He offers this as evidence for the not-self nature of the body.

So we might think, "Okay, well, body isn't self, but surely there's something else in there that qualifies as self." And so he goes on. Feeling is not self. Perception is not self. Volitional formations are non-self. And finally, consciousness is non-self. "For if consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.' But because consciousness is non-self, consciousness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to determine of consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.'"

How many of us would, if we could, say, "Let my consciousness be calm, peaceful, at ease"? We can't do that. The Buddha points to this as undermining the belief we hold around this aspect of control—this sense of "being who I am."

He goes on to speak about the other two characteristics, pointing out that everything in our experience is impermanent. Form is impermanent. Feelings are impermanent. Perception is impermanent. Volitional formations are impermanent. Consciousness is impermanent. And because these are impermanent, they are unreliable.

The question he then poses to the monks, to the practitioners he's addressing, is this: Is something that is impermanent and unreliable worthy of being called self? Does it make sense to call something self when it is impermanent and unreliable?

This brings us back to the question of what we mean by "self." As we reflect on it, there is often a sense that something we call self has stability, some kind of permanence. In the time of the Buddha, one conception of self was a transcendent self that was permanent and blissful. This teaching directly challenges that notion—the idea that such a self can be found anywhere in our experience.

We can certainly, through meditation, attain states that are blissful. But they are impermanent. They come and go. They arise based on causes and conditions; they fall apart based on causes and conditions.

In this part of the sutta, the Buddha is really encouraging us to look at what we call self and to explore whether it makes sense. There is something that we call self—but does what we call self actually stand up to investigation? Does it prove to be what we think it is when we examine it closely?

We'll return to that question. But it can sometimes help, in exploring this concept of not-self, to consider some analogies that illuminate what is being said. As I mentioned earlier, one way to understand this idea of not-self is to recognize that what we think of as self isn't a thing at all. Rather, it's a flux, a flow, an ever-changing stream.

Experience. We impute, essentially impute, a concept to that ever-changing flow of experience, and that concept is what we are identifying as self. But we don't see it as a concept. We don't see it as a process in the mind that is creating this concept—we see it as a thing.

I'll offer a couple of analogies. The first is the analogy of a river. I like this analogy. It's fairly apt because our experience, when we meet it with mindfulness, feels kind of like a flow, a stream, a river of experience.

So what is a river? The water in the river is continually changing. We can't take a bucket of water out of the river and say, "That's the river." We can't even point to the flow of water in the river and say, "That's the river," because that water is never the same water. It's always different water. Instant by instant, it's different water.

Perhaps the riverbed? Maybe the riverbed might be the river. Well, the riverbed without the water doesn't seem like much of a river. And even the riverbed changes after a flood. The actual course of that riverbed can change depending on causes and conditions. The river's name doesn't seem to be the river either.

And yet there is something that we understand to be river. We can give a river a name and we can talk about it. Actually, I think that process of giving something a name so that we can talk about it is part of what cements this idea of thing in our minds. The process of perception, misunderstood essentially, creates this idea that there's something there—as opposed to it being a convenient shortcut.

And so the sense of self, like the sense of a river... there is something that makes up what we would call a river, just as there is something that makes up what we would call us, what we would call me or myself. There's something going on here. A process is happening, a process that is related moment to moment by a chain of cause and effect. And yet the thing that we think of as self doesn't exist in the way that we think of it. It's not that there's nothing there. It's not that nothing exists. But it doesn't exist in the way that we think of it existing.

There's a sutta that speaks to this—one of my favorite suttas:

This world, for the most part, depends upon a duality—upon the idea of existence and the idea of non-existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is, with correct wisdom...

The Buddha elsewhere refers to the world as being this fathom-long body. "In this fathom-long body lies the world." So he's talking about the world of experience here.

For one who sees the origin of the world—one who sees the arising of experience as it really is, with correct wisdom—there is no idea of non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is, with correct wisdom—that is, for one who sees things passing away out of experience, experience ending, with correct wisdom—there is no idea of existence in regard to the world.

So when one sees that experiences are constantly arising, there's no idea that things don't exist. And when one sees that things are constantly ending, there's no idea that things do exist.

The Buddha goes on to say that rather than existence or non-existence, there's a process of things coming into being and falling apart—and that this process is a causally arisen process. Things arise dependent on causes and conditions. Experience arises in dependence on causes and conditions, I should really say.

What we experience as self comes into being through a process of conditions coming together. And we fundamentally misunderstand it to be something, to be a thing.

Another analogy that points to this—conditions coming together to create something, to create an experience—is the analogy of a rainbow. A rainbow seems like a thing. You can see the rainbow. There's some kind of existence within the rainbow—it's clear, we can see it, we can talk about it. And yet with the rainbow, conditions have to come together just right in order for that rainbow to be seen. There needs to be water in the sky. There needs to be sun at an angle through which it can pass through the water and meet an observer. These three things have to be in relation to each other: the observer, the water, the sun—all have to be in the correct position with respect to each other. If one of those three is in some other place, if the observer is a few miles further on, they may not see the rainbow because the orientation is incorrect.

So does the rainbow exist, or does the rainbow not exist? We can't really talk about it that way. It comes together based on conditions.

When I speak about this teaching of not-self as being a pointer to the flux of experience, sometimes the question comes up: what's the difference then between impermanence and not-self? Isn't flux just another term for impermanence? I'd like to explore this a little bit.

In my own experience, there's a kind of difference—I have seen a difference in how the recognitions of impermanence and not-self are felt. With impermanence, it can feel like you're watching something come into being, and you're watching something go out of being. It's kind of startling.

I remember on one retreat in Burma. It was a room that had some large posts, and people were doing walking meditation while others were sitting. At one point I was sitting, and they were doing walking meditation. I opened my eyes and saw this person move behind a post so that I could no longer see them. And they vanished. In my mind, they vanished. That person just was not there. It's startling. There was a person there, an object, something—a thing. And then that person was not there. That person disappeared.

So with the insight into impermanence, there can be a sense of there being something that appears and disappears. The insight into not-self, in my experience, is the recognition that there isn't anything there. There's not actually a thing there. As things come into being, they're already falling apart. So it has a different flavor to it, this insight into not-self. There's nothing actually there. There's no thing there. There is a process happening. It's not that there's nothing, but there isn't something.

It's not uncommon for people to express or feel a sense of discomfort around this teaching—to have almost a feeling of fear around this idea. Listened to from the perspective of self, this teaching doesn't make any sense at all. And from the perspective of self, there can be a sense of, "Well, what's going to happen to me?"

This is certainly familiar to me. I've experienced this sense of fear. And that fear usually is not around the experience of not-self, but around the idea of the teaching of not-self.

I find it interesting to contrast the way we relate to impermanence and the way we relate to not-self from the intellectual standpoint. Everybody knows things are impermanent. It doesn't seem to bother people too much when you're just thinking about it. You go out and talk to people on the street: "Are things impermanent?" "Yeah, sure, things are impermanent." It doesn't disturb people. But when we start talking about this concept of not-self, it feels a little disturbing. And it also just seems completely wrong on top of it—like, this cannot be right.

So with impermanence, there's this matter-of-fact, casual acceptance: "Yeah, that teaching, no problem, I understand that." And with not-self, there's this kind of fear that happens.

But when we actually move into the experiential world of these insights, it kind of gets reversed. Because when we start seeing things—particularly when we start seeing things disappear, when we start seeing things vanish—things start to feel really unstable. That insight into the ending of things, the impermanent nature of things, everything ending, ending, ending—that experience brings up quite a bit of discomfort. The actual experience of impermanence is not one where you can just say, "Oh yeah, no problem."

The insight into not-self is a relief.

When we really see that there's no one here to defend or to protect, there's no problem.

I find it interesting, this way that the idea creates so much distress, and yet the insight is so relieving.

It seems to us that there's plenty of evidence for self. When we think about what self is, well, it's just kind of obvious to us that there's a self there. That feeling itself is the confirmation that self exists. The feeling seems to be a good part of the evidence for self. It's like, of course self exists—I feel it.

And not only that, the view or the belief, the idea in self is so powerful that it filters how we view our world. There is actually a lot of evidence for not-self out there, but because we view our experience through this lens of self, we conveniently ignore all of the evidence to the contrary. This is a fundamental way our mind deludes us. This is a capacity of delusion: when we look at experience through a certain lens, that's what we see. What we see then confirms our belief.

Some of that evidence, I pointed to a little while ago—the Buddha actually mentioning that consciousness is not self. If consciousness were self, it would be possible to say, "Let my consciousness be thus."

I'll point to a really concrete example here. When you sit down to meditate and put your attention on your breath or in the flow of changing experience, with an intention of choosing to be present with that experience, the mind wanders. Who did that? Who did that wandering? If you did the wandering, then were you the one that decided to stay put?

And even more amazing, even more mind-blowing, is the fact that out of that spaced-out place where it seems like there's not much choice or control—the mind in autopilot, doing its thing, running on habits and patterns—suddenly mindfulness reappears. Who did that? Causes and conditions came together for mindfulness to reappear. It's as simple as that. There's no one there doing this.

So exploring this—how do we explore this actually in our practice? I've mostly been talking about the idea, the concept so far. But what does it mean to actually begin to recognize this in our actual experience?

The teaching that the Buddha gave, the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, points us in this direction. There he's suggesting we look at our experience for what we call self and begin to investigate it. Does it really hold up to that investigation?

There's a famous quote—I know many of you are familiar with this quote by Dōgen: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."

So to study this teaching, we study what feels like self. When we study this, when we get familiar with this feeling, with what we are calling self, we begin to see—and I think Rebecca said this very beautifully the other morning—that as we study this, as we look at what we're calling self, we may see at some point that it falls apart. And then we get a taste of what this not-self teaching means. Or we may, through studying self, begin to see it arising—see that out of causes and conditions, a particular pattern or habit of selfing comes to be. The angry self or the frustrated self comes into being out of these habits and patterns. It wasn't there, and then there it is. We see this self coming into being. Or we might start to see, as we explore what we are calling self, that what we call self actually changes quite rapidly from one to widely different experiences.

I'll go through some of these ways.

First, just some reflection. You might go through this with me, in your own experience, asking yourself: What is it that you call self? What in your experience is it that you identify as self?

Sometimes it includes a sense of solidity, a sense of thingness, a sense of continuity—often a continuity from past to future, from past to present, where memory plays a big role. Essentially, because of memory, because I can remember things, there must be someone who remembers. That sense of continuity.

It might be the sense of the one who's in control, the one who decides, the one who chooses. It might be the sense of being the one who feels or knows.

At one point in my practice, I could really clearly see that I wasn't doing the knowing, that I wasn't choosing what to know. Knowing was happening, and yet it felt like I was the one experiencing what was known. I think that's a pretty common, deeper kind of sense of self—being the one who experiences.

So it's often a vague kind of feeling. Actually, when we start to look at it, it's a vague kind of feeling, and it's hard to actually pin it down, to pin down what we mean by self. It's more of a feeling in a way. But there's something there that feels really solid.

I'd compare it to the way we observe pain. When you first start to meditate and observe painful experience, it feels like a solid thing—some thing there, a block of some kind. And then when we turn our attention into it, we realize there's no thing that we call pain. It's actually a lively, changing process, an experience of flux and flow. You can't really say, "Well, that's the pain," because when you find that one point, it vanishes, and then the experience moves over just a few inches. There's no one thing that is the pain.

It's kind of similar as we start to observe what we call self. It seems solid until we start to look at it, and then it shifts and changes. We can't quite pin it down. This too is evidence for not-self.

And yet what we seem to do, because that view is so strong, is think, "Well, I must just not be looking at it right. I must just not be seeing it right." Or if somebody points out a contradiction to us—like the Buddha saying, "Go through all of these aspects of experience: it's not there, it's not there, it's not there, it's not there"—we think, "Okay, I can agree it's not there. But it must be someplace else," because that view is so strong.

So the encouragement is to actually turn towards this feeling. What is it? Sometimes this feeling can be really clear—this is a good time to really start to play with this teaching. Actually, this seems to happen when some of our beliefs about self are challenged. That seems to be when the feeling of self gets really strong.

When we're going along and everything corresponds to our views of how things should be, how I am, how other people should behave with respect to me—as long as things are moving along in line with our views, we don't particularly notice. That sense of self is more vague. It's like, well, there's no problem, so there's no sense of that solidity. But as soon as there's something that points out to us that our belief or view may not be in line with reality, then the feeling of self kind of hits us in the face. The feeling of self-righteousness, for example—I'm right, you're wrong. This comes because there's some kind of rub between our view of how things should be and how things actually are.

So this is a good time to explore this sense of self. I'll give you an example from my own practice of this kind of exploration.

On one retreat, I was suffering from the "I'm a failure" pattern quite frequently. I felt like I couldn't meditate. I felt like everybody else could meditate, and I was a failure. I was a bad yogi. I would notice that, and there was a lot of suffering around that pattern.

At some point on that same retreat, it began to become really clear to me in very short time—because I was suffering from this feeling of "I don't know how to practice, I can't be mindful"—and I would take a step and feel the sensations of the foot on the ground. Mindfulness! I'm a good yogi. And then suddenly, "Oh, I can't feel anything. I'm a bad yogi." And it was like, whoa, wow, this is interesting. I'm a good yogi. I'm a bad yogi. This "I" was in my face. This "I am" was in my face.

So, exploring it.

What is it? What was I feeling? What was really happening? I think much of what was going on around self was these ideas, views, and beliefs. This is a large part of where self comes into play. We have views, we have beliefs around how things should be. And from the perspective of my ideal, I should be a good yogi. When my own experience didn't measure up to how I thought it should be, I was a failure.

One thing this experience pointed out so clearly to me was that when I felt like I was a good yogi, it didn't feel like there was a problem. That was how things were supposed to be. When I felt like a failure, that was where the problem seemed to be. But at some point I began to recognize that the feeling of failure was intimately tied to the idea I had about what being a good yogi was. That sense of "I'm a good yogi" was actually a setup.

So in exploring this process of self around this issue, what I really saw I needed to do was look at that self-praise I was engaging in. I did also need to recognize when I was telling myself I was a failure—both sides of it are equally nonsense. But the conditions for the arising of that failure were directly connected to the attachment to that feeling of being a good yogi.

In this exploration, this is where the rub comes in. This is where our views don't meet reality. My idea of being a good yogi was something like continuous mindfulness. This doesn't happen very often. The mind wanders. Every time the mind wanders—oh, I'm a failure.

So the rub of our views of self, our view of who I am or who I want to be, when that meets reality and there is suffering—this is a great place to explore the sense of self. This is a pointer for us. Actually, whenever there's suffering, there's some kind of sense of self, some kind of "you" there.

The process by which self is created, by which the experience of self is created—that selfing process, the process by which that comes to be—is the same process by which suffering comes to be. So you're already doing this. You're already exploring this in your experience. When you're exploring and meeting the experience of unsatisfactoriness, of dukkha, you're exploring this process of selfing, whether or not it feels that way.

You can also notice when this feeling of self arises. Sometimes we get into places where things are pretty quiet. There's not much grasping, not much clinging going on. Things feel pretty stable, pretty calm. And then suddenly something happens and there's our self, right in our face.

On one retreat, I was in a place where things were relatively neutral for quite a good stretch of time. I was beginning to notice there was subtle reactivity to that neutral experience, just being in walking meditation, noticing neutral experience. There would be this little bit of leaning into the neutral experience, a little bit of expectation—ooh, maybe something will happen—a little bit of wanting there. And when nothing happened: I'm a failure.

Out of nothing, the mind was just creating this pattern. Neutral experience, a little bit of wanting, that expectation doesn't get met, and I'm a failure. This is self arising right in the moment. I saw it in that moment and I actually smiled at it. It's like, look at that! Wow! Out of nothing, the mind created a failure.

We can also see a rapidly changing sense of self sometimes. As we start to feel into what we're calling self, we begin to see that we've got a lot of different selves in there. There are committees in there, all different ages.

I was doing some walking meditation out here on one three-month course, and I had some reactivity to some of the questions in the hall. I was arguing in my mind with how things were being discussed and described in the question and answer period. I noticed that I was arguing in my mind, and I could feel a sense of—I remember feeling a sense of the forty-year-old, analytical, argumentative me. I was feeling into that, trying to be with it, trying to understand it.

And it felt so sticky. I didn't really see how to tease it apart. It just was so complicated and so *me*.

I was doing the walking meditation, and this truck drives up. Big, loud brakes squealing. The doors bang open. And instantly, the mind switched from that argumentative 40-year-old to a "It's a truck! Wow, that's amazing!" And I felt like I was two years old. Just like that.

That was quite a startling lesson for me—seeing how these senses of self change. So look: What are you taking yourself to be in your experience? What is it that you think of as self?

The last piece I'll explore about this teaching is another teaching of the Buddha that Greg mentioned yesterday morning in the instructions. He talked about the teaching to Bahiya, and this is actually a very beautiful teaching.

Bahiya came to the Buddha and asked him for the teachings in brief. And the Buddha responded: "You should train yourself thus. In the seen is only the seen. In the heard is only the heard. In the sensed is only the sensed. In the cognized is only the cognized. This is how you should train yourself."

So he started there. And that's the training. That's what we do. We meet our experience. This is where I began the talk—just meeting our direct experience underneath the level of concept. In the seen is only the seen.

And the Buddha goes on in this teaching. He says, so this is the practice. The simplicity of just meeting experience is the practice. And then the Buddha goes on to state what the results of this practice are. He says: "When for you in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized—then, Bahiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there's no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor in between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

The Buddha points to this as a result of practice. It's an insight. We don't have to believe it even. Just come back to the simplicity of experience. In the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard. Underneath the level of concept, in the cognized is only the cognized—recognizing concept as just another construction of the mind, as opposed to believing it as a thing. When for you this is the case, there is no you in terms of that, no you there.

So we don't need to believe this teaching. We don't even need to think about it. You can really let this whole talk go out of your minds and just come back to the simplicity of meeting your experience moment to moment. Trust in that. The insights come out of that.

Let's sit together for a few moments.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 7

What versus Why

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this profound talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella examines our deeply ingrained habit of asking 'why' we are the way we are—a tendency reinforced by Western psychological frameworks. While intellectual understanding of our history can provide some relief, she argues it rarely touches the deeper roots of our suffering. Drawing from the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), she contrasts unwise attention—ruminating on questions like 'What was I? What will I become?'—with wise attention that meets experience through the lens of the Four Noble Truths: 'This is suffering. This is the origin of suffering.'*
>
> *Through vivid personal examples—including a theatrical mishap that generated years of embarrassment, a surprising discovery about nightly loneliness triggered by a digital clock, and a transformative encounter with deep-seated self-hatred—Andrea demonstrates how suffering is always created fresh in each present moment. The causes and conditions from our past only become active through present-moment reactions to memories. By carefully observing 'what' is happening layer by layer, rather than making assumptions about underlying causes, the mind naturally reveals its own conditioned patterns.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with thoughts as arising phenomena (using notes like 'hearing' or 'seeing'), checking in with our attitude toward experience, and meeting sticky patterns with patient, continuous contact. Andrea shares how a moment of clearly seeing 'you're no good' as simply a thought—an empty phenomenon arising in the mind—cut deeply into a lifelong pattern of self-hatred. This same practice of meeting what is happening, moment by moment, not only frees us from reactivity but opens the door to liberating vipassanā insights into impermanence and not-self.*

As human beings, we seem to have a pretty strong habit or pattern around wanting to understand why things happen. This is a pattern that has actually served us quite well. So many things have arisen out of this quest for understanding why.

And yet we seem to be particularly curious about why things happen to *me*. We're very practiced at this particular exploration. It seems especially in Western culture, with the way psychoanalysis has permeated into our way of thinking, we all—or many of us at least—have a pattern of wanting to understand why we are the way we are, particularly through thinking about our history, the causes and conditions from our history.

The way we have practiced this tends to be through thinking about, through reflecting on, through intellectualizing. Why am I the way I am? Why do I react the way I react? Why do I have these habits and patterns? And we understand that through thinking back to our childhood, or to ways that we related to people, or situations that we were in.

This actually can be quite helpful at times. I'm not saying this is not helpful. For instance, if you're in a situation where you're meeting someone and there's a little bit of an emotional charge around this meeting, you might reflect on the fact that this person reminds you of somebody you have a charge about, and that there's no need to have that reaction with this particular person. So you can mitigate some of your reactivity through this kind of reflection, through this kind of thinking back about and understanding how our patterns and habits have come to be.

And yet we sometimes, I think, perhaps mistakenly feel that we should be able to control these reactions just through this intellectual process. Often this doesn't work very well. We think that because I know this person isn't the same person that I have the charge about from my history, I shouldn't have this feeling about that person. And yet we still do. We still have these reactions.

So often this reflective process, this thinking back on why we are the way we are, doesn't touch into the deeper roots of our suffering, of our reactivity. It can help to explore a different way to do this, and this is what we're doing here—exploring a different way to meet our suffering. Not through thinking about, but through meeting moment by moment what we're experiencing. Essentially, rather than thinking back about why we are the way we are, we look at what is happening moment to moment and come to an understanding through that process of looking at what is happening.

That's what I'd like to talk about this evening. I'd like to explore some words of the Buddha, who suggested that wise attention is one of the ways to meet our experience, using this tool of wise attention. I referred to this sutta the other day, but I'll just read some of the words to you.

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

be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future? Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the present thus: Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?"

So these questions—the way the Buddha is saying the untaught ordinary person reflects unwisely—this is reflecting through the framework of who am I? What am I? How have I gotten here? What are the causes and conditions that have brought me here? How did I get here? It's reflecting through the framework of self and this penchant to ask why. Why am I the way I am?

The Buddha goes on to say that a well-taught noble disciple understands what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, she does not attend to those things unfit for attention and attends to those things fit for attention. She attends wisely: "This is suffering." She attends wisely: "This is the origin of suffering." She attends wisely: "This is the cessation of suffering." She attends wisely: "This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering."

I spoke about this in terms of looking at experience through the framework of the Four Noble Truths. Not just thinking about—not the thinking-about process here—but the way this is phrased in the sutta, "this is suffering, this is the cause of suffering," is pointing us directly to look at the present moment and understand what is happening here and now. Is it suffering? Is it the cause of suffering? Is it the ending of suffering? Is it qualities being cultivated that lead to the ending of suffering—the path leading to the ending of suffering? Looking at what is happening in the present moment through this lens of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha says, is wise attention. Rather than reflecting on "why am I the way I am," look at what is this, now? Is it suffering? Is it the cause of suffering?

This is pointing us directly into the present moment and is a great teaching for us. Suffering occurs in the present moment. It does not occur in the past or in the future. If we are suffering over something that happened in the past, what's actually happening is that there is a thought in the present moment about that past incident, and the suffering about that incident is being reconstructed right here and right now.

I had a great understanding into this at one point. Some years ago, I was an actress in a play. One night on stage during a performance, I forgot my line. I tried ad-libbing so that the other actors would know I'd forgotten and hopefully at some point would jump in and rescue me. I said a few ad-libbed lines, and at some point I ran out. Nobody jumped in. There was this gaping silence. The invisible wall between the audience and the actors just dissolved, and I looked out and saw all these people waiting for me to say something. It was very embarrassing.

For years after that, whenever that memory arose, the embarrassment came back with it. They were completely tied together. Then, on one three-month retreat, that memory arose many, many times. I really got to watch the process of this embarrassment. The memory arose, and there was a reaction to that memory in the moment. It became clear to me that the memory and the reaction and the embarrassment were different things. It also became clear that the embarrassment wasn't somehow intimately or integrally related to that memory. There was a definite sequence in the mind.

This was a great revelation—to see actually that the embarrassment wasn't somehow lurking, just waiting to pop up. It was recreated in the moment. Suffering is created in the moment. The conditions for experiencing that embarrassment did occur in the past; I was in the play, I forgot the line. But the suffering occurring on that three-month retreat was completely new—not unrelated, but created in the moment. And I can think about that now without feeling embarrassment. The embarrassment wasn't permanently connected; there was a process by which it was created from that memory.

So not only does suffering occur in the present moment, but as this example points to, the cause of the suffering—the wanting—also occurs in the present moment. Even though some of the events we may be reacting to happened in the past, the direct cause of the suffering in the present moment was the reaction in the present moment: the reaction to that memory, "I shouldn't have forgotten that line," the not wanting to have forgotten, the clinging to wishing I had been a different person at that point. The craving, the wanting—it also occurs in the present moment.

At one point in the earlier days of my practice, I had come to meditation through the breakup of a relationship and the strong emotions arising around that experience. The practice I engaged with was very much attending to my emotions in daily life—simply noticing how my emotional world was being experienced.

One of the emotions that seemed to come up regularly was loneliness. No particular surprise there. And one pattern I noticed was that every night when I went to bed, loneliness arose. Again, this didn't particularly surprise me. I thought I understood why I was lonely at that moment—it seemed so obvious why this feeling would come up when going to bed at night. I wasn't even thinking about why it was arising. And yet I was just observing the emotions, just observing. That's what my practice was at that time.

At some point during this weeks-long exploration of looking at the loneliness, I began to notice that the loneliness arose—it began—while I was setting my alarm clock. I thought that was rather odd. It was so clear: I was setting the alarm clock, and boom,

the loneliness. There seemed to be some connection, but I didn't know what it was. So I just kept observing, noticing the pattern of loneliness arising when I set this alarm clock.

One night, I think because my interest was somewhat piqued, I was setting my alarm clock—a little digital alarm clock—and while I was setting it, an image arose about my ex-boyfriend. We were together in Disneyland, looking up at a marquee that had a digital clock on it. I could see there was a link between the memory and my physical sense impression. And I could also see that the loneliness arising was a reaction to that memory—something along the lines of, "Oh, poor me, I'll never have such wonderful times as we had at Disneyland."

The loneliness arose that night, but I was kind of amazed. What amazed me about seeing this was that the why of why I was lonely was not related to what I thought it was at all. It didn't particularly have to do with going to bed alone at night. It had to do with a reaction to a memory about my ex-boyfriend, triggered by a physical sense impression.

That was remarkable to me—that the mind could see this so clearly. But what amazed me even more was that the next night when I went to bed, setting the alarm clock, the memory obviously came back. It had become conscious to me. But the loneliness didn't come back. It was as if seeing how the loneliness had been created through this process had somehow dismantled it.

I didn't know how that worked or why it had happened, but it seemed to be related to having clearly seen the links and the causes in the present moment—how the suffering of the loneliness was created. I'm not saying I didn't get lonely again, but the regular every-night-going-to-bed-lonely stopped. That was a great relief, this little moment of seeing.

So in the present moment we can see how suffering is put together. We can see how our reactivity is created, the causes and conditions for it arising. And this seeing of the present-moment causes of our suffering—how it's created right here, right now—seems to have a deeper impact on the underlying tendencies toward suffering.

I hope this distinction between the why of the present moment and the why of history is clear. There are causes and conditions from history—things that happened. But present-moment suffering is occurring directly in the present moment through things happening directly in the present moment. And these things can be witnessed simply by looking at what is happening.

This exploration of what is happening—this is our path, this is our practice: to have the courage to meet what is happening. This is much of what the instructions we've been discussing point toward—meeting experience directly, underneath the layer of concepts. Meeting our body sensations, meeting our emotions, the feelings. These are things we often want to understand the why of. An emotion arises: Why am I feeling that emotion? But here and now, in this retreat particularly, we have this great opportunity to just look at what.

Let go of the why and just look at what is happening. Images, thoughts, emotions also arise in the present moment and can be experienced as simply what is arising in the present moment.

There's a distinction between seeing an arising of a thought or arising of an image or a mind state as something that's just happening in the present moment, and seeing our experience *through* that thought, seeing our experience through that mind state.

In terms of supporting our ability to see thoughts and images as arising experiences in the present moment, one of the tools that has been most helpful for me is to acknowledge the arising of that thought through a noting of how that thought is appearing. What I mean by that is thoughts will appear to us through some experience that we consider a thought. Sometimes it sounds like we're talking to ourselves—we hear our voice in our minds. Sometimes it sounds like somebody else is talking to us. Sometimes it sounds like there's a radio playing and it's somebody else we don't even know, and they're talking about things we don't even care about.

In these experiences, the thought is arising automatically, almost as if it's being heard. And so we can use that to support us connecting with the *how* of that thought, how that thought is being known. Note "hearing." Or sometimes thoughts arise as images—we see an image. I have found that using "seeing" as a note when I'm experiencing thoughts in that way directly points to the process by which that thought is coming into being through the seeing realm. Even though I know it's not that I'm actually seeing, even though I know it's not that I'm actually hearing, using that note seems to point to the thought as an arising experience, as a *what* is happening in the moment, as opposed to the content of the thought or believing the thought. This can help us connect to that part of our experience also as just an arising *what*—what's happening right now? There's an image arising: seeing.

Another way to look at what's happening in the present moment addresses something we can miss. The attitude that Rebecca was speaking about the other morning—the attitude with which we are looking at our experience—is sometimes a major part of what is happening that goes unnoticed by us. We're looking at our experience through a

lens of frustration, or we're looking at our experience through a lens of wanting, and it's not really noticed that we're doing that. A tool that can support us in helping to reveal other things that might be going on is to simply check in: What's the attitude? What's my relationship to this experience? This serves as a means to help us widen the lens to see more of what is happening in the present moment.

This points to seeing an additional lens through which we're looking at experience, or a kind of larger layer of experience that perhaps hadn't been noticed. It points to the way that we do sometimes recognize that our experience is layered—that habits are layered on top of other habits, emotions on top of beliefs and other emotions. There's a layering process that often we experience and begin to really see in the present moment. We see this layered nature of our experience.

For instance, you might notice a common pattern arising: you see that there's a kind of fear very deep, and then there's anger on top of that fear, and then resistance on top of that anger—layers of our experience. Having a sense that there are these layers, we often think that the way to meet that experience, the most important part of meeting that experience, is somehow to get to that middle layer. If there's fear in the middle, and then anger outside of that, and then resistance outside of that, what I really need to pay attention to is the fear right in the middle—that's the way we think, because we understand that's kind of at the core.

But jumping over the other things that are actually happening in the present moment—the resistance, the anger—diving into the middle is jumping over what's actually going on. It's not so helpful to dive into the middle, even though we might have seen this pattern many times and know that there's fear underneath. If we are doing that and ignoring these other things in the outer layers, it's almost a violence to our minds to try to force ourselves into something when there are these other things actually happening.

So it's helpful to just notice the obvious of what is happening in the present moment. Just what is obvious. What's obvious in the body, what's obvious in our thoughts, what's obvious in our emotions. What's obvious is resistance. Resistance is what's happening right now. There's no need to push in to some idea of what we think is happening underneath.

Sayadaw U Pandita talks about investigation as being like a process of polishing a bowl—rubbing. Taking a soft cloth and rubbing is how you polish a bowl.

So this is how we explore our experience. We meet it with this kind of gentle, soft contact rather than with a chisel trying to chip it apart. The continuous contact of our mindfulness with our experience, the continuous contact with what is happening, begins to melt the layers and can reveal layers underneath other layers. Just noticing moment by moment what is happening.

I had an experience of this, seeing how these layers can be so layered, on one retreat at Spirit Rock. I was doing walking meditation, and during this retreat—it was a long retreat, and I had been doing quite a number of long retreats at that time—I was experiencing a lot of doubt, a self-doubt about whether I should be doing this. Should I be doing all of these long retreats? And the story was kind of like, "Well, I'm not worthy here somehow," something like that.

During one walking meditation, this pattern, this doubt, just kept coming up. Should I be here? Should I be doing this? And it was so strong that I realized I needed to explore it. So in the walking, I began by stopping and recognizing, "Okay, the thoughts are not present right now. I'm just meeting the experience." My intention in this walking was to stop as soon as I saw any thoughts arising. As soon as I noticed a thought coming up, I'd stop and kind of take note of that thought.

As I did this, several layers were revealed to me as I just kept looking at what's the thought that's happening right now. Notice that, keep going. And then, what's the thought that's arising?

I started by noticing these thoughts about doubt—doubt about doing these long retreats. And then the next kind of thought that was obvious when I stopped and checked in was fear somehow that I'm not good enough, that I'm not measuring up, that I'm not a good enough yogi to be doing all of these long retreats. And then underneath that, or the next thought that came up, was something like, "I'm not worthy to be dedicating my life to this. Not worthy to leave my job to do this." I had taken a long sabbatical; I was living on savings. Not worthy to leave my job for this.

The next thought was my insecurity: What's going to happen about my financial situation? And underneath that was an aversion—it's like, "This is not acceptable. I have to have control over my finances." And underneath that was this sense of vulnerability. When I hit the vulnerability, I could just be there with that. It's like, "Yeah, this is true. This is true. We're vulnerable."

So I didn't really know that this whole pattern of thought around "I shouldn't be doing long retreats" had anything to do with thinking about my financial situation until I started looking moment by moment at what is happening, what thoughts are arising, what's going on moment by moment, looking at experience.

Having this sense of these layers of experience, it's often helpful to not make assumptions about what might lie underneath the layers. That is kind of getting into the territory of "why" again, in a way. What's happening? I'm feeling disconnected and lonely. And what underlies that? Why am I feeling disconnected and lonely? Making assumptions about that is generally not so helpful. These assumptions may or may not be true.

It's quite amazing how our minds, if we make assumptions about things and believe them, will start finding out that they are true. We will gather the evidence to prove that they're true, whether or not they actually are true. They become self-fulfilling prophecies in a way. If we are looking at our experience through assumptions, we see what we expect to see.

So if you notice assumptions in your experience, at least try to hold them lightly—kind of like the assumption that I made about going to bed lonely at night. I thought I knew why that was happening, but I was willing to just meet the experience as it arose.

We do have a tendency as human beings to create meaning, and I think this is where this tendency to create assumptions comes from. We want to understand what things mean. "I'm having this emotion and this means..." "I'm having this thought and this means..." And again, this can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, this kind of creation of meaning.

There's a beautiful poem about this, the way we tend to create meaning. This is a poem by Fernando Pessoa, a Portuguese poet who wrote under various heteronyms. He created different identities and wrote under those different identities, and this particular poem comes from his Alberto Caeiro identity:

The mystery of things, where is it?
Why doesn't it come out to show us at least that it's mystery?
What do the river and tree know about it?
And what do I, who am no more than they, know about it?
Whenever I look at things and think about what people think of them,
I laugh like a brook cleanly plashing against a rock.
For the only hidden meaning of things is that they have no hidden meaning.
It's the strangest thing of all,

stranger than all poets' dreams and all philosophers' thoughts,
that things are really what they seem to be, and there's nothing to understand.
Yes, this is what my senses learned on their own.
Things have no meaning. They exist.
Things are the only hidden meaning of things.

We also have a strong tendency to create meaning about our practice. Things happen in our practice, and we think, "This means..." We find ourselves not wanting to practice, and we think, "This means I'm a failure. This means I really don't want to practice. This means I'm not serious about practice." But not wanting to practice is simply a mind state that's arising in the present moment. That's all it is. It was such a huge relief to me when I recognized, "Oh, not wanting to practice is arising." It doesn't have to have any meaning attached to it. It's just not wanting to practice. It's a really great mind state to learn to recognize and simply note.

Another thing we make meaning about is our wandering mind. We're going along and practicing, and suddenly our mind starts wandering way more than it did yesterday. And we think it means something like, "Well, I must not be trying hard enough. This means I'm not being diligent enough."

I had this experience on a three-month course where the practice had been moving in the direction of more and more clarity, more ability to stay connected with the breath. It had been going quite well, I thought. And then one day I sat down and all I was doing was thinking. I was like, "Wow."

Fortunately, I had had enough experience not to make the meaning, "This means I'm a failure, this means I'm not trying hard enough." I decided to just look at what was happening. What is actually happening? How are these thoughts coming to be? And what I began to notice was that I would sit down, pay attention to the breath, and I could connect with the breath very clearly for about a second. Then I noticed that the sensations of the breath got really subtle—so subtle that I could hardly notice them anymore. And that's when the mind would wander.

This kind of thing actually happens to us a lot, I think. As our practice begins to deepen, we're holding an assumption about what we're paying attention to: "This is what my breath feels like, and this is how I pay attention to it." And yet, as we pay attention to the breath or other experience, that experience can shift. It can change. And if we are trying to pay attention in a certain way, there's going to be a disconnect and the mind may wander.

This is what I found in this experience—just trying to meet that subtlety of experience. What I learned in subsequent retreats was that it doesn't have to be a problem. I was actually trying to touch those subtle sensations, asking, "What is that? What is that feeling? How is the breath so subtle?" I was trying to force the mindfulness into that, and that wasn't so helpful either.

But at some point, one teacher—I think it was Sayadaw U Pandita—when I reported that the breath was getting so subtle that I couldn't notice it, he said, "You can just notice subtle breath." I was like, "Oh." I hadn't thought of that.

So I began using that as the note: subtle. Breath is subtle. I didn't actually have to try to figure out what the subtlety was. It's just subtle experiences.

Sometimes when the mind is wandering, it may mean that you're getting caught in something or other—check into your own experience. But sometimes, if the mind has been settling for a while and suddenly starts wandering again, at least in my experience, it has signaled a shift in the practice. There's something new to connect to, something new that's happening that the mind just isn't quite familiar with connecting with.

So letting go of the idea that it means something—either that it means the practice is going well or the practice is going horribly—and just noticing what is happening. Be on the lookout for "this means" in your thoughts, and just connect with what is happening, no matter what. The way through our experience is just to notice what, what, what is happening. It's very simple. It's not so easy, but it's very simple.

This practice—there's really only one instruction. That's all we do. Wherever we are in our practice, just meeting what we are noticing in the present moment and noticing how we're relating to it. It can be that simple.

Looking at the moment, looking at what is happening, as I pointed to earlier, begins to reveal the cause and effect nature of the unfolding of our experience. And this happens kind of automatically in a way. We don't have to try to see the cause and effect. Just by seeing a thought arise—a memory arises, a thought about that memory, a belief about that memory, and a reaction to that—just by watching what is happening, we understand how the causes and conditions are in play in the present moment. So we don't really have to try to see the why of the present moment. We just need to connect with what, what, what is happening.

I'd like to give an example from my own practice that ties a lot of these types of whats and whys together—the different kinds of whys, the why of history, the intellectualizing why, the why of the present moment. It's a pattern that for me was very strong, one that happened repeatedly. I think it came from very long ago in my past: a pattern of self-hatred and unworthiness.

I had a sense, a kind of intellectual understanding—I had done some therapy and talked about this a lot, done the intellectual thinking about why this pattern of self-hatred was there. Through that process, I had come to the understanding that there was a particular relationship it was probably connected to. I didn't have any direct evidence for that, but it just made sense. It made sense based on what the therapist said and what I had said. It just seemed to make sense. So that's the intellectual understanding that we often meet our experience with.

Then, on one three-month course, I got to watch this pattern. I had been watching the pattern on many retreats, but on this three-month course it was particularly strong. At some point I realized I didn't want this. I fought it for a while. I mean, you've got a long time on a three-month course, right? You can think, "Yep, I don't need to pay attention to that. I'm going to pay attention to arising and passing. I'm going to pay attention to just physical sensation. I'm not going to pay attention to this feeling of self-hatred."

But it was pretty strong. It kept really coming back. So finally it was like, okay, I surrender—I'm just going to accept that this is what my retreat is about. Somehow I had the belief, a meaning I had put on it, that this was a lesser kind of retreat, this retreat about self-hatred. But I did just start observing it, watching the experience as it arose.

At some point—and I don't even remember clearly how this connection was made—there was a very clear connection made to that relationship. Perhaps it arose as a thought in the moment, clearly linking. This is sometimes how this connection can get made. We can see how a history is connected to a present moment pattern through an arising of a memory in the present moment, seeing so clearly that pattern unfolding as a result of that memory. I don't remember exactly how it happened for me in this particular case, but I did see very clearly that the pattern of self-hatred in my experience was directly related to this relationship.

And in that moment there was a huge release and opening of compassion for this person and their relationship. There was a kind of understanding that happened. Now I would call this a psychological insight. It was really clear to me how my history connected with the arising pattern in the present moment. And there was an opening around it. It did feel like there was a shift somehow.

And actually I thought, oh, maybe that's taking care of the self-hatred. I was actually shocked when it came back the next time. Oh, I thought I was done with this. And actually, that psychological insight—the strength of the self-hatred was just as strong. I was shocked.

But there was a shift, and the shift was that what I think that psychological insight had helped me to see was that the pattern in my own mind, the pattern of self-hatred, was related to causes and conditions. It wasn't my fault. It was kind of just a product of the relationship—me and that person and the way we interacted. And so there was a little bit of a lessening of the me in the pattern, but the pattern kept coming up very strongly.

The shift that I noticed after that point was that it was no longer quite so scary to be with it. So I could actually meet the feeling much more clearly. I could start really looking at the what of that self-hatred without flinching.

One night—the pattern would come and go on the retreat, it would be there sometimes, it would not be there sometimes—on one dharma talk, actually it was a Q&A Joseph was doing, he answered a question about particularly sticky patterns. And he gave an instruction that had been helpful for him that I had not heard before. The instruction was that when there's a really particularly sticky pattern, it can be helpful to make a double note on the arising of the experience. And the note would be contact—that is the actual meeting of the experience—followed by the feeling tone of that contact.

I had heard this instruction, and as I was leaving the meditation hall that evening and walking up the stairs out of the walking room, the self-hatred descended. And I felt powerless to do anything about it. But I had this really strong determination to just meet it. So I went back to my room and I sat. And I just paid attention to that experience. I used this double noting that Joseph had suggested in the talk. Every time there was any kind of movement towards a "you're no good" thought arising in my mind—contact, unpleasant. I just noted it as soon as I could, just trying to meet the arising of that experience with contact, unpleasant. Just noting it, noting it, noting it.

At some point that evening, the arising of that experience, noted clearly, was just seen as a thought. This is just a thought. This is just an empty phenomenon arising in the mind. In that moment, the self-hatred vanished and bliss flooded the body. The next thought was, ah yes, and this too is impermanent. And the bliss diminished and there was just much more of a sense of balance, a recognition in that moment that there had been an insight, but that it didn't necessarily mean the pattern was gone—that it had been seen through in that moment.

And yet that moment actually had a very deep power of cutting into that pattern. I would have described it as a very deep rut in my mind before that moment. After that moment it was more like the rut was a wide bowl. It was very easy to get out of it. I attribute this to that moment of seeing "you're no good" as a thought and a belief arising in the moment. There's the thought "you're no good" and there's a belief in that thought.

This is actually an interesting phenomenon to check into—thoughts versus beliefs. The thought "you're no good" can arise in the mind, and without any belief, that thought vanishes. That's what's happening now. That's the way I experience this. Those thoughts still arise, but there's not belief in them. And that, I think, is what allowed that rut to become more of a wide bowl.

So looking into the what of experience can cut very deeply into these conditioned patterns that we have.

It can take a lot of courage to stay with our present moment experience in the face of strong suffering. And yet this is the way that the mind can understand and let go of that suffering.

This same practice of just meeting what is happening not only frees us from the reactivity that tosses us about, but also allows us to see deeply into the nature of experience. That moment of seeing, "this is just a thought"—that was a vipassanā insight. The insight into just an arising experience. That's the insight. Those are the insights that cut into our patterns and habits. Those are the insights that free us.

And it doesn't matter what you're paying attention to. It really doesn't matter. We think we have to somehow get rid of all these patterns of self-hatred. I certainly thought I did in order to have a deep insight. I thought self-hatred had to be gone first. But no, insight can come in the midst of that pattern. Deep recognition into impermanence, unreliability, not-self—these are the insights that free us, simply by noticing what is happening moment by moment.

So let's sit for a few moments.

CHAPTER 8

Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this comprehensive talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a clear and practical exploration of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), one of the Buddha's most fundamental yet challenging teachings. She presents it as a detailed exposition of the Second Noble Truth, explaining how craving leads to suffering through an intricate chain of twelve interdependent links.*
>
> *Drawing from the Kaccānagotta Sutta (SN 12.15), Andrea explains how dependent origination represents the Buddha's "middle teaching"—a description of reality that avoids the extremes of existence and non-existence. Rather than beginning with the traditional first link of ignorance (avijjā), she starts in the middle of the chain where experience is most accessible: contact (phassa), feeling (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), clinging (upādāna), becoming (bhava), and birth (jāti). She illustrates these links through concrete examples, including attachment to sense pleasure and identification with being "a good yogi."*
>
> *Andrea emphasizes that this teaching can be understood as describing moment-to-moment experience rather than solely as a multi-life model—noting that the Abhidhamma itself devotes far more attention to the momentary interpretation. She identifies two particularly "weak links" in the chain where mindfulness practice is especially powerful: the junction between suffering and ignorance (where suffering can lead to faith rather than bewilderment), and between feeling and craving. The talk concludes with an inspiring passage from the Aṅguttara Nikāya affirming that all things, met with concentration and mindfulness, culminate in liberation.*

Tonight I'd like to talk about the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination.

This teaching is one of the most fundamental and most challenging—in a way, most difficult to understand—of the Buddha's teachings. It's basically a detailed exposition of the second noble truth, the second noble truth being that the cause of suffering is craving. The exposition of dependent origination goes into great depth about how craving leads to suffering, describing a whole set of causes and conditions that lead us into suffering.

Sometimes this teaching is called the Buddha's middle teaching. I think we're most familiar with the middle way, the middle path that the Buddha taught. The middle teaching is not so much a practice but an understanding, a description of the way things are for us usually in the world. The middle path, by contrast, is the set of practices that implement a way leading to an understanding of the middle teaching.

So I'm going to reread a sutta that I read part of the other day:

"This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends upon a duality, upon the idea of existence and the idea of non-existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no idea of non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no idea of existence in regard to the world. 'All exists,' Kaccāna—this is one extreme. 'All does not exist'—this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle.

"With ignorance as condition, volitional formations come to be. With volitional formations as condition, consciousness. With consciousness as condition, name and form. With name and form as condition, the six sense bases. With the six sense bases as condition, contact. With contact as condition, feeling. With feeling as condition, craving. With craving as condition, clinging. With clinging as condition, existence. With existence as condition, birth. With birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering."

So he teaches this as a middle teaching between the understandings of existence and non-existence. Things don't exist in the way we normally think of them existing, but there is a chain of conditions that leads to a kind of stream. And if we think of things as not existing, that's also not correct, because there is this stream.

This teaching of dependent origination is a complex teaching, as you may have heard from that long list—twelve links in this chain that he described. And I will go through them tonight, so buckle your seat belts.

The complexity of this teaching was underscored by Ānanda in an interchange with the Buddha. One day Ānanda came to the Buddha and said something along the lines of, "This teaching on dependent origination seems so clear to me." And the Buddha said something like, "Say not so, Ānanda. This teaching on dependent origination is very profound. It seems profound, and it is profound. One who understands dependent origination understands the entirety of my teaching."

So essentially, a penetrative understanding of this teaching is equated with full liberation. We probably won't understand it entirely tonight—but there's always a possibility. There's one sutta that I love to contemplate where there was a discussion between a monk and another group of monks. They were talking about a topic, and in the course of that discussion, which was basically a Dhamma talk, both the person who was speaking and the whole group of listeners became fully enlightened. So there's hope for all of us tonight.

I hope to make this talk both clear and practical, because this teaching can be kind of obscure at times. But there are some ways that in my own practice I have seen this to be very useful.

On the practical side, just to begin: why talk about this? Why go through this very detailed description? Well, partly it is a very clear causal description of how suffering comes to be. And because it describes how suffering comes to be as a chain of causes and conditions, and describes it in a very impersonal way, we can begin to understand our own suffering as being an impersonal phenomenon—not something that is particularly due to who I am, but just because of the fact of being alive. We can see the impersonal nature of this unfolding process of suffering through understanding a little bit about this teaching.

We can also understand that through this description of the causes of suffering, when we understand how suffering is caused, we may be able to connect with choices that will lead us out of this chain. In understanding the causes of suffering, we can make skillful choices that will help to unravel this chain.

So I'll go through these twelve links again. Ignorance is typically the first link—ignorance leading to mental formations.

Mental formations conditioning consciousness. Consciousness conditioning name and form—mentality and materiality is another translation of that; *nāma-rūpa* is the Pali. Name and form conditioning the six sense bases. The six sense bases conditioning contact. Contact conditions feeling. Feeling conditions craving. Craving conditions clinging. Clinging conditions becoming. Becoming conditions birth. Birth conditions aging and death—and thus the entire mass of suffering.

Now, a couple of things to point out about this. One is that this is generally taught as a cyclic chain. It's not a one-way path; it actually loops back on itself. So suffering is understood to in turn further condition more ignorance, leading through the cycle again.

The other thing is that it is a causal chain. The typical way we think about causality is that A causes B—B happens because of A. And that is one of the kinds of causality described in the Abhidhamma, the text on Buddhist psychology. I believe in the Abhidhamma there are something like twenty-four different kinds of causality described with respect to this chain. I'm just going to mention three of them, and I'll try to point to these a little bit as I go through the more detailed description of the elements of the chain.

There's the one I just mentioned, what we might call inducement—that because of something, something else happens. A causes B. Another one is what we might call mutual conditioning, where A conditions B and B conditions A. It's a back-and-forth relationship. The most obvious example of this kind of conditioning is the chicken and the egg. You have a chicken, and because of the chicken, the chicken can produce the egg, and then from the egg comes a chicken. So it's mutual conditioning. You're not going to have the chicken without the egg, and you're not going to have the egg without the chicken.

And then there is what is called arising together—two things arising simultaneously. Co-arising, it is sometimes called. This may be two things being caused by something else, but you're not going to have those two things apart from each other. One of the standard examples of this in the texts, at least in my understanding, is that when there is some kind of contact with the sense bases, there is an arising of a moment of consciousness that contains feeling and perception. Feeling and perception arise together. There's not one without the other, and there's not really a sense that feeling causes perception or perception causes feeling. They arise together. This is co-arising.

I think the fact that there are all these different kinds of conditionings is part of what makes this teaching so complex. I'm not going to try to go into all of the complexities; I'm going to try to keep it basically pretty straightforward tonight.

The classical teaching on this chain breaks it into three lives. Basically, there are conditions from a previous life that led into how we are in this life, and the conditions in this life will in turn impact how we are in the next life. In this form, the first two links—ignorance and mental formations—are understood to be part of a past life. Then the middle links of the chain, from consciousness through to becoming, are understood to be in this life. And everything that happens in this life is said to then lead into birth, aging, and death in the next life.

Now, it's obvious that this is a pedagogical tool, because in the previous life we have birth and aging and death; in this life we have birth and aging and death. We don't have to wait until our next life to have birth and aging and death. So it's obvious that this is a pedagogical tool—though the literal phrasing of the links does support this kind of multiple-life interpretation.

The terms used do support this multiple-life interpretation—birth does seem to indicate the birth of a body, aging and death the physical aging and death of the body. But the suttas also support an understanding of this process of dependent origination, this full cycle, as describing moment-to-moment experience.

In this case, the term for birth, *jāti*, is understood to be the birth into an identity, the birth into a state of selfing, basically. And the term for aging and death is understood to be the decay, the cessation of that state of being—the aging and cessation of moment-to-moment experience.

As an aside, I found something very interesting regarding these interpretations. I had heard the multiple-life model as the primary way of teaching this many, many times, with the understanding that the moment-to-moment interpretation was also possible. But I had understood that moment-to-moment reading as a more modern interpretation, something laid on top of the suttas rather than actually present in the Pali Canon.

Then I read an article by Venerable Payutto, who actually pointed out that in the Abhidhamma, which is part of the Pali Canon, there are two descriptions given of dependent origination. One is this multiple-life model of understanding how causes in a past life impact us in this present life, and how causes in this present life impact us in a future life. The other teaching is about moment-to-moment arising.

In the Abhidhamma texts, there are only five pages devoted to the multiple-life model. And there are seventy-two pages devoted to the moment-to-moment model.

In the commentarial tradition that followed the suttas and the Pali Canon, this emphasis is reversed. In the commentaries, the multiple-life model receives much more attention, and the moment-to-moment model receives much less. Our Theravāda tradition draws heavily on the commentaries, so it makes sense to me now that this multiple-life understanding is what I was mostly taught. But the moment-to-moment teaching is there. It's in the Pali Canon.

This second view—that dependent origination describes a moment-to-moment arising of experience—is one that I have personally understood, at least in parts. It has meaning for me. There's a clarity to it that helps illuminate my moment-to-moment un-

folding of experience. I don't have any personal experience of previous lives or any intimations of future lives, so that teaching makes it more difficult for me to connect with dependent origination.

I'm going to approach this teaching this evening from the moment-to-moment understanding. I'll talk about it as a process that describes the moment-to-moment unfolding of suffering in our lives.

I'm going to do this in a slightly unconventional way. Typically, people begin talks on dependent origination by starting with the first link in the chain, ignorance. But I'm not going to do that. I'm going to start somewhere in the middle, where I think it's actually a little easier to understand.

Basically, we have a mind and a body. We're conscious, and we have this body and mental processes going on. Because of that, we experience input from the six sense bases. These six sense bases are the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body or touch sense organ, and the mind. We receive sense impressions through these six sense bases.

Through these sense bases, through contact with things in the world—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch—we experience contact. This is the next link in the chain. So we have consciousness, mind and matter, the six sense bases, and because of the six sense bases, we have contact. We experience contact.

This is all relatively straightforward. It's just biology at this point. There's contact with the sense base. Based on that contact, each sense impression in all the sense doors has a flavor to it. It's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is the feeling tone of experience. So based on contact, conditioned by contact, feeling arises.

Based on this feeling tone—and we've talked about much of this in various talks—based on this feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, if something is pleasant, we like it. We want it. We want more of it. If something is unpleasant, we don't like it. We want to get rid of it. If something is neutral, we often don't connect to it or notice it at all.

So based on this feeling tone, there is wanting—wanting more of the pleasant, wanting less of the unpleasant, perhaps not wanting to connect to the neutral. We're kind of like a simple machine that tries to maximize pleasant and minimize unpleasant.

We usually act on this process of wanting automatically. Something pleasant arises, there's liking, there's wanting, and we move out to get it, to grab it, to hold onto it. We take some kind of action to grasp that object. This is clinging. Craving leads to clinging.

Once an object is clung to, our intentions and actions rally to serve that clinging—to produce or control things, to maintain the sense that we have control over what we have clung to. These intentions and actions that operate in the service of clinging are what we call becoming. We actually like becoming. We like feeling like we know where we're headed. We like feeling like we have some sense of control, like we know something.

Following on from becoming—the intention toward control, the doing around our clinging—birth arises. This is birth into some kind of identity. Things become "me" or "mine." This might take an obvious form: "This is my thing, this is my shawl." Or it might be something more subtle, like "I'm the kind of person who likes to walk in the woods." Birth is where there's a sense of identity, a sense of one separate from another. When there's self, there's other.

This chain of dependent origination can be understood not only as a description of how suffering is created, but also as a description of the process of identification, the process of selfing that we've explored in past weeks. From here, once there is this birth, the Buddha says that suffering is inevitable. Having taken birth into an identity, there is the inevitable falling apart of that identity—evidence that we don't have the control over that identity that it feels it should have.

Let me offer a couple of examples to give you more of a flavor for these links in the chain. The first example concerns sense pleasure. There's contact with a sense object—say, the sight of a beautiful flower. There's contact with the eye, and then a feeling of pleasure arises based on that contact. Based on that feeling of pleasure, wanting forms—this desire to have this pleasant thing. Then comes clinging, the actual taking possession.

There's sometimes a question about the distinction between craving and clinging. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator of the Pali Canon, offers a helpful description. He talks about craving as the movement of a thief reaching out to take something, and clinging as the moment he has grabbed it. They lead from one to another along a continuum, from craving to clinging. So clinging is actually taking possession of the thing we want.

Becoming comprises the intentions and actions designed to control things according to that clinging—to keep the thing protected or safe. Birth is the clear sense of identification or possessiveness: "This flower is mine." It's feeling that one owns or controls or possesses that thing. And then aging and death: one who possesses something must ulti-

mately be separated from it, whether through the loss of the thing or through the death of oneself. All accumulation ends in dispersal. This is one of the teachings around impermanence. Whenever one has something, there will inevitably be separation from it.

So there's suffering in this. If there's attachment to having, there's going to be suffering in the loss. There's also suffering in the fear of loss. The suffering we experience is in direct proportion to the intensity of attachment, the intensity of clinging, and the intensity of identification—that feeling of "I am the one who has this thing."

That's one example. Now another, somewhat more complex, is what we might call a life-state example. This is actually more along the lines of how we typically suffer, because we largely suffer over things that we think we are. We do sometimes suffer over loss of possessions, but I think we really suffer more over some kind of identity that we hold.

"I'm the kind of person who doesn't make mistakes." When we hold such an identity and then make a mistake, there's a conflict with reality, and we really suffer from that.

Let me go through an example of this as well. The contact with the sense door is with the mind—some kind of an idea of being, perhaps an idea of being a good yogi. There's the contact, that contact with the sense door. And then there's some kind of feeling around that. This is probably fairly complex, actually, but for the sake of this example, let's just say that the idea of being a good yogi creates a pleasant feeling. There may be a kind of fantasy around being a good yogi that creates a pleasant feeling tone.

The craving is the desire to have that fantasy, that idea of that pleasurable state, become a reality. The clinging here is around a fixed attitude. It's an intensification of that desire—the desire to become a good yogi becomes intensified to the point where it becomes a fixed attitude: "I need to become a good yogi. I need this to be happy. I will accomplish this." The clinging has more of an intensification to it.

From those fixed attitudes, those beliefs, patterns of behavior arise that serve that belief. We are in the process of becoming at this point. When those intentions arise to serve those beliefs—the intentions to behave in a certain way in the meditation hall, the intention to follow the schedule, the intention to sit long, whatever it is—those intentions are the process of becoming.

Birth is the sense of taking the identity of that belief. One has the feeling that one is a good yogi. Perhaps everything confirms this. You can sit longer than anybody else, or you eat slower than anybody else, and you walk more slowly and open the doors more carefully. Everything is confirming to you that you are a good yogi. This is the birth. There's this distinct feeling of self that has arisen around this pattern.

Aging and death: whenever there is a sense of a self occupying a position, sooner or later there will be something that happens that deprives that self of that position. There's a sitting where you find you can't stay mindful for two seconds together. This runs counter to the identification, to that birth into that identity, and there is suffering. In my experience, there now becomes some kind of belief: "Oh, I'm not a good yogi." And this is very painful, because what I wanted was to be a good yogi.

Now I'd like to go back to those parts of the chain that I haven't gotten to yet—the ones at the beginning: ignorance, mental formations, and consciousness. But first I want to make the point that because this chain is cyclic, it is understood that suffering leads to ignorance. In fact, the Buddha has a famous quote that suffering either leads to bewilderment or to search:

"And what is the result of suffering? There are some cases in which a person overcome with pain, her mind exhausted, grieves, mourns, laments, beats her breast, becomes bewildered. Or when overcome with pain, her mind exhausted, comes to search outside: 'Who knows a way or two to stop this pain?' I tell you that suffering results either in bewilderment or in search."

So this suffering leads to ignorance. A main definition of ignorance is not understanding the Four Noble Truths—that's one of the main definitions in the texts. One who does not understand the Four Noble Truths, his mind, her mind is clouded with ignorance. Ignorance means that we don't understand suffering. We don't understand what leads to suffering. In ignorance, we think we know what will lead to our happiness. We think that having what we want will lead to our happiness. But as you have seen, I think, in your own experience, actually having what we want doesn't go very far. It actually just takes us deeper into this cycle of suffering.

Deeper into this cycle of dissatisfaction, we begin to see that actually having what we want doesn't go very far.

So the basic condition for suffering to lead to ignorance is that suffering is not understood. What causes suffering is not understood. If suffering is met with wisdom and understanding instead of ignorance, this chain leads in a completely different direction. It actually leads out of the chain of suffering and into a chain of liberation. This is one of the places where we can really bring our attention. Understanding suffering with wisdom begins to break this cycle. But mostly we don't meet suffering with wisdom, and ignorance results.

So the next link: with ignorance as a condition, mental formations come to be. Based on ignorance, based on this not understanding suffering, intentions and actions are formed about how we choose things, decide things, do things, behave. These intentions around how we are going to engage in the world—this is mental formation. Mental formations are essentially the habits and patterns that lead us forward in this cycle. We often take the most obvious step to get rid of our unpleasant sensations and to hold on to our pleasant sensations, moving us into this chain of pleasant leading to wanting leading to clinging. This is ignorance leading into mental formation. Because of ignorance, we intend and act in ways that run in line with ignorance, that run counter to wisdom.

With mental formations as a condition, consciousness comes to be. We can think of these habits and patterns, our choices, our intentions, as conditioning the nature of our consciousness and what we experience. For example, if you have a habitual pattern of responding with anger, if there's a habitual inclination towards anger, then that becomes a kind of filter in our consciousness. We tend to pick things out of the environment that confirm or support that anger. We have an orientation towards a pattern. Mental formations are basically an orientation in our minds, and because of that orientation, our consciousness picks certain things out of our environment and doesn't pick other things. Certain things come to consciousness, other things do not come to consciousness, because of those mental formations.

We've talked about this in past weeks, about how filters have us choosing certain experiences out. We filter things in and out of our experience. There's one amazing study some of you may have heard about that really highlights this ability of the mind to filter experience. People were asked to view a short video clip of people passing a basketball to each other. They were told to count the number of times the basketball passed between various people on the team. That was their task while watching this video. The vast majority of people could count the number of passes, but they neglected to see that during the course of this video, a person in a large gorilla suit came out, walked onto the basketball court, danced around for a while, and then walked off. When they were asked about this, they said they hadn't seen it. In fact, they didn't believe it when they were told that it had happened. They didn't believe the gorilla was in the video. This is an example of how a perception can filter in and out experience. Our mental formations, what we are intending to see and do, impacts what we experience, impacts our consciousness.

So consciousness leading to name and form, or mentality-materiality. This is sometimes a confusing term—mind and matter, different translations render it differently. Basically, the materiality part refers to the processes of our body. The mentality part

refers to most of the processes of our mind: the process of perception, the process of feeling, the process of mental formations. One very clear definition I've seen is that mentality-materiality is the four aggregates excluding the aggregate of consciousness. We've talked about the aggregates several times—the five aggregates of consciousness, feeling, perception, mental formations, and form, or body. These two links, consciousness and mentality-materiality, are the entirety of the five aggregates: mentality-materiality being those four—feeling, perception, mental formations, and body—with consciousness being separate.

Now this link is interesting because there is an understanding that these two are mutually conditioning each other. I mentioned the chicken and the egg before. In one sutta, the Buddha described that he saw consciousness conditions mind and matter. When he went back, trying to go further back, he thought, "Well, what conditions that?" Mind and matter conditions consciousness, and consciousness conditions mind and matter. It goes back and forth.

Based on the state of our consciousness—for example, if our consciousness is flavored by anger—then our body may respond, may become tense. We tend to perceive things as unpleasant. We experience things as unpleasant. So at this point we're back where we started: we have a mind and a body. And because we have a mind and a body, there's contact, feeling...

craving—and you can see how, with a mind that is already flavored by ignorance, with mental formations inclined to screen certain things out and certain things in, how this pattern of unfolding conditions will tend to lead us through this cycle over and over again. It's a pretty potent cycle. It tends to reinforce itself.

But it can be broken apart. It can be unraveled with mindfulness.

This chain describes conditions that support and lead to suffering. If the conditions are changed, we can change the course of our minds. And the main way to change the conditions is through mindfulness, understanding, and wisdom. Attention to understanding any of these twelve links will support its unraveling.

So this is good news. Anywhere you are in your experience, wherever you wake up, whatever moment of experience you are waking up into—if you're connecting to it in that moment with mindfulness and non-judgmental awareness, you're working to unravel this chain. You're working to understand the craving, if that's what you've woken up into, or perhaps the feeling of an identification, a strong sense of identity around a beingness of something. You wake up there, you bring the mindfulness there, and it begins to unravel this chain.

There are some particularly weak links to this chain that the Buddha highlighted. I've already mentioned one of them, but I'll come back to it. Two main weak links: the link between suffering and ignorance, and the link between feeling and craving.

As I mentioned before, many of us come to spiritual practice through meeting suffering. And the Buddha said that suffering leads to bewilderment or to search. If that search is lucky enough to hear a liberative teaching, there is the possibility that instead of leading from suffering to ignorance, suffering met with an understanding of a liberative path—instead of leading to ignorance—suffering will lead to faith. Faith that there's a way out of this, that there's a teaching that proclaims a way to work with suffering to become free of it.

And then there's another chain, called the transcendent dependent origination, which takes us from faith to gladness, to rapture, to tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowledge and vision, disenchantment, dispassion, liberation. In the same kind of causal chain that this chain of suffering leads us step by step into suffering over and over again, this chain leads us step by step to freedom.

The work at this link from suffering is to understand it, to bring mindfulness to it. The first noble truth says suffering should be understood. This has been a huge part of our practice here in these weeks and months—understanding our suffering, not judging it, but understanding how it comes to be in our present moment experience. You've all seen this. You've all seen, even in small ways, how understanding suffering leads to a release from that suffering. It may simply be a small movement of mindfulness that can hold suffering and not be reactive. And in that non-reactivity is a clue, a hint of freedom.

The other link I'd like to mention is the link between feeling and craving. The Buddha emphasized this in many places in the suttas, that paying attention to feeling is a very powerful practice. Part of the reason it's so powerful is because it's the link before which we leap into reactivity. Feeling leads to craving, but that link is relatively weak.

Some of the links, like contact leading to feeling, that's a strong link. I hear that it's possible to see between them. I don't think I've seen that. But I have clearly seen the feeling to craving link and seen that a modicum of mindfulness at feeling just short-circuits that movement to craving entirely. When we can clearly recognize, "Oh, this is a pleasant experience, this is an unpleasant experience," the craving may be completely abandoned. It may not arise at all. This is an extremely powerful practice.

There's a sutta that addresses this. This isn't exactly another chain, but it is a list. I'll read it. This is from the Anguttara Nikāya: "All things are rooted in desire. They come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings."

This part maps onto those first links of dependent origination in a rough way. Basically we've got contact and feeling as clear places where they link together. Things are rooted in desire, come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings. And then it goes in a different direction—kind of like the link from suffering to faith goes in a different direction at that link in the chain.

It says: the foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness. Their peak is wisdom, their essence liberation. All things merge in the deathless, and Nibbana is their culmination.

This isn't a causal list like dependent origination, but it does point to the link at feeling being mastered by mindfulness and concentration—the moment-to-moment mindfulness of the flow of our experience, the concentration that results from that. The foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness. Their peak is wisdom, their essence liberation. Clearly seeing and knowing our experience moment to moment, wherever we are in that chain, is the path towards the dismantling of that chain.

The other thing I appreciate about this sutta is that it refers to all things. All things have liberation as their essence. All things merge in the deathless. All things culminate in Nibbana with mindfulness and concentration. This is all things the Buddha is talking about. The touch of a doorknob, the state of anger—all things culminate in liberation if we attend to them with concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom. It does not matter what we bring our attention to. It doesn't matter where in that chain of suffering we've woken up. It does not matter.

Mindfulness and concentration, combined with a little bit of understanding of how this process works, can lead us out of this chain of suffering to the end of suffering.

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

CHAPTER 9

Equanimity

Andrea Fella · 1h02

In this talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of upekkhā (equanimity), one of the four brahmavihārās and a quality present in every wholesome mind state. Drawing from the Lokavipatti Sutta (AN 8.6), she explains how both ordinary people and well-instructed disciples experience the eight worldly winds—gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and disgrace, pleasure and pain—but differ fundamentally in their response to these conditions.

Fella clarifies common misunderstandings about equanimity, distinguishing it from flatness, indifference, or non-action. True equanimity, she explains, allows us to touch life more deeply, supporting compassionate engagement with the world while maintaining balance around results. She describes equanimity's near enemy (indifference or the "equanimity of not knowing") and far enemy (the reactivity of greed and aversion), offering practical guidance for recognizing each in meditation.

The talk details multiple pathways for cultivating equanimity: studying reactivity through mindful attention to vedanā (feeling tone), developing concentration that suppresses the hindrances, and deepening wisdom through understanding kamma and anattā. Fella shares personal examples of working with wanting and judgment, illustrating how mindfulness can meet reactive energy like "jumping on a wild horse" and redirect it skillfully. She concludes by describing equanimity towards all formations (saṅkhārupekkhā) as the final stage before awakening—not cold detachment, but the manifestation of highest strength rooted in complete understanding.

As we live our lives, we inevitably encounter conditions that blow us around—conditions of praise or blame, gain and loss, status, disgrace, pleasure and pain. These are known as the eight worldly winds. They are an inevitable part of our worldly life. Even here on retreat we experience these qualities, these winds blowing through.

Typically we react to these circumstances. We like the praise, the pleasure, the status or fame, and the gain. We don't like their opposites. And there's some part of us that thinks—and we've been told endlessly by our society, by the mass media—that happiness consists in having the praise, the gain, the status, and the pleasure. So we somehow think there's something wrong with us, something wrong with our lives, that we've done something wrong if we're experiencing their opposites.

The Buddha had a different view of them. Words from the Buddha: "For an ordinary person, there arise gain, loss, status, disgrace, censure, praise, pleasure, and pain. For a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones, there also arises gain, loss, status, disgrace, censure, praise, pleasure, and pain."

So if you thought enlightenment was going to make you endlessly feel pleasure, gain, and the rest, the Buddha says otherwise. What's the difference, then, between the ordinary person experiencing these things and the well-instructed disciple experiencing these things?

He says, "For an ordinary person, when gain arises, he does not reflect, 'Gain has arisen for me. It is inconstant, stressful, and subject to change.' He does not discern it as it actually is." Likewise for all the others. "His mind remains consumed with the gain. He welcomes the arisen gain and rebels against the arisen loss. He is not released, I tell you, from dukkha." Likewise for all the other seven.

"Now gain arises for a well-instructed disciple of the noble ones. She reflects, 'Gain has arisen for me. It is inconstant, stressful, and subject to change.' She discerns it as it actually is. Her mind does not remain consumed with the gain. She does not welcome the arisen gain or rebel against the arisen loss. As she thus abandons welcoming and rebelling, she is released, I tell you, from dukkha."

So the difference seems to be in one's response to these things, not that they stop happening to us. There are many stories in the suttas of people coming to see the Buddha and heaping praise on him or heaping blame on him. Even the Buddha was not sheltered from these worldly winds, but his mind was sheltered.

The quality that shelters our mind from these winds is equanimity. It is a beautiful quality of mind that we cultivate, that is cultivated as we practice. It is a balance of mind, a mind that doesn't react to pleasant or unpleasant. It's a mind that accepts things as they are, understands things as they are—non-reactivity, spaciousness, ease.

The quality of equanimity, along with several other qualities, is understood to be in every wholesome mind state. Equanimity, along with mindfulness, non-greed, non-aversion, faith, and quite a few others, are said to be in every wholesome mind state. So we cultivate these wholesome mind states, and equanimity is cultivated along with them.

Sometimes when we hear about equanimity, one of the descriptions is that it leads to a neutrality towards beings—there's not reactivity one way or the other towards beings. When we hear that it's a kind of neutrality, we think of flatness, of non-responsiveness. But equanimity is not a flat emotion. I do think of equanimity as an emotion, one of the

beautiful emotions of an open heart, along with the other brahmaviharas: metta, karuna, and mudita—kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. These four form the emotional map, in a way, of the heart that is free from clinging.

So this emotion of equanimity is not one of flatness or indifference. It is the emotion that allows compassion and mudita to deeply experience the joys and the sorrows of this world without being swept away by them. Equanimity allows us to touch life more deeply. It's anything but flat and indifferent. It is not indifference or apathy.

Another misunderstanding about equanimity is that it means simply settling back and being with things as they are—that one doesn't take action. But equanimity is not necessarily associated with non-action. The quality of compassion engages us to act in the world, engages us to meet suffering and do something about it. Equanimity supports that action and allows us to be balanced around the results of that action. Causes and conditions come together in this world from so many different directions that we cannot guarantee our actions will produce the results we are aiming for. Equanimity allows us to be at ease with this.

The quality of equanimity is not something we can cultivate directly in a way. It's supported by conditions. It grows out of the practice. It's a result of the practice. I'd like to talk about some of the ways that equanimity does grow out of the practice.

The first way is by studying what gets in the way of equanimity, what counters it. This is one way we can study equanimity—by understanding its opposite. We can also cultivate conditions that directly support equanimity, cultivate wisdom that supports equanimity. And then there's the formal practice of equanimity, which we'll talk about perhaps briefly tonight, but then again on Tuesday night.

The practice of cultivating equanimity really does begin when we first sit down on the meditation cushion and start to see how reactive our minds are. We study what gets in the way of balance of mind by studying reactivity—reactivity to things as they are. This is one of the things the Buddha pointed to as the difference between an ordinary person and a well-instructed person. The ordinary person does not discern gain, praise, status, and so forth as it actually is. The well-instructed disciple discerns gain as it actually is.

This term, "as it actually is," is a translation of the Pali term *yathā-bhūta*, which means something like "as it actually is" or "as it has come to be" or "things as they are." The present moment is given. It is as it is. It is things as they are. And in meeting the

present moment, we rebel against it. We either want it to be different in some way, or we want it to stay. We want to hold on to it. We often struggle with things as they are, wishing they were some other way.

From Ajahn Sumedho: "It's a great relief to accept things the way they are, because the only real misery is wanting to see them in some other way."

So we push away things as they are. We're averse to them. There's that kind of reactivity. Or we hold on, wanting it to stay a certain way, trying to keep things arranged so that we can maintain the gain, the praise, the pleasure. That holding on, that clinging, actually obstructs the true meeting with that experience. In some way, that clinging actually separates us from the experience. It obstructs the balance of mind that understands this is a phenomenon that will arise and pass away.

So much of our practice has to do with meeting this reactivity. And we are cultivating equanimity every moment when we're meeting this kind of reactivity. Sometimes this is hard to see. It's hard to really take in. We're so often oriented around looking at our struggles as being what we're paying attention to that we're not noticing that along with that mindfulness of the difficulty, mindfulness of the struggle, beautiful qualities are being cultivated—the quality of mindfulness, the quality of faith, the quality of equanimity.

In fact, you might even say that during the times of difficulty in practice, the mind is actually growing much stronger. When we meet those difficulties with mindfulness, there's much more cultivation of wholesome qualities going on than when things are easy. Kind of like that story Will talked about last night—the story of the mistress and the servant, where the servant wanted to test her mistress's patience of mind. Without those tests, we don't meet the difficulties that allow us to expand our capacity for equanimity.

So we practice by meeting this, meeting these difficulties. And as we practice this, we get little glimpses of what equanimity means. We notice in observing some kind of reactivity, a wanting, that as we bring our mindfulness to it, there's a little bit of space around it. And it's not such a problem. Seeing that difficulty through a spacious mind, there is balance in the mind. And there's a shift. I know you've all experienced this kind of shift. This shift is a movement towards equanimity.

It's a beginning of seeing that quality of equanimity. Or perhaps in observing reactivity, you actually see in a moment when the reactivity vanishes. And then you get a deeper taste of this quality of equanimity, the vanishing of that reactivity. The mind opens to that space of non-reactivity.

On one retreat, I was exploring wanting, the quality of wanting in the mind, particularly when I was doing walking meditation. I was doing walking meditation out front here a lot in the early part of the three-month course, and I really noticed, as many of you have probably noticed, that I really wanted to look at people while I was doing walking meditation. Initially, I was being a good yogi and just had blinders on—I'm not going to look—just forcing myself not to look.

At some point I realized that wanting was arising, and that since that was what was coming up, I should observe that. It took me ages to actually realize that that was what was happening and that's what I should be doing, as opposed to trying to force myself to stay with the walking while wanting was arising.

So I began to explore the wanting, to explore that quality in my mind and in my body. I didn't look—I still refrained from looking—but I began to get interested in how it arose and how it operated in my mind. I would notice that as I was doing the walking meditation, if somebody appeared in my peripheral vision, the wanting would arise as soon as that person appeared. I wouldn't look up, but I just felt the wanting. It felt like this magnetic pull. Oh, I want to look. I so wanted to look at that person. But I didn't. I just watched them in my peripheral vision, so I couldn't really tell who they were. And then they walked in front of me, up the stairs, into the building. As soon as the door closed, the wanting was gone.

That was pretty cool—to see that release from the wanting. And so for some number of days, I kind of got into watching this wanting, feeling the wanting and almost waiting for the person to disappear from my sight so I could watch the wanting disappear.

After some days of this, I finally realized that I was actually holding onto the wanting in order to see it disappear. Somebody was walking, and I noticed there was just this subtle holding onto the wanting in order to see it disappear when they walked around the corner or whatever they did. I saw in that moment that there was no need to hold onto the wanting, and the wanting vanished like that. It felt like being released from a vice grip.

This release, seeing this release from reactivity, feeling like you've been released—this is a taste of equanimity.

Through the practice of observing reactivity, as this example demonstrates to some extent, the mind begins to learn its own contribution to the reactivity. Partly we are blessed in a way because our minds actually want to move towards happiness; we just fundamentally misunderstand how that happiness is to be found. When we bring mindfulness to our experience, when we bring mindfulness to reactivity, the mind begins to

understand that the reactivity is created in its own place, that the mind itself is creating that reactivity. It sees that the reactivity is the source of the suffering and that it is creating its own suffering. When it sees that, when the mind sees that, it lets go.

As the mind starts to understand this through the mindful attention to wanting and aversion, it begins to let them go slowly. It's a slow process. Over time, what we might call the gravitational pull towards greed and aversion, towards the habits and patterns that we have around pleasant and unpleasant—that gravitational pull begins to weaken. And instead, the gravitational pull to balance of mind, to non-reactivity, grows stronger.

I remember feeling this. It was almost like feeling a rubber band at one point. I was walking back to my room on one retreat, and I saw somebody over in the woods on the side. There was an immediate sense of wanting to look at them and judge them. Even though I had no idea what they were doing or who they were, there was this feeling arising of wanting to judge them, this pull to look at them and judge them. As that pull happened, there was a stronger pull back that was like, don't need to go there. A pull towards non-reactivity, non-judgment. It just felt like a rubber band was pulling me back to center.

The practice of bringing mindfulness to reactivity is one that you're all quite familiar with at this point. In my daily life, this practice of noticing when the mind starts to move into reactivity is a huge part of my practice.

Mindfulness is relatively at a low level operating much of the time. And so if there's any movement towards reactivity, the mindfulness is often right there. What's begun to happen is that it feels almost like there's a rising of energy around the reactivity—a sense of a welling up of something. "This isn't right. I've got to change this. I've got to do this. I've got to fix this." There's a rising of energy.

And the mindfulness, it feels to me, kind of moves in and connects with that energy, like you might jump on the back of a wild horse. That energy is just a very strong movement towards reactivity. The mindfulness can meet that like jumping on the back of a wild horse—like an Aikido move in a way. The mindfulness meeting that energy and then, with a quarter turn, redirecting the energy elsewhere. The mindfulness meeting that reactivity can then be fed by the energy of that reactivity, and the mindfulness can grow and strengthen. It's quite an interesting exploration. It takes not being reactive to reactivity—just the willingness to meet that reactivity, to jump on it like jumping on a wild horse, to simply connect with the reactivity.

One powerful support for the cultivation of equanimity is mindfulness of feeling—attending to whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We've talked about this in various ways. Joseph talked about the qualities of feeling in one talk, and I referred to it in the talk on dependent origination, in which when we pay attention to feeling, we can short-circuit the seemingly automatic movement to craving. If we can bring our mindful attention to feeling tone, we can greatly support this non-reactivity, the movement of non-reactivity or non-movement of reactivity.

This is a really beautiful place to explore in our practice. It can short-circuit the movement in that chain of dependent origination. And in that seeing of feeling as it actually is—meeting pleasant, meeting unpleasant, meeting neutral with mindfulness—craving does not arise. When craving doesn't arise, clinging doesn't arise. When clinging doesn't arise, becoming doesn't arise. When becoming doesn't arise, identification doesn't arise. And nor does suffering. This is a very powerful place to practice—a direct cultivation of the quality of mind, the meeting of feeling tone that supports non-reactivity.

When we neither reject what is unpleasant nor try to hold on to what is pleasant, we are beginning to come into alignment with the truth of things as they are. And this alignment with truth allows us to simply be at ease. When we actually settle into the truth of the way things are, there's a way in which our whole system just relaxes. It's not a problem.

We can also begin to explore the terrain of equanimity through noticing what might be called its near enemy. I've just been talking about its far enemy—the far enemy of equanimity being the reactivity of greed and aversion. The near enemy of equanimity is something like indifference.

Indifference may result from a slight disconnection from experience, from just not really being there with experience. Indifference might result from a kind of not knowing, or it might result from a slight aversion to the experience. One of my friends, in exploring this in her own experience, said to me, "I've come to the understanding that the quality of equanimity isn't one of 'I don't care.'" She said, "If my mind is saying 'I don't care,' there's a little bit of pushing away there." She said the feeling of equanimity is more like, "I don't mind this." I thought that was a beautiful way to understand the distinction between indifference and equanimity.

Exploring this in your own experience, it can be subtle at times—equanimity versus indifference. Delusion can be a great mask and have us think that we're equanimous when actually there is a cloud in front of our minds. Sometimes this is called the equan-

imity of not knowing. In the Visuddhimagga, this is the term used for the near enemy of equanimity: the equanimity of not knowing. This not knowing is not knowing the truth of impermanence, of unreliability, of ephemerality—of anicca, dukkha, anatta.

For instance, we might feel like we're equanimous about some of our possessions, but that equanimity, that feeling of equanimity, might be based in a subtle or not so subtle feeling that we have control over our possessions. And if something happens to point out to us that we don't really have control over our possessions, that equanimity will be revealed as false equanimity.

Another way to explore this—think of it as an analogy. You have a relationship with somebody, and you feel like you're pretty balanced around that relationship. And they die. They're killed in an accident. And you don't know this.

You're still feeling a sense of balance, of peacefulness, of calm around your relationship with that person. Then say a week later, you find out that they have died. There may be a shift in your feeling to one of grief, frustration, sorrow, perhaps anger. In the week intervening, that equanimity was the equanimity of unknowing. It was not based in understanding the truth of things as they are.

What I've been exploring has been the things that are in the way of equanimity—exploring the reactivity, exploring the indifference. Now I'd like to talk about another way to cultivate and explore equanimity, and that's to understand the conditions that help bring about equanimity and to cultivate those conditions.

One of the main supports for equanimity, for the quality of equanimity to arise, is concentration. If we look at the list of the seven factors of awakening that Greg talked about, concentration precedes equanimity. So let's explore this a little bit. How does this work? How does the practice of concentration support the understanding and the experience of equanimity?

As the mind gets concentrated, settled, stabilized on experience, one of the hallmarks of the concentrated mind is that the hindrances are suppressed—the hindrances of sense desire, of hatred, of sloth and torpor, of restlessness, and of doubt. Those reactive qualities of mind are at bay when the mind is concentrated. This is one of the reasons why concentration feels so good, because those qualities of mind are not present. The mind without hindrances is a mind that is not reactive. And so you can get a taste of that flavor, the taste of equanimity, through concentration.

Now, this is a constructed kind of equanimity. It's not the equanimity of understanding. It's the equanimity of conditions coming together such that the hindrances are suppressed for a time. But it gives you a flavor of what it's like for the mind to be non-reactive. So cultivating concentration supports this quality of equanimity.

The cultivation of mindfulness also supports equanimity. As I mentioned earlier in the talk, wholesome consciousness includes—every wholesome consciousness includes—mindfulness, non-greed, non-aversion, equanimity. So the cultivation of mindfulness brings along this quality of equanimity, the continuity of mindfulness. This is perhaps talking more about the open, spacious awareness, the choiceless awareness, not necessarily about the concentration that comes from one-pointed attention on a single object, but the stability of awareness over time. With continuous mindfulness over many moments, the quality of equanimity will begin to be felt more strongly.

In a way it's kind of like this: you're experiencing just moment after moment of arising experience—a pressure, a sight, a breath, a sound, an emotion, a thought—just moment after moment of rapidly changing experience. With the mind right there with each changing experience, there's no room for reactivity. So you can get a taste, a flavor, of this balance of mind.

Some of the key supporting conditions for equanimity are wisdom and insight. There are two main understandings that are said to really deeply support equanimity, and they are an understanding of karma, which Rebecca talked about a few nights ago, and the understanding of not-self. I'd like to briefly talk about each of these and how these understandings support equanimity.

Karma, just to remind you or review a little of what Rebecca said the other night, is a natural law of cause and effect. When our actions are motivated by skillful intentions, it leads us towards happiness, towards non-suffering. When our actions are motivated by unskillful intentions, it tends to lead us towards suffering. When we choose skillfully, happiness tends to follow. When we choose unskillfully, suffering, dukkha, tends to follow.

We have these moments of choice, and oftentimes, if we're not able to be mindful, these moments of choice are not seen. Habits and patterns make our choices for us. Greed arises and makes the choice to do something. Aversion arises and makes the choice to do something. As we become more and more mindful, we begin to see that there can be a kind of insertion of wisdom into these choice points, and we can steer the ship—or rather, wisdom can steer the ship. It's not really us steering the ship, but wisdom can steer the ship in a different direction.

So how does this understanding support equanimity? I think there are two parts to how it supports equanimity. First, there's the understanding that essentially how we are experiencing the present moment—the feeling of the present moment—arises as a result of our past choices. The feeling tone, the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality of the present moment, is determined by our past choices. We can't change the past. So this is part of the understanding of karma that supports equanimity.

At first glance, it may not seem to. It may seem like if I'm experiencing something in the present moment that's unpleasant, then regret would be the result of understanding karma. I made bad choices.

We seem to think that beating ourselves up in the present over something we did in the past is somehow an effective way to help us not do those things in the future. But the understanding of karma is an understanding that we can't change the past.

The second piece of it is that our response to the present moment is what creates our future. The response to the present moment is how we step forward into the future. So we have some degree of agency. As I said, wisdom can arise. When wisdom arises in the present moment and responds to that moment of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral with balance of mind, without reactivity, we are moving towards happiness instead of unhappiness.

When we deeply understand how karma functions, it supports equanimity. It's a deep recognition that it's like this due to causes and conditions.

So that's one understanding around how the understanding of karma supports the movement of equanimity in our own arising experience. There's another understanding around equanimity towards beings. The equanimity about other people, other beings, is supported by understanding that all beings are subject to the same law of cause and effect, the same law of karma, and that their happiness and unhappiness also depends upon their own choices. We can't make their choices for them. We cannot choose to make them happy. They need to make that choice. And with that understanding also comes a sense of balance of mind around the happiness and unhappiness of other beings.

It's interesting to think about and reflect on how the causes and conditions between people interweave. I had a really clear example of this on one retreat. I was doing a lot of meditation in my room, and because of my back problem, I had put a futon on the floor. I was doing most of my meditation lying on the futon. I was in a single room with my bed there, and the futon took up most of the rest of the space.

About halfway through the retreat—it was a month-long retreat—I opened my door, and there was somebody sitting on the futon on the floor in my room. There was instant confusion. I closed the door. I looked at the number on the door. Yep, it's my room. I went back in, and she said, "This is the room they assigned me to. The retreat must be full."

I said, "There's some mistake." Indeed, the manager had told her she was in my room. She had gone into my room, seen the futon on the floor, and thought, "Wow, this retreat must be really full. They're putting two people in single rooms." And she decided to move in. She had unpacked all of her things and made the bed.

I got it straightened out because I had been a manager at Spirit Rock, so I knew where to find her room assignment. The manager was off for the afternoon, so I found her correct room and got her settled.

But I kind of reflected on the amazing confluence of events that had led to this. If I hadn't been doing lying meditation on my floor, she would have walked into somebody else's room, seen there was somebody there, and gone back to the manager saying he gave her the wrong room number. If the manager had been a little more diligent and careful, he would have written down the right room number. If she hadn't been so open and willing to sleep on the floor, she never would have moved in. It just stunned me. It was like, wow, look at all of these pieces that came together, all of these threads that created that experience.

I was pretty balanced around it. I wasn't angry. I wasn't reactive. I was just amazed at how these threads interweave. Our reactivity around circumstances—typically what we do is blame somebody. Somebody else is at fault for these things. But the happiness and unhappiness of our experience, the reactivity or non-reactivity, is entirely in our own minds. It doesn't have to be at the mercy of other people's choices.

This is really the good news of karma, and the reason it supports an understanding of equanimity.

Then there's the understanding of not-self, which supports equanimity. As we begin to see very clearly that there isn't a continuous being here that chooses, decides, feels, but rather a process of choosing that chooses, a process of feeling that feels, a process of knowing that knows—we see that there is no one to defend, to protect.

There's no reason to defend or protect. There's no need for reactivity when we see that it's just a process unfolding.

The degree to which we understand this truth of not-self is the degree to which we experience equanimity. Equanimity unfolds in degrees for us. At times we feel more equanimous than others. Our practice can be looked at as an unfolding or a deepening of this understanding of equanimity. We get little tastes of it at first, begin to get a flavor, an understanding of the flavor of equanimity. We may get some more extended periods of time of equanimity.

These wisdom teachings—the teachings of karma, the teaching of not-self—can support the cultivation of equanimity through reflection. Before we have the full understanding of these teachings, they can be used as reflections to support a movement toward equanimity. The Buddha actually teaches this. One of his main reflections is on not-self. He says often that things should be understood as they are: This is not me. This is not mine. This is not who I am. To me this seems to be encouraging this as a reflection, and I've used this in my practice at times. An emotion arises: this is not me, this is not mine, this is not who I am. We can bring in this wisdom as a reflection and it can open a little bit of spaciousness around the experience, allowing us to meet it with a little more balance of mind, a little more equanimity.

So we can use reflections on these teachings to support the cultivation of equanimity —reflection on causes and conditions. One of my favorite reflections was offered by Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "This is nature." To me, this encapsulates both karma and not-self —the process of seeing an arising experience just as a natural phenomenon. This anger is arising as a result of causes and conditions. It's simply a process, a flow of change. The seed of anger had been planted and the tree of anger is growing. This is nature. When I used this on my first retreat with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, I found it quite supportive for opening the mind to this quality of equanimity, just creating some space.

So we can use the reflection on these teachings to support equanimity. And the insights into these teachings—when we actually see clearly karma unfolding, how it works in our direct experience, not as a thought, not as a thinking about, but the direct experience of the unfolding of karma; or as we see in our experience the truth of things just being a flow of change, a flow of changing experience, no one here doing anything, choosing anything, experiencing anything, just experience experiencing—that too, that insight leads to equanimity. It opens to equanimity.

The final stage of vipassanā meditation before full awakening is said to be equanimity toward all formations. This quality of equanimity, this place of balance of mind—this is the place where, non-reactive, just meeting experience from that balance of mind, the mind can release into freedom.

I'll close with a quote from Nyanaponika Thera: "Equanimity is a perfect, unshakable balance of mind rooted in insight. But in its perfection and unshakable nature, equanimity is not dull, heartless, and frigid. Its perfection is not due to an emotional emptiness, but to a fullness of understanding, to its being complete in itself. Its unshakable nature is not the immovability of a dead, cold stone, but the manifestation of the highest strength."

CHAPTER 10

Relax, Receive, Allow and Learn

Andrea Fella · 54 min

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers practical guidance on cultivating the conditions that support wise mindfulness—the kind that leads toward freedom rather than simply enhanced focus. She begins by distinguishing right mindfulness from wrong mindfulness as described in the suttas, explaining that the difference lies in the underlying view: mindfulness grounded in understanding suffering versus mindfulness serving greed or self-centered agendas.*
>
> *Fella introduces four interconnected supports for practice: relax, receive, allow, and learn. She emphasizes that relaxation of body and mind creates the foundation for natural awareness to arise, offering the practice of dropping gentle requests into the system rather than effortfully trying to relax. She then explores the crucial distinction between attention (which selects objects from experience) and mindfulness (the capacity to know what's happening while it's happening), noting that we can direct attention to a specific experience like the breath while still maintaining a receptive quality—like tuning a radio to a frequency and then simply receiving what comes through.*
>
> *The teaching on allowing addresses how this quality creates space for genuine learning about suffering to occur. When mindfulness holds reactive emotions with an allowing attention, the mind naturally begins to understand that reactivity is painful in the moment. This understanding, arising from direct experience rather than conceptual knowledge, supports the natural release of unwholesome patterns. Fella acknowledges that allowing isn't always possible, offering the skillful alternative of allowing the not-allowing, or simply changing channels when the mind is too caught to hold experience with equanimity. Throughout, she uses the analogy of riding a kick scooter to illustrate how gentle, repeated efforts build momentum in practice more effectively than forceful striving.*

On a retreat, any retreat, we spend a lot of time cultivating the conditions that support mindfulness. Tonight I'd like to explore some of the supports for us in this endeavor.

Mindfulness itself is, at least in my understanding and what is in the suttas, a quality or capacity of mind that basically creates the conditions for us to be aware of what's happening in the present moment while it's happening. And yet that quality itself is kind of neutral, because this capacity to be aware of what's happening in the present

moment while it's happening can be applied to this practice, to curiosity about what's happening in the present moment. It can also be applied to something like being really quiet while sneaking through a house in order to steal things.

So what's the difference?

Part of the understanding—and the Buddha actually speaks in the suttas of this, though not in many places—is that there are references to what is called wrong mindfulness. Wrong mindfulness in the wrong Noble Eightfold Path is based in wrong view. That's how it's described: in one of wrong view, wrong intention arises. Wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, wrong concentration arise in one who has wrong view. The view of somebody sneaking through a house to steal things is one of greed, one of self-motivation. This is not what we would call directing the capacity of mindfulness towards understanding.

Understanding in particular what the Buddha pointed to—the freeing quality that mindfulness can point us toward, the freedom that mindfulness can guide us toward—comes when we are curious about understanding suffering. If that thief were curious about understanding suffering, the thief might recognize that the actual activity of mind happening in that moment of wanting to take something that belonged to somebody else is painful. That in the moment it is not conducive to a heart that feels free, a heart that has love and compassion.

From this perspective, the Buddha pointed us to understand that the foundation of our path is right view. In the Four Noble Truths, he pointed us to understand suffering, let go of the cause of suffering, realize that the letting go of suffering results in a release of freedom from suffering, and recognize that there is a path that can be used to cultivate this freedom.

The mindfulness of the Eightfold Path is this mindfulness of being aware of what's happening in the present moment, but it's mindfulness from a particular perspective. I'd like to describe this perspective in some really ordinary ways this evening.

One way to think about this perspective of how we bring this capacity of knowing what's happening in the present moment while it's happening is to consider curiosity about what is happening in the present moment as being something that is happening in the present moment.

That sounds like nothing. In mathematical terms it sounds like a tautology—if you're aware of what's happening in the present moment, you would be aware that it is happening in the present moment. And yet, actually, if we look at our minds, this is not what's going on usually in our habitual perspective, especially before we meet the practice.

Typically when something arises in our minds, even if we're aware of it, we are often at least somewhat caught by the energy of that, thinking we need to do something or follow on. If you were to go out into the world and notice somebody was angry and ask them, "Do you know you're angry?"—some stranger on the street—they would probably look at you like you're kind of nuts. "Yeah, of course I know I'm angry." But are they aware of anger in the moment as an experience that's happening in the moment? What the experience of anger actually is? What is the human experience of anger? Not "Are you angry, and what are you going to do about it?"—which is how most of us before we meet the practice would know anger.

This perspective, this shift in the use of mindfulness to be curious about experience happening in the present moment as phenomena, as experience happening in the present moment—whether that's the experience of the breath, the experience of a reactive emotion like anger, confusion, desire, or frustration, whether it's a beautiful quality of mind like love, compassion, patience, joy, ease, or peace—the perspective of mindfulness is curious about something along the lines of: What is it like to be a human being having this experience? What is it like to be a human being experiencing love, experiencing fear, experiencing anger? Opening to that side of the equation.

This is a simple shift, and yet it's a profound shift. There's a vast difference—and you all know this—between the experience of being with some reactive state of mind, being with frustration, versus being frustrated. We feel the difference. There's more spaciousness when we are with an experience.

So that's another way we can hold this perspective of mindfulness: Can we be with our experience? Can we keep ourselves company in an experience?

With something like a reactive emotion, fear for example, when that is arising, we get curious about what the inner experience is. How does it affect the body? How does it affect the mind? What is the human experience? What is it like to be a human being experiencing this?

In this practice of mindfulness, we are exploring all of our human experience. No part of our human experience is fundamentally antithetical to being mindful. There are certain experiences, of course, that make it more challenging to be mindful, but there's

no particular state—except perhaps for non-mindfulness itself—no particular arising experience of which it's fundamentally not possible to be mindful. Even a state like spacing out, even a state like sleepiness—it is possible to be mindful of those experiences. Nothing is left out. And yet there will be things that are challenging, so we'll speak about how to work with those experiences as well.

I'd like to talk about some of the supports that I've seen in my own practice that really help with this—holding this perspective, finding our way to this perspective, which is what supports us to move in the direction of freedom. As I said, being caught in reactivity basically reinforces those patterns, those habits. When we are feeling frustrated, feeling angry, that tends to reinforce those patterns of mind. But we can create a larger container in which mindfulness can hold frustration or anger or confusion—any experience. Mindfulness can hold it. And that creates the possibility for something different to happen: transformation around that reactive emotion, release around reactive emotions, and support for the growth of wholesome qualities.

If we're holding love in a container of mindfulness, it creates the conditions for love to strengthen. If we're holding frustration in a container of mindfulness, it creates the conditions for that frustration to transform and release. Mindfulness has this great, amazing capacity to strengthen the wholesome and allow a weakening and releasing of the unwholesome. This perspective that we're exploring to bring to our mindfulness is crucial for mindfulness to lead us towards freedom.

I'd like to describe some of the supports I've seen and speak about them in a really simple way. The first support is: relax.

When I first began meditating—probably for the first couple of years of my practice—I didn't hear this instruction. I don't think it was because it wasn't said, but I picked up on other parts of the instruction, and my personality, my mode of being, my usual habits of mind applied those habits to the meditation, which of course it would do. I thought that the way to freedom was to hold on to the breath as long as I could, to tightly hold on to experience, and to push my mind into experience so that I could see it as closely as possible and track it all. My mind was really busy.

When I finally really heard this teaching of relax, I began to understand that relaxing—relaxing the body as a start, as a place to begin—supports a very natural capacity to be present, to be aware in the present moment, to be aware of what's happening while it's happening. That capacity is supported by relaxation. As we relax the body, it supports the mind to be able to relax a little bit. And as the mind relaxes—well, basically a non-relaxed mind is one that is caught up in its ideas, its agendas, its opinions, its views, its worries and concerns about the past and the future. A mind that is not re-

laxed is usually not in the present moment, or if it is in the present moment, it's thinking about the present moment: What do I need to do about this present moment? How can I get the thing I need, get rid of the thing I don't want?

A relaxed mind puts us in a place where there's much more natural capacity to recognize what's here. When we relax, we can check in. So just relax the body—play with this a little bit right now, just relaxing the body, relaxing the mind. You can explore this through consciously relaxing. You can scan through the body and consciously find areas where there may be tension and see if there can be a softening or relaxing around those areas. You can do that consciously.

I also like to offer an analogy that my colleague Gil Fronsdal offers for relaxing the mind. If you've consciously relaxed the muscles of the body, spent some time doing that—just as if your brain were a muscle—maybe the brain can relax too. There can be a conscious inclining towards relaxing, letting go of tension in our system, in our body and in our minds.

Another approach I've found really useful, especially the further I got into retreat: the more it felt like trying to do something was a little bit agitating. So what I began exploring was a kind of requesting—just sitting in my posture and then dropping a request into my system: May the body relax. And then seeing what happens. Not trying to do the relaxation, but just dropping that request in when you sit.

May the body relax. Try it right now.

May the body relax.

Is there any effect as you drop that into your system? Sometimes I found that that request actually created—or released—something that I didn't even know was being held. It's almost like our system, our organism understands in a way. When given a request like that, especially the more stability and the more settled the mind is, the more those requests are likely to have an effect. At times our system seems to have an understanding of things that we don't have conscious access to. And so sometimes we can use that.

May the body relax. May the mind relax. Don't even think about what that means. Just drop that in and see what effect it has on the body and mind. May the mind relax.

As the mind relaxes, there can be a kind of recognition that very simply, there is awareness. First of just this experience of relaxation. But then of just perhaps the body sitting here. Maybe the breath. Maybe hearing. Relaxation places us, puts us in a space where we can be more receptive to knowing what's happening while it's happening.

This is a second piece that I'd like to explore with you a little bit—this sense of receptive awareness. There's a quality in our attention where, when we are mindful, we can choose what we're going to attend to. We can direct our attention. We do this quite a bit in meditation at times, choosing to attend to the breath, for example. I would call that directing the attention. With mindfulness we can choose to direct the attention.

We can also, with mindfulness, choose to not consciously pick what we are paying attention to—to not choose, "Now I'm going to pay attention to the breath," but rather settle back and receive what's obvious. Letting go of controlling the choice to direct the attention. We can receive, almost like we can settle back and let experience come to us.

Right now, for instance, we'll play with these two just briefly. Let your attention rest in your hands. Notice the sensations of your hands. You can do that. And maybe now a breath. Let yourself be aware of a breath. We can choose to direct the attention and be aware of that experience.

And then just play a little bit right now with letting go of choosing. Essentially just settle back and see what's obvious, what wants to come to you, what experience. Maybe it's hearing right now. Or maybe it's the breath, or body sensations, or an emotion. Letting go of choosing what wants to come into awareness.

A piece of this pointing that we're doing here is another support that was really helpful for me to begin to articulate to myself, especially again the deeper my practice went. The more practice I did, it began to be very useful to recognize and understand that there's a difference between attention and mindfulness.

Attention is that capacity of mind that picks something out of experience. It is amenable to conscious control, as we just explored there. We can choose to direct the attention to the breath, or to sounds, or to the body. So it's amenable to a conscious choice. And yet if we're not consciously choosing, that factor of attention is essentially being conditioned. Something will be brought into attention, and it will tend to be something that would come from the conditions that were here in the immediate preceding moments. When we're not choosing to step in and say, "I want to pay attention to this," the conditions give rise to something being brought into attention.

That's kind of that settling back and asking, what wants to come to you? What wants to come into attention? Something is picked up in attention there. But that factor of attention—of choosing something out of the environment to notice, essentially that's what I'd say attention is—is different from this quality of mindfulness, which is this capacity to know what's happening in the present moment while it's happening.

I'll give an example of how you all already know this distinction. If you are walking down the street or doing something that requires you to move through the environment in some way, you may be mindful of that—and you may also not be mindful of that. How many of you have walked to your room, forgotten mindfulness, but navigated the halls, the stairways, the turns, the doors? Something was attending. Something was attending to the experience. Attention, perception, knowing—the five aggregates, which we'll talk about at another time. But these processes of body and mind were attending to experience.

Mindfulness may not have been there, but attention was functioning. Attention was helping you to get to your room in some fashion. And yet, you've all experienced this. It's not like when mindfulness goes away that we start walking into things or tripping over things or losing our way.

So we all understand this difference, and yet somehow in my practice I thought that if I wasn't in charge of what object was being attended to, it meant I wasn't being mindful. I had conflated these two in some way.

It is possible for mindfulness to be present and we are not actively choosing what to pay attention to. This we could call choiceless awareness—choiceless in the sense that we are not consciously choosing. I like to call that receptive awareness, because we are simply settling back and receiving. So I appreciate that distinction between receptive and directed awareness.

Another helpful piece for me was recognizing that I originally thought about these two—directing the attention and receiving—as being different things. If I was choosing to pay attention to the breath, I was kind of doing the whole thing. I was doing the tracking, I was doing the latching onto. But there's a way in which we can explore even as we direct the attention. What we could say is kind of allow the attention to come in on a particular area of our experience. We can direct attention to some aspect of our experience, and then receive that experience.

It's almost like how a radio works. A radio is a receiver. We tune to a particular frequency on a radio, but then the radio isn't going out and grabbing that frequency—it's still doing its job of just settling back, taking what comes in to that frequency. That's a kind of analogy for how we can direct the attention. For instance, right now, allow yourself to attune to the breath. But then receive what's there. You don't have to dive in and find anything or push the mind into it. What's obvious in the breath? What's naturally available to be received in the breath?

This receptive attention, relaxation, receptive attention—these are tools that are supports for any form of meditation. Even metta practice, for myself, began to become really alive when I shifted from looking for something and instead would just drop the phrases into the heart. "May you be happy." And then settling back and receiving. How does that phrase land? It's a kind of tuning to the heart channel and seeing how these phrases drop into the heart. What happens? How does it land?

So again, receiving—any practice we can explore this dynamic of directing and receiving. Sometimes the directing will be more helpful. Sometimes the receiving will be more helpful. There's kind of an art to this. It's not that we can tell you, do this for the first two minutes and this for the next five minutes. It really is very dependent on conditions. But it's worthwhile to explore this possibility of receiving experience—whether it's receiving in a directed way, attuning to the breath, attuning to the field of hearing, and then receiving that field, or whether it's a broader receptive awareness without choosing to ground with a particular object.

There's a blend, a way that it's helpful to explore these two together: relaxation and attention. This is another area where I found supports for the practice.

And this points to something Winnie talked about last night when she said, you're not either in the middle of a three-month retreat or at the beginning of a six-week retreat. You are here to meet this moment. So right now, just notice your hands. Notice the sound of my voice. Notice a breath. Often it's not very hard to do that for a moment. What tends to be more challenging is to sustain that over time.

And continuity is a really supportive tool for the establishment of mindfulness. We'll talk a lot about continuity. And yet again, in my own practice, I thought I needed to really grab onto the present moment and hold onto it for dear life, creating a lot of tension in that attention.

And so the practice of what Joseph sometimes says—short moments, many times—just enough effort essentially to stay present for this moment, for this in-breath. That's all the effort you need to make. You do not need to sit down and say, "I need to sit here and be present for the entire forty-five minutes." What is often helpful is to recognize, "Oh, this in-breath." And then do it again—an out-breath. And then again, an in-breath. Just enough effort for half a breath.

Another secret teaching from Joseph. He said, "I'll give you that secret teaching: just enough effort for half a breath." And then do it again, and again, and again. And notice when the mind jumps in and creates the experience of time stretching out in front of you. When the mind jumps in and says, "But that's for another six weeks, I can't..." That's a thought. That's all that is. It's a thought. And notice that thought arising.

I have an analogy that I like to use around this—short moments, many times—and that is about getting the momentum of mindfulness. This momentum will build actually in the short moments, many times. This is again part of the art of our practice: as we explore an in-breath, and again an out-breath, with enough effort to be with the in-breath, over time the momentum of mindfulness begins to build. And then it's almost like we don't have to remind ourselves—or it is that we don't have to remind ourselves as often. So we may be present for two or three breaths very easily and then need to remind ourselves. We need to start getting familiar with that experience of the mindfulness lingering for a little while and begin to notice when it starts to wobble a little bit.

The analogy I like is that of riding a scooter—those little kick scooters, not a motor scooter, that kids ride. A little two-wheeled scooter with a platform you stand on. To get the scooter going from a standstill, you need to tap on the ground: tap, tap, tap, tap. You could probably put the foot down and push really hard in the hopes that you'd go a long way, but that can create some instability for the momentum. Gentle, light taps give you the possibility to balance and get the momentum going. You get balanced and you get the momentum going with the taps, the gentle taps. Then you begin to get familiar with what it's like for that momentum to grow, and you can ride for a little while. You don't have to put your foot down. In fact, at certain points, when the momentum is going, putting your foot down will slow you down.

So you get the momentum going, and then you start to get familiar with what it's like for the scooter to get wobbly. And you put your foot down again to get the momentum back. That kind of experience around the gentle, light touch—reminding yourself, "Can I be with the in-breath? Can I be with the out-breath?"—light touch, and then beginning to get familiar with that experience perhaps of a little bit of momentum of mindfulness. And when it feels supportive, reconnect with a gentle reminder again. "Oh right, mind's starting to drift"—kind of a feeling of the attention pulling away. Bring it back, bring the attention, connect again. Light touch, many times.

And the third tool—so basically it's relax, receive. That receiving may happen in directed or receptive attention. Relax, receive. And the third one, which Greg pointed to this morning too: allow. Cultivating an allowing attention to whatever is happening in the present moment. This morning Greg used "kind attention." We could say "loving

awareness." It's an important part of our wise mindfulness, of this mindfulness that points us in the direction of freedom, because it supports the possibility of the mindfulness holding whatever is happening, of supporting the curiosity around what is the human experience of whatever is arising.

When the mind can explore and incline towards this attitude of allowing, it creates the conditions for us to be okay with whatever is happening in the present moment—which allows us to learn from it.

When we can notice and begin to recognize what's happening here in the present moment, we begin to understand the conditions that are at play in creating what's happening—the conditions that are at play in creating our reactivity, the conditions that are at play in creating mindfulness and concentration and love. And so our mind begins to understand. As the mindfulness is joined with this allowing, it creates the conditions for our minds to deeply understand itself, and to understand suffering—that first noble truth that the Buddha talked about.

Those four noble truths come with actions. Each of them comes with actions. The first is meant to be understood. And to me, this is where the whole thing begins. We cultivate this capacity of mindfulness and explore the possibility of allowing. When that is in place, when the mind can allow what is arising, it creates the conditions for that understanding of suffering.

As the mind begins to understand suffering, basically what happens there—I kind of pointed to this earlier—that thief going through the house, if that thief were looking at their own mind in that moment, they would find pain in the experience of wanting to take something from somebody else. If they could actually notice the human experience, which they probably can't because there's a lot of delusion going on for them to be in that situation, but if they could step below that layer of delusion and open to the human experience of what was actually going on there, they would find pain.

When we open, with this allowing attention, to reactive emotions, our system, our organism, basically begins to understand: this is not helpful. This is not conducive to well-being in the moment. And because of that learning—because the mind itself, it's like we don't have to consciously do that learning, we don't have to figure that out—the conditions of mindfulness and allowing support the mind, the organism, to understand that. Our mind can begin to understand that reactivity is suffering in the moment. And because of that learning, our system essentially, inherently wants to move in the direction of well-being.

Our practice of mindfulness, we could say—this mindfulness coupled with allowing—is giving our system new information. It's giving our system an education into our habits of mind, our habitual tendencies, showing us that they don't serve us in the way that we thought they did. And as the mind sees that they don't serve us, the mind itself begins to understand and begins to find its way to releasing them.

There are definitely times when consciously we can help that along. There are times when it's really supportive for us, recognizing that we're caught in a storm of anger, to turn the attention to something else, to bring in some mettā, to use some of our tools that support us in balancing the mind there. And yet, if the mind can hold that reactivity with that experience of, "Oh, this is the human experience of anger. I can be with this. The mindfulness can be with this," then the learning is happening there already. You may not need to apply those antidotes if the mindfulness and the allowing are holding it.

And yet, of course, it's not always easy to allow. Might it be so? I wish it were so—that when I'm caught in some kind of reactive state and the mind is really caught by it, I could just say, "Oh, just allow this." Sometimes we can't do that. And so sometimes we have to hold, or step back, perhaps see if there can be a bigger container that allows the not-allowing. That allows, "Wow, there's all this anger, and I hate this." Oh, can I know that? Can I know there's anger and hate? Can I be with that? Can I allow the resistance to the anger and hate to be there and be known—to allow the not-allowing? Is it possible to create that bigger container, to step back and recognize that maybe we can allow the not-allowing?

And if that does not seem possible, that's a good time to change the channel, to turn your attention to something else, to bring in some of the tools that we know help to balance our mind when we're really caught by something.

And so... relax. May the body relax. May the mind relax. And can you, in that relaxation, recognize something of an ease of being with this moment? Maybe there's a little more possibility of knowing, "Oh, this, in the present moment"—maybe the body, maybe the breath. If you're exploring a more open awareness, just whatever's arising. If you are exploring the breath, attuning to the breath, or attuning to the body and then exploring receiving the breath. Just enough effort for this moment.

And what's here now, receiving the next moment and the next moment. Opening to the possibility of allowing your experience to be exactly as it is.

Allowing is not about agreeing or disagreeing with experience. We don't have to agree with something or like it in order to allow it. Allowing is more this sense of recognizing that what has arisen is already here. Might as well allow it, because it's already here.

And that allowing isn't necessarily about non-action, but opening to recognize that what has arisen has arisen. This creates space in the heart. That allowing creates space in the heart for—rather than reactivity being the next moment, rather than reactivity being how we meet what's here—skillful responsiveness to be how we meet it. And maybe skillful responsiveness is just holding it in that allowing. And maybe skillful responsiveness means choosing another experience to attend to.

Relax. Receive. Allow. And let the learning happen.

CHAPTER 11

Knowing A Mind Affected By Delusion

Andrea Fella · 1h06

> *In this dharma talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers an in-depth exploration of delusion (moha), the most fundamental of the three root poisons alongside greed (lobha) and aversion (dosa). Drawing on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's (MN 10) instructions on the third foundation of mindfulness, she examines how we can recognize "a mind affected by delusion as a mind affected by delusion" and "a mind unaffected by delusion as a mind unaffected by delusion."*
>
> *Fella presents three levels of delusion: the most obvious form of simply being unmindful or lost in thought; a subtler level involving personal views, beliefs, and conditioning that filter our perception without our awareness; and the deepest human delusion—our tendency to take what is impermanent (anicca) to be permanent, what is unreliable (dukkha) to be reliable, and what is not-self (anattā) to be self. She illustrates these with vivid examples, from the famous "gorilla basketball" study on selective attention to her own meditation experiences of watching the mind search desperately for something reliable to land on.*
>
> *The practical heart of this teaching emphasizes that we cannot simply tell ourselves to stop being deluded, but we can recognize delusion when it operates. By studying our views, noticing when something feels solid or permanent, observing how long happiness lasts when we get what we want, and tracking the arising of the sense of self, we create conditions for wisdom to gradually transform these deep patterns. This patient, curious investigation—rather than forced correction—is the path toward the cooling (Nibbāna) that the Buddha described as the extinguishing of greed, aversion, and delusion.*

The possibility of our practice here is freedom. The Buddha used the term Nibbana, which literally, I understand, means cooling. He used this image of cooling a fire and talked about the patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion being like a fire burning in our hearts and minds. This image of cooling the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion is one of the simplest and, for me, one of the more inspiring definitions of freedom in the suttas: the extinguishing of greed, aversion, and delusion. That's the letting go of something. The Buddha also said that the experience in this very life of that extinguishing was a state of peace, free from mental pain and grief.

Now, that doesn't mean that the heart is not open and connecting. This is an important recognition and understanding—that the dropping away of greed, aversion, and delusion doesn't leave us as indifferent beings. In fact, it leaves room for a different kind

of connection: the connection of a heart that is not contracted, that feels more deeply, that resonates in this world with compassion when there is suffering, that empathizes and experiences a resonant joy when there is joy, and that has this deep sense of connection.

We may not quite understand this freeing from greed, aversion, and delusion at first. Yet over time we may get little tastes of what this means and begin to trust that this direction is the direction of freedom.

Our work here, as we've been describing, is to get to know our minds, to get to know the entirety of our human experience. It's the getting to know part that creates the conditions for wisdom and understanding to transform greed, aversion, and delusion, to release them. From time to time, we may find ourselves in this space of non-constriction. Yet the way to that is by getting to know the constriction really well.

The Buddha called greed, aversion, and delusion the three root poisons of the mind—the three root fires, we could call them with our analogy this evening. Greed and aversion we have some experience with and have some degree of ability to recognize them, in their many different flavors. Yet delusion, by its very nature, is much harder to see. It is much harder to get to know delusion because it obscures itself.

Greed and aversion are more in the business of co-opting our minds to go along with them. With greed, there's this notion that getting what I want is going to make me happy—getting what I want, getting rid of what I don't want. Those energies are more clear to our minds because they're essentially trying to make us see things or do things or behave in certain ways. Yet the nature of delusion is to obscure, and so it is much harder to see.

In the Third Foundation of Mindfulness, which Jill read the other day, it points to simple instructions. I really love the simplicity of the Third Foundation. The first half of it basically asks us to look at or recognize a mind affected by greed, understanding that a mind affected by greed is a mind affected by greed, and a mind unaffected by greed is a mind unaffected by greed. A mind affected by aversion is a mind affected by aversion. It's really just pointing to recognizing the experience of greed, the experience of aversion as an arising, as a phenomenon happening in the moment. And the absence—a mind unaffected by aversion is a mind unaffected by aversion. So we notice the presence and absence.

Likewise, one understands a mind affected by delusion as a mind affected by delusion. Right there it points to the possibility of recognizing delusion, of seeing it at work in our minds. And then recognizing a mind unaffected by delusion as a mind unaffected by delusion.

Delusion is the most fundamental of these three fires because it basically underlies greed and aversion. Greed and aversion don't exist without delusion. Yet it is possible to be deluded without greed and aversion being present. Greed and aversion can also create delusion. One form of delusion is seeing things through a particular perspective—not that we're not aware, but that we are aware with a particular perspective and are unaware that the mind is holding that perspective. We might be in a state of aversion and...

our mind becomes affected by aversion and then we see things through that lens.

At one point, one of my teachers asked me to scan through the body and notice what was obvious. What's the most obvious thing? And then what's the next most obvious, and the next most? I just let the mind land randomly on these experiences. When my teacher asked me to describe what I'd noticed—because he'd asked me to let it be choiceless, not that I was choosing, but just noticing what's obvious, what's the first thing that's obvious—when I reported to him, I said, "Well, I wasn't choosing, but it's clear to me that this wasn't choiceless, because every single experience that the mind landed on was unpleasant."

It was clear to me—I knew that my body was not nothing but unpleasant experience. And yet the mind was choosing unpleasant, highlighting unpleasant. This is the way my mind works. This is the habit of mind based on years of practicing aversion. You may have your own flavor of this.

This is a kind of filter, an unseen filter that biases the mind towards seeing things in a certain way, taking in certain things and not other things. Greed and aversion in particular create this kind of filter for us. This is a form of delusion that arises out of greed and aversion.

But greed and aversion themselves are based on a more fundamental kind of delusion—basically, believing that in the case of greed, if I get this thing, I'll be happy. And happy not just for a moment, but something in our minds believes that we'll be happy for a good stretch of time. This is a fundamental perspective, a view underlying that movement towards wanting to have something, wanting to get rid of something.

This evening what I'd really like to explore is offering you some information about how you might begin to recognize a mind affected by delusion as a mind affected by delusion, and a mind unaffected by delusion as a mind unaffected by delusion. Information to describe different ways that delusion works.

This information—it's not so much something to try to do something with. As we've been saying, sometimes just... and Sayadaw U Tejaniya really pointed to this. He said so much of what he offers is information that it's like what I'll call Dharma rain. It's just landing on the landscape of your system and filtering in to your minds, to your hearts. That itself is a condition. Hearing the information is a condition that may allow you to see something different, see something new. We may not even be conscious we're taking in this information.

At one point I was sitting a three-month retreat here and I had some insight about something—I don't even remember at this point what it was—but what I do remember is that there was this sense of, "Wow, that's really important. They should be telling us about this." I was thinking of writing notes: "Really, you need to talk about this in your talks, it's so important." I didn't write those notes, thank goodness. In the next three Dharma talks, I heard it. It was there. It had been there.

This is a form of delusion in a way. Sometimes it happens that because we have a certain perspective on experience, we take in information and don't take in information that doesn't match our views—or we don't consciously take it in. And yet my sense is that it was going in like that Dharma rain. It was going in, and that's what supported the seeing of it. It wasn't conscious that I saw it or heard it. It wasn't conscious, but... And then it was stunning to me that I hadn't heard it. I realized, "Wow, this is something they must say all the time. Three Dharma talks in a row it's been said, and I didn't hear it before."

This is part of the way our minds function. We take in information that's in line with what we already know, or in line with perspectives or views that we have. This is one way that delusion works.

I'd like to offer some information about different levels or different depths of delusion. The most obvious form—I'm going to talk about them in three different levels—the most obvious form is basically when we're not mindful. It's just being disconnected from experience. That's the most obvious kind of delusion, and we see that when we wake up from being lost in thought.

The second kind of delusion is more related to our own personal views, opinions, ideas, beliefs, agendas—the conditioning that we've had from our childhood, our family culture, our wider culture. These views come in through our conditioning and shape how we see things.

And this is the second layer of delusion—not that we have views, but that we are unaware that we have views. We take our perspective and we don't even know it's a perspective; we just take it to be reality. This is the second level of delusion. I'll talk about each of these in a little bit more depth.

The third level is different from the second, which we might call personal delusion because it's based on our own personal conditioning—our culture, the family we've been connected with, our school, our own personal experience. This third level of delusion is what I will call human delusion. It's delusion that we all share, the most insidious deep patterns in our minds. We seem to come into the world with these perspectives, and yet they are perspectives, and we can see them as perspectives.

This first kind—not connecting—is basically being lost in thought, not aware of what's happening in the present moment, just disconnected from experience. The moment we can begin to see this, the moment when mindfulness returns, in that moment we can get a sense that mindfulness is back. Also in that moment, because our minds have been functioning, perceiving, knowing—those processes don't stop when we're not mindful, as we know—when mindfulness returns there's a way that we can have a sense, a kind of lingering smell or lingering taste of what that state was like before mindfulness came. Maybe a sense of a fog, or of being sunk underground, or just that feeling of being separated from experience.

And so when mindfulness returns there's an opportunity to notice the difference between non-delusion and delusion in that simple way, in this kind of most obvious way. Every time your mind returns from wandering, that's an opportunity to notice the non-delusion of waking up into mindfulness again. That's probably not complete non-delusion in that moment, but it's in the terrain of that distinction between a mind unaffected by delusion and a mind affected by delusion.

Other forms of this kind of delusion can manifest as sleepiness, dullness, restlessness, heaviness of mind, doubt, a wavering mind. And yet we begin to see that while these states of mind are probably habitually deluded, habitually non-mindful, they're not inherently deluded, not inherently non-mindful. It is possible to be aware of sleepiness. It's possible to be aware of spacing out. You might think that spacing out is almost the definition of delusion, and yet I began to be curious about the state itself.

I noticed one day while I was having breakfast that the mind kept spacing out. While it was spaced out, I wasn't particularly mindful for most of the time, but then I'd wake up, notice that mindfulness was back. And I had an agenda at that point, because I was eating breakfast. My mind said, well, what I'm supposed to do here is pay attention to the process of eating. And so I turned my attention to noticing all the sensations of eating, and then the mind would space out again. This happened a bunch of times.

Finally, I decided to kind of just check out. This is a tool we've talked about in some of the meetings I've had with you—just widening the attention. It's like, well, what's going on here? Maybe the mindfulness can follow or know what's happening as the mind is spacing out. Instead of trying to hold on to paying attention to something in particular, I explored the possibility of allowing the mind to let go. And it kind of felt like the mind hovered up above my head and to the right a little bit, just hovering up there. And yet I discovered that it was possible to be aware of that state, that experience of the mind hovering.

In that place I recognized that the mind was resting, that it actually needed rest. This movement to come back to attending to the eating process was making the mind tired. The mind needed some rest and it was going to take its rest whether I gave it permission or not. And so I began to be curious about that and discovered that it is possible to follow the mind into that state, to allow the attention, the mindfulness to broaden and take in: oh, this is what it's like for the mind to do this. In this case what it became was not spacing out and disconnection from experience, but resting—resting and aware.

In this exploration around things that we might think are habitually disconnected, I really want to emphasize what I'm hoping you hear. It's not that when there's a sense of disconnection from experience you should try to connect to something—oh, there's disconnection, let me pick up hearing, or let me pick up body sensation. What about exploring instead: what's this? What's this feeling of disconnection? What's this feeling of sleepiness or low energy or boredom? What's this? And in that we see that we can be connected to states that we habitually think of as non-mindful.

This is exploring that edge of being aware. In a sense, what this does is convert delusion to non-delusion.

This curiosity of "what's this?" allows us to explore that edge of awareness. In that example of spacing out, there was the recognition of a certain quality—almost like the mind looping in itself. That was the delusion. And the resting, while the mind just hung out, didn't have that same looping quality.

The second form of delusion—delusion based on views, agendas, and concepts—is a little more insidious because it can mean that we are aware. It's not that we're not aware, but that what we are unaware of is a filter or a view. We are unaware of the view that's happening.

We take in views from our family, from our experience. We can have perspectives based on our culture, based on our own personal experience, based on an agenda. Even something as simple as an agenda can create a filter where we take in information related to our agenda but do not see information unrelated to it. There are so many different ways this kind of delusion works, and I'm just going to go through a couple to give you some flavor of this.

This one about agendas is kind of fun to explore. Many of you may have heard about the study on selective attention—when you give somebody an agenda, our minds, when they have a task to do, will miss things that are pretty obvious in experience. This is the famous gorilla basketball study. People were shown a video and asked to count the number of times the basketball passed between the players in white shirts. There were people with dark shirts and light shirts, and they were asked to count only the passes between players in white. Most people could do that accurately. And then afterward they were asked, "Did you see the gorilla?" About half the people saw the gorilla or something like it, but half did not.

Now, that itself is not inherently delusion—that's a natural functioning of our mind. It narrows attention to take in something we're oriented towards. We had a task, and we focused on it. And yet some number of people, even when told afterward what had happened, said, "Well, I would have seen that gorilla had it been in the video." Now *that* is delusion. That belief that what we are taking in is an accurate representation of reality. It is not an accurate representation of reality. It is a representation of our views, opinions, agendas, and what's important to us in this moment.

There's a lot of information our minds don't take in, and this is not inherently a bad thing or a problem because essentially there is so much information coming in that it would overwhelm us if our minds didn't filter certain things. And yet what is an issue is our belief that our eyes function like cameras, accurately taking in everything that's happening.

Views are a huge source of this kind of delusion—a huge source of these filters that operate in our experience and have us taking in some information but not other information. We have views about ourselves, views about other people. Essentially these

views can box us in. And we notice when somebody else is doing this to us. "Oh, you're always like that." "No, no, I'm not always like that. I know I'm not like that." But it's harder for us to see when we do it to other people or when we do it to ourselves.

I started reading *Remembrance of Things Past* a few years ago. I didn't finish it, but the first 150 pages had some amazing observations of humanity and the way the mind works. Proust says: "Our social personality is a creation of the mind of others. Even the simple act of what we call seeing a person we know is in part an intellectual one. We fill the physical appearance of the individual we see with all the notions we have about them, and of the total picture about others that we form for ourselves. Those notions certainly occupy the greater part."

This is more true than we know—that when we see somebody, mostly what we are seeing are our views, our opinions, our ideas about them. We have concepts, ideas, views, and opinions about our friends, about our family members. About somebody we do not know, we have views and opinions. You've seen this—views and opinions about how somebody's reaching for a spoon, or the way they put food on their plate. All kinds of things we have views and opinions about. It's rampant.

We form these views and opinions, and we may not even see that we have them. Then we start looking for things that confirm those views and opinions. This is called confirmation bias in modern psychology—we tend to look for information that confirms what we already believe, and we don't recognize, or we actively ignore or discount, information that does not confirm what we believe.

Another one from Proust: "Facts do not find their way into the world in which our beliefs reside. Facts did not produce our beliefs. They do not destroy them. They may inflict on them the most constant refutations without weakening them." We're seeing that these days.

And so we can begin to see how this form of belief, this form of delusion, is not neutral. It creates so much suffering—the way we hold to our views, the way we believe our views to be true. Our views about ourselves, our views about other people, our views about the world, our views about political systems.

It gets more complex in some ways, or layers get added on, because it's not just views about individuals. We also have views about groups of people. When we're relating to people who are similar to us in various ways, we tend to see them through our views of them as individuals, and so there's still those views operating. But when we see people who are a little different from us—perhaps a different race or gender or sexual orienta-

tion or different ability—we don't tend to see them just as an individual. We tend to see them with a whole bunch of baggage about what we see as a category or a group they belong to.

So this is where racism, ageism, sexism, homophobia—all of these are in this terrain of carrying baggage about people with respect to group identities or group connections. This causes so much suffering in our world. Not seeing this baggage. Not knowing that we are carrying along views and seeing, relating to the world through views.

Again, we're probably not going to get rid of views entirely. But what we can begin to do is recognize that views are operating. Views are operating all the time. And this is something we can remind ourselves of.

I was just talking to a dharma friend the other day, and that friend said, "I knew there was a gorilla in the room, but I didn't know what the gorilla was." There was some kind of state of recognizing that something was confusing, but they couldn't quite identify it—"Oh, it's the gorilla in the room." But that person could recognize, they could say, "Yep, there's delusion here. I don't know what it is, I can't name how the delusion is working, but I know there is delusion happening." Knowing there's some kind of view going on that's creating some kind of relationship to experience, but not quite even able to see what that belief or view is. But knowing that it's there. This is a beginning of a way of recognizing delusion is affecting the mind.

Here's a question we can ask ourselves at times. Anytime there is suffering—anytime there's an experience of something feeling just not quite right—there is some kind of delusion at work. There's some kind of view or belief at work. And so it can be useful to just ask yourself that question sometimes: What's being believed?

It won't always pull that delusion or pull that view, pull that belief out of the subconscious mind and reveal it to us. But it can give ourselves the chance to recognize, "Okay, there is some kind of belief happening here," and even that is powerful.

Views about ourselves, views about... At one point I encouraged somebody to notice a very particular strong belief they had about themselves, a strong, conditioned belief. And the person recognized it was strongly believed. In exploring this, noticing it as belief, this person said, "But I can't stop believing it."

So that's another way of noticing how strong delusion can be sometimes—that we can see that there's a belief and that we still believe it. And yet it's helpful in that kind of situation not to try to convince yourself to stop believing it, especially when it's strong in that way. What's useful there is to recognize, "Wow, yeah, there's that belief, and boy, strong believing is happening. That's what's happening right now."

Even that basically opens the mind, because when a belief like that, a strong belief, is operating below the level of our conscious awareness... For myself, I had a strong belief in my unworthiness. Self-hatred was kind of the emotional tone there, a strong belief in my unworthiness. And recognizing it as a belief—sometimes I could recognize it: "Oh, that's that belief." And there are gradations of how much belief there is. We can kind of recognize, "Oh, this is strongly believed," or "not so strongly believed."

We can recognize how strong the belief is around some view that we're holding. And if it's very strong, it's useful just to even recognize, "Okay, strong belief is happening." You don't have to convince yourself to not believe it, but recognize that it is a belief, because that begins to crack. Just recognizing that it's a belief begins to crack the mind's taking it to be truth. It's at least recognizing that it's belief, and that's what's going on in that moment. In that moment, you are aligning yourself with what's actually happening: strong belief, that's what's happening right now. And potentially recognizing, "This is the mind affected by delusion, affected by this belief. This is the mind affected by belief."

The third kind, the most insidious kind of delusion, is what I call human delusion—delusions that we tend to share as human beings. These are basically forms of views, but they're such deeply held views that you could go to any culture in the world and these views are operating. They're kind of independent of culture. They seem to come into being with our birth as human beings, these views—basic distortions of how we meet experience.

These will be familiar to you as I name them, because what we tend to do as human beings is we tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. We tend to take what is unreliable to produce a lasting kind of happiness to be reliable, to produce that lasting happiness. And we tend to take what is not self to be self.

These three root misperceptions are also an understanding of what is seen through when the mind becomes free. Essentially, this is the deepest delusion in our minds: that we tend to take what's impermanent to be permanent, what's unreliable to be reliable, what's not self to be self.

In this kind of situation, again, it may not be that we're not aware, but we are seeing experience through this very deeply conditioned perspective. Sayadaw U Tejaniya said delusion—this kind of delusion—doesn't mask the object. It masks the nature, the true nature of the object.

And so we see our friends and we see ourselves, and we, in some interesting way that I spoke of this morning, tend to take ourselves to be immortal. We may know that we're going to die, but not today. Or we may understand at some level that we're going to die, but we don't wake up in the morning and recognize, "This day—this day may be my last day on the planet."

In terms of exploring these three areas, there's a lot that can be said. I recently gave a series of, I think, eight dharma talks on delusion, so this is just the top layer. But I want to offer a few reflections on how we can begin to see this.

The Buddha encouraged us in this terrain to cultivate the perception of impermanence, to cultivate the perception of unreliability, and to cultivate the perception of not-self. In my understanding, this means to look at, recognize, and orient towards noticing that things are impermanent, that there is unreliability, that things are often uncontrollable—not me or mine or I to control.

With respect to taking what's impermanent to be permanent, at times you might notice that something in your experience feels solid. At one point in my practice, I was just noticing where the mind was creating solidity and got curious about that. A solid experience of a block of pain, for instance—what's that like? And then exploring it, being curious about it, I began to see that it's not solid but kind of a rapidly changing, dynamic experience. Looking at what we are taking to be solid, we can notice its changing nature.

This may happen over a longer stretch of time. For instance, one day I was a veggie chopper in the kitchen here. You walk in and there are all kinds of vegetables, often in buckets, and the cook will put a new bucket out. Well, one day, the cook—I don't know, the cook seemed like he had a kind of sense of humor—because what we had on the table was all of the chard in a huge mound. To me, it was like four feet high. It was this huge mound of chard. I felt like I couldn't see the person on the other side of the chopping table.

My mind created solidity around that mound of chard, and it said something like, "We are never going to finish that in the hour." And yet I just started working. I noticed that sense of "it's a thing."

And then I started chopping and chopping and chopping. About half an hour later, I looked up and the mound was gone. It startled me. It had simply disappeared. So that's the kind of exploration we can make—noticing that things change. We can let that be a highlight for us: notice change. And notice what we are taking to be reliable, what we

are looking for to be reliable. Sometimes it's something simple or small, like getting my seat in the dining hall or having two pieces of chocolate. What is it that our mind is grasping for? What are we looking at thinking, "Oh, that's going to make me happy"?

The Buddha offered a very simple instruction around this. He said, yes, it's a form of happiness when you get what you want. Notice how long it lasts. So this teaching on unreliability is directly connected to impermanence, to the impermanent nature of experience. Our mind imputes a more lasting kind of reliability to something that is fleeting. And so the Buddha encouraged us to notice.

Okay, you have a bit of happiness from having some chocolate. How long does it last? What happens? Chocolate is actually pretty interesting. I was surprised when I investigated this. I put the chocolate in my mouth and it was pretty happy, pretty good. Lots of sense pleasure happening with the chocolate. And then the chocolate was gone. But I just kept investigating, and there was a lingering happiness. It probably lasted about a minute. That's a lot longer than I thought it would last, but it did fade. So noticing—how long does it last?

The mind sometimes, especially deeper into retreat, may find itself desperately searching for something reliable in experience. The more we see just how fleeting experience is, how rapidly things are falling apart, some part of our mind rebels. This is some of the deeper undoing, the deeper noticing of how strongly our mind rebels against this truth of impermanence, of unreliability. As we see experience arise and vanish, arise and vanish, at certain points that can be delightful, but sometimes it's like there's nowhere to land. Where do I land here? And the mind desperately starts searching for somewhere to land.

This is a manifestation of that delusion—the belief that there's got to be someplace to land for happiness. There must be. Our minds believe at some very deep level that there must be someplace to land for happiness, where I can rest. And so you might notice the mind searching, looking for something to land on. Can't I find something? That's a form of delusion at work, that belief that there would be someplace to land. And again, you don't have to stop that from happening, but recognize it. Searching. Searching for somewhere to land. This is delusion affecting the mind, believing there's someplace to find happiness.

At one point on a long retreat at the Forest Refuge, I noticed this process happen repeatedly. There would be a kind of space where the mind was searching for someplace to settle. And sometimes the mind would actually create a state of ease or peace and land there for a little while. Oh, I can rest here for a while. Then that would fall apart.

And there would be a kind of an even deeper peace that happened as the mind could be okay with even the falling apart of peace. But then the mind picked up the search again. "Oh, but there must be someplace, someplace to land." And by this time, I had watched this happen over and over again, and I just felt very tender towards this pattern. It's like, "Oh, search away. You're not going to find anything. But I'll be with you while you look. Okay."

It's like some part of our system just has to do that. We cannot tell ourselves to not be deluded. But we can begin to recognize this. "Searching, okay, searching is happening."

And then seeing what's not-self as self. This is a big topic, and we might do a whole talk about not-self and noticing the sense of self at some point. But this is actually the key piece I just want to point to here. Along with all of these other things that we've been pointing to—whatever experience is arising, notice it.

There's a famous quote by Zen Master Dōgen. He said, "To study the way is to study the self." I would say, to study the way, to study our minds and hearts, is to study this sense of self. "To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be awakened by the ten thousand things."

And so our practice isn't somehow trying to find our way to not-self, but is to study—to get to know all the ways that we take up self. So notice: When does it feel like I'm a me? When does it feel like that? And there are some really obvious times. I wouldn't so much encourage trying to find it everywhere—the sense of self is probably operating a lot and very continuously below the level of our conscious awareness. I'm pointing more to those times when it just kind of stares us in the face. Sense of self-righteousness. "I'm right!" Oh, there's a good one. There's Andrea. Okay.

So noticing that—what does that feel like? At one point, I was noticing a sense of "I'm right, I'm smart, I know my stuff, and that person is wrong, and they shouldn't be doing that." So a lot of selfing there. And then something else happened in the situation. I was doing walking meditation and noticing very much this congealing of a sense of me—this analytical, argumentative, "I'm right" Andrea was really present.

And then a big truck drove up. And my mind just... I mean, it was amazing, this truck. And the whole forty-year-old Andrea just vanished, and it was replaced by something that felt more like a two-year-old. "Wow, it's a truck!" Bang, crash, boom, squeal of the brakes. There was this sense of delight of a two-year-old. Immediately this shift—seeing how a sense of self turns on a dime. And what I took to be me is now gone. Something else is there.

So noticing that, noticing how these interplay, how they come into being. Studying the sense of self. And then at times you may notice a weakening of that. At times you might notice just taking in experience. Not me, not mine, not who I am.

And in terms of cultivating the perception of not-self, which the Buddha encouraged us also to do at times, I think that this is the avenue that he pointed to—using this reflection. This sense of self that's happening is a conditioned phenomenon.

It isn't me. It's not me. It's not who I am.

The Buddha used that phrase extensively. One understands one's experience: *This is not me. This is not who I am. This is not myself.* Using that as a kind of reflection, we begin to let wisdom infiltrate our habit of the sense of self.

And so delusion—seeing delusion. At times we see through something. Insight arises, and our minds open into clearly recognizing the unreliable nature of experience. At one point I was seeing everything as just an arising, and I understood: this is unreliable, this is unreliable. And the mind was so happy in knowing that. It was not experiencing suffering; it was knowing the unreliability and not picking up experience, knowing that unreliability. It was not clinging to experience.

I thought I'd figured it out.

Conditions change. The next day, what I was experiencing was picking it up. And that's what I got to be with. It's not a mistake and it's not a problem.

Sometimes we see through—it's like the veils part and we see through some delusion. *Oh, things are unreliable. There's no point in picking anything up.* And then habit of mind returns. Conditions change. The mind picks things up, holds on to them, and—oh, this hurts, it suffers.

It's not that we've somehow lost that understanding. In fact, the next day when I was picking up experience, clinging to experience, it was much clearer to me that this was the mind doing it. That this was a habit of mind. This was delusion at work—this picking up of unreliable experience and clinging to it.

Having seen it clearly not picking it up, when the pattern came back, that's a way we can now really begin to recognize: *Ah, this is the mind affected by delusion.* Before the delusion falls away—for moments, maybe for a minute or a few seconds or perhaps a few hours—a delusion might fall away. Having seen that difference, the mind unaffected by delusion, the mind affected by delusion becomes much clearer.

And so this is the opportunity—not to beat yourself up for not seeing it the way you saw it yesterday, but rather: *Oh, here's the opportunity to see how delusion works. This is delusion at work.*

And so again, the path is mindfulness of what's arising.

CHAPTER 12

The Five Aggregates

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā) as presented in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness. She begins by contextualizing this teaching within the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), explaining how contemplating experience through the lens of the aggregates helps us understand the truth of our existence.*
>
> *Fella systematically examines each aggregate—form (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhārā), and consciousness (viññāṇa)—using accessible examples like drinking tea to illustrate how these processes interweave in every moment of experience. She draws on Bhikkhu Anālayo's framework showing how we locate self in each aggregate: body as where I am, feeling as how I am, perception as what I recognize, mental formations as why I act, and consciousness as the medium of experience.*
>
> *The talk pays particular attention to mental formations as the constructive engine that shapes all other aggregates, and how perception creates delusion when we mistake our mental constructs for reality. Fella shares personal anecdotes, including mistaking bat sounds for pigs in Burma, to demonstrate how the mind constructs experience. She concludes with the Buddha's teaching that our lack of complete control over the aggregates serves as evidence for not-self (anattā), pointing toward liberation from clinging and the suffering it creates.*

This morning Jill responded to a question around the fourth foundation of mindfulness and explored how that foundation can really be seen as seeing experience. The foundation is mindfulness of dhammas, and as she pointed out, the word *dhammas* has multiple layers of meaning. It can mean simply experience or phenomenon, and it can mean the Buddhist teaching, the Dharma. It can also mean truth. And so in this exploration of the fourth foundation, we're exploring the phenomenon of our experience, what arises through the perspective of the lens of the Dharma, to begin to understand the truth of our experience.

As she said this morning, we don't have to wait to do the fourth foundation until we've mastered the first three. They're all at play in our practice pretty much right from the beginning. We sit down and meditate and try to stay with the breath, and the mind goes off into wanting or thinking. Right there, in observing wanting, observing aversion, we are exploring this fourth foundation—the hindrances—noticing how they

come to be, noticing the conditions that put them together, noticing what makes them fall apart. This is an aspect of the fourth foundation. We can open to and begin to explore our experience from these Dharma perspectives.

Tonight I'd like to explore one of those perspectives offered in the fourth foundation: the five aggregates. The word "aggregate" itself, in English at least, is not a very friendly word. It doesn't have a very experiential quality; it sounds rather technical. The word in Pali, *khandha* (or *skandha* in Sanskrit), has a much more ordinary sound, apparently. My understanding is that word basically means something like heap, bundle, group, or collection.

And yet this word "aggregate" is actually, as I reflect on it, a pretty good translation. These *khandhas* are described both as the *what* of our experience—what's happening in our experience—and as the *processes* that happen in our experience. They're both nouns and verbs in a way. The word "aggregate" can function similarly: as a noun, it means stuff made of other stuff, which is a pretty good translation for what we're talking about here.

These aggregates of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—these five aspects or areas of experience—are how the Buddha divided up our human experience, pointing out that all experience falls into one of these heaps or collections or bundles. And yet they're also understood to be processes: the process of body, the process of perception, the process of feeling, the process of knowing. The word can also be used as a verb—we aggregate, we pull things together.

Let me describe these five aggregates briefly. Form refers to our bodily experience, the physical aspect. The other four aggregates are mental processes, mental experience. Feeling is this recognition of experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—or as the Buddha says, the process responsible for that recognition. Perception is the process of recognizing what's happening in experience, related to memory, learning, and understanding what objects and experiences are. Mental formations encompass a whole range of emotions, thoughts, and mind states that have a volitional component—the volitional aspect of our experience. And then consciousness: the simple knowing aspect of our experience.

We can think of them as the building blocks of our experience. Any experience we have, we can begin to recognize as these processes or experiences unfolding, intertwined.

Having a cup of tea, for instance: there's the bodily experience of the warmth, the moisture on the tongue, the taste—perhaps sweetness if you put sweetener in, or bitterness, whatever the flavors are. That's all part of form. Then the feeling tone: some aspects might be pleasant if the warmth is soothing, or unpleasant if it's too hot and burns your tongue. The taste itself might have pleasant and unpleasant aspects. Then perception: the recognition of chamomile tea, or Earl Grey, whatever it is—the acknowledgment of what this is. And then mental formations. We have mental formations about everything.

We'll either like this tea or we won't like it, or it will remind us of some other cup of tea we had when we were sitting in some cafe in India one time, comparing and contrasting that tea to this. Our minds will do this forming, this mental formation. Or perhaps the mind is simply present and mindful for this experience—mindfulness itself being a mental formation. And then there's the knowing. We are aware. There's this basic quality that we know this experience.

So these processes make up our experience. Any aspect of our experience can be found in these five aggregates, in these categories. This is simply the way the Buddha divvied up experience. It's perhaps a different divvying than we might expect. And he divvied it up in different ways—he also divvied it up in terms of the six sense bases, a different kind of dividing of the human pie of experience. So there's not just one way, but he pointed to this particular way for certain reasons, and I'll get to that in just a minute.

First I wanted to read to you the section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta where it gives the instructions about this foundation. It's actually pretty simple. I'm going to read this translation using different words for *dhammas* so that it will give you different flavors. Sometimes I'll use the word *dhammas*, sometimes phenomena, sometimes experience.

So these are the instructions: A practitioner abides contemplating experience as experience in terms of the five aggregates affected by clinging. And how does one abide contemplating experience as experience in terms of the five aggregates affected by clinging? Here one understands: Such is material form. Such is its arising. Such is its disappearance. Such is feeling. Such is its arising. Such is its disappearance. Such is perception. Such is its arising. Such is its disappearance. Such are mental formations, such are their arising, such their disappearance. Such is consciousness, such is its arising, such is its disappearance.

A practitioner abides contemplating phenomena as phenomena in terms of the five aggregates affected by clinging. A practitioner abides contemplating *dhammas* as *dhammas* in terms of the five aggregates affected by clinging.

I like this translation—contemplating our experience in terms of the five aggregates. Beginning to understand our experience from this perspective.

Initially this can take some navigation or understanding, looking at experience and recognizing, "Oh, this experience—that's body. This experience—that's feeling." Sayadaw U Tejaniya points to the study of the five aggregates as being kind of like learning to read. As we learn to read at the beginning, we learn to recognize the shapes of letters. We have to recognize the shapes of letters and associate those with sounds. At first we need to learn the letters: this shape is a C, this shape is A, this shape is T. Then we learn the sounds associated with them, and we learn that it becomes "cat." But once we've learned this, once we've begun to understand how to read, we don't have to do that breakdown anymore. We just see the word and it's "cat." We understand it fully just from the contact with it.

He says it's kind of like that with the study of the five aggregates. Initially we may need to actually spend some time with each of these aggregates, getting familiar with them, like we get familiar with the alphabet. And then after some time we don't have to do that work anymore.

So this section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—the instructions are actually pretty simple. Notice each aspect of experience. What kind of experience? Notice such as feeling. Notice its arising and disappearance.

And so that's the main emphasis I'd like to look at tonight—just exploring how to begin to recognize these aggregates in our experience.

But why? Why recognize these in particular?

The emphasis partly in this exploration is on clinging, to begin to recognize how we tend to cling, how we congeal around these aspects or areas of experience. There's a way in which the Buddha pointed to these five aggregates of clinging as being central to the process of selfing. This is another aspect of the question Jill addressed this morning, looking at the sense of self and how to begin to explore it. Well, this is the main tool that the Buddha used for exploring the sense of self—exploring how the sense of self is created.

In many places where the Buddha talked about this selfing process, he used these five aggregates as a way to help us see through it as just another process in our mind. Again, as Jill said this morning, it's not that we're trying to stop this process of selfing, but we're trying to see it for what it is, which is a process of mind constructing this

sense. Seeing the process at work begins to weaken the clinging and weaken the ways in which that process leads to suffering. And so this exploration of the five aggregates is one of the ways in which we can begin to explore this teaching of not-self.

Bhikkhu Anālayo has a simple way of describing how a sense of self is associated with each of these aggregates. I like this because I think we can all resonate with it as a way of locating a sense of self with each one. He says body or form, this experience of body—the sense of self tends to locate it as *where* I am. The body is where I am, kind of located in the body perhaps. Feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—is *how* I am. Perception is *what* I'm recognizing in the world. Mental formations are *why* I'm doing things, that sense of volition or agency, why I am acting. And consciousness, the knowing aggregate, is *whereby* I am experiencing—the medium through which experience is recognized or known.

And so to begin to get familiar with these aggregates can help us see our experience in a different way. Not as I or me or mine, but as just these processes of body and mind interweaving, interconnecting, influencing each other. No need actually to have an ongoing I controlling anything. It's doing itself; these processes are doing themselves.

While the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta doesn't point explicitly to this teaching on the connection to the selfing process, there are many other teachings in the suttas that point to this. And if I have a chance tonight, if I have some time, I may talk about one of those, but we'll see how far we get here.

So, body, form. We've talked about this quite a bit already, so I won't spend too much time here. Brian spoke about it last night in mindfulness of the body. Really, I think this foundation, this aggregate, is looking at the physicality of our experience in its basic form. Just beginning to recognize the language of the body. How does the body communicate with the mind? It communicates through the touch sense, through these elemental experiences of feeling tingling, pulsing, vibration, hardness, softness, moisture, dryness, heat, coolness—these areas of physical experience that come through our touch sense.

And then through the other physical senses: we experience through the eye, for instance—we look out into the world and we think we're seeing people and walls and windows and zabutons and zafus and chairs and lights. But all of that is actually in the perception aggregate. What comes into the eye, what the bare experience in the eye is, is form and color. That's the basic experience in the eye. In taste, the basic experience—we bite into pizza, we taste pizza—but we're tasting salty, sweet, bitter, savory, sour. That's it. That's the language of the tongue. Pizza, cheese—those are concepts, ideas, learned through time, learned from exposure.

So beginning to recognize what our actual bodily experience is. This helps us, as I think I said—it seems ages ago now—when I gave an instruction on the body in the morning. I talked about how as we begin to recognize the language of the body, we begin to tease apart these processes, to recognize that in fact there is a difference between the taste of salty and the idea of pizza, the pleasantness or unpleasantness of that, and all of the ideas and associations that we have about it. We begin to recognize that there are processes going on in the mind. And so beginning to get familiar with this language of the body helps us tease apart these five different processes, these five aggregates.

I think one of the key ways that we identify with the body, in addition to this sense of locating ourselves in the body—I think that's a pretty common feeling, though it may be cultural to some extent, this sense of "I'm in the body"—because the Buddha also talked about different ways that this could be experienced. He said it might be that the body is in me. Or, I am part of the body.

Or the body is mine. That's another one that's very familiar—this body is mine. We carry it around with us like it's something we own, as opposed to being a process that's integral to our being. The way Brian spoke about it last night was so beautiful, this very integral nature of embodiment, how experience comes through this body. And somehow we feel like we own it. So we can begin to recognize the ways in which we congeal a sense of self around each of these areas.

Then feeling, this second aggregate, we've also spent some time on already. Feeling is understood to be a mental experience—it's a mental aggregate. Now this may be fairly easy to understand in terms of mind states. The feeling of happiness is pleasant; we understand that to be a mental pleasure. The feeling of anger is often unpleasant. But even physical sensations—feeling associated with the physical body, feeling associated with sight, with sound, with smell, with taste, with touch—is also understood to be mental.

I want to give you a bit of an understanding of this. I think we all know this to some extent because we do recognize how a state of mind can influence what we feel. Someone touches us by surprise, and perhaps if the mind is in a certain state, that would be experienced as unpleasant. If the mind is in a different state, it might be experienced as neutral or even pleasant. With mindfulness too, as the mind becomes really present for experience, sometimes we're surprised at just how beautiful things are, how pleasant some experiences can be—things you wouldn't expect to be beautiful or pleasant.

At Spirit Rock one time, I was sitting one of the long retreats and doing walking meditation in the upper walking room. The bell had rung, and I turned to leave the hall. My gaze just glanced out the door, and my perception was that there was a picture hanging on the wall just outside. That picture seemed very beautiful to me—really simple but incredibly beautiful. Just these three squares, offset in a way that created a feeling of great pleasure and beauty.

Now, I'm fairly nearsighted, so I was curious to look more closely at this beautiful painting. I walked closer and discovered it was a fire extinguisher. Not something I would have normally thought of as pleasant or beautiful.

This points to how feeling tone is constructed by the mind. The feeling tone, the process of feeling—and so the feeling tone itself is what we would call the "what" of our experience, that things are pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. Yet this process of feeling, the verb side of this, is that our feeling is conditioned. The conditions of our mind—views, opinions, ideas, attitudes, state of mind, whether we're in a state of concentration and equanimity, of mindfulness, or a state of aversion—all of this influences how the process of feeling unfolds. The mental climate of our mind affects feeling.

We can also start to see—and this is a hugely important area in our practice—just how our reactivity operates when we are not mindful, when we are not clearly knowing, "Oh, this is a pleasant experience. This is an unpleasant experience." How the mind will tend, based on its habits, to spring into wanting to create conditions for us to have the pleasant, to get rid of the unpleasant. The seeing of feeling tone helps create the conditions for us to recognize that tendency to leap off of feeling tone into reactivity.

Play with this in your sittings at times. It is really helpful. Just begin to track a little bit—again, not all the time. I don't want this to be a big project. But from time to time, especially if you find your mind in a state of reactivity, it can be really useful to recognize or reflect on what the mind is actually reacting to. What is unpleasant in my experience that the mind is moving into this? What's pleasant in my experience that the mind wants to hold on to? Sometimes we can be surprised.

What we think of as what we're reacting to and moving towards or moving away from—it may not be what we think. And so it can be a very interesting exploration.

I think a sense of self, in addition to this sense of feeling being how I am, there's this strong sense of self motivated around feeling—to maximize pleasant and minimize unpleasant. Kind of an underground sense of self that feels like it cannot be okay unless it's in control of maximizing pleasant and minimizing unpleasant at a very deep level.

And then the process of perception. Perception being that aspect of experience where we recognize what's out there. This is a really useful function of our minds—thank goodness for perception. If I had to come in here every time and figure out that this was people and chairs and floor and stairs and wall, it would be exhausting. And so this is a useful kind of shortcut in our minds to quickly recognize what's happening and recognize how to navigate things.

The way this works is basically our minds contact some experience—a sound, for instance—and then the mind kind of goes into its memory banks and looks for the closest match. What's the closest match I can find to that sound? And then perceives or recognizes it as that. Many times perhaps during the day you have heard the sound of a car going down Pleasant Street. That sound is one thing. And then the mind will label it or recognize it as car, perhaps, or truck, maybe. So that is perception at work.

I think in the realm of hearing is one of the easiest places to begin to recognize this process, because it's fairly easy to see or recognize the distinction between the vibration in the eardrum, that thing coming into the ear, and the mind in some fashion identifying it. That identification of the experience might come as labeling it, if we're talking to ourselves—oh, car or truck. Or it might come as an image, or even as a feeling. It can come as a feeling in the body. Maybe, for instance, as if you're riding in a truck, something like that. That could be a way that perception would work.

So this process of perception does a pretty good job for us, but it is not perfect by any means. It easily makes mistakes. I'll give an example from my own experience, an example that uses sound. I was in Burma, practicing in a monastery. I was meditating in my room primarily, and my dorm was in a place near the wall of the monastery. The village sounds came over the wall fairly easily—the loudspeakers, the sounds of the farms, and all the things that were going on. So there was a lot of noise.

At a certain point each day, I began noticing a squealing sound, and my mind perceived it as pig. That squealing—I mean, I had heard pigs squeal, and that's the closest thing my mind came up with. Okay, it's a pig squealing. But my mind didn't quite stop there. It also added a little bit more, because it sounded to me like this was a distressed squealing. And so I kind of created—this image appeared in my mind—that what was on the other side of that wall was the butcher shop of the village, and these were pigs being slaughtered for the next day. That was what my mind created.

I knew that was a creation. I knew that I did not know if that's what was going on. But still, that's what was coming up. And so I just noticed it and I felt compassion for the pigs.

Then one day I was doing some walking meditation instead of sitting meditation. There were bats flying in the air, coming really close to me, and they were squealing. This was what I had been hearing. And of course, the compassion vanished. There was no need for that compassion. There were no pigs being slaughtered. I knew—I knew that I did not know there were pigs being slaughtered. I knew that was a construction of the mind, a mental formation. But what I was not prepared for was that it was not a pig. That it was a bat.

That was a kind of real eye-opener—just how much was constructed out of that idea that it was a pig.

And so we can see that we create the idea. I heard the sound, I believed it was a pig, and that itself was a place where the mind slips into delusion. Now, the misperception of it as a pig is not necessarily delusion. That's just the mind making something like the closest match it had. I don't think I'd ever known that bats squealed before, so that was the closest match it had. But believing that what I was hearing was a pig—that is delusion. Believing that my mind was accurately experiencing and knowing reality through its perceptions, that's a form of delusion.

This is one of the main places that delusion enters in our mind: taking our perceptions to be reality, to be what's out there. We take our experience as if our eyes are cameras, seeing actually everything, every little bit of information that's out there. But that's not the way our minds work. We see some things, we don't see other things. Our minds perceive things and not other things. This is a really important area of recognition.

To come back to feeling tone, because there's a real blend here, an interweaving between perception and feeling tone: that example around believing it was a pig being slaughtered, the feeling of the ache in the heart around a being being killed—all of that was constructed by the mind. When we are responding to something and take it to be pleasant or unpleasant, it can be really interesting to check in. Is it actually a sound or a sight or a smell that we're taking to be pleasant or unpleasant? Or a touch? Or is it an idea that is happening in association with that sound or sight?

Very often our pleasant and unpleasant experience is connected more to the perception and associated ideas, mental formations around that perception, than it is to the actual sense contact. This for me has been a really fascinating exploration—useful and eye-opening to see what is actually being reacted to. The vast majority of the time, it is something my mind makes up. It can be a pretty close match to reality, but it is not what's actually out there that the mind is reacting to. It is something that the mind has constructed. This is a really useful understanding.

And so a sense of self around this: "I am recognizing what I am recognizing." I think the sense of self here is, "And I'm doing it accurately. I'm seeing things correctly." This is a piece of that selfing there.

Mental formations is a huge aggregate. It includes all of our mental activities that have a kind of volitional or intentional effect. This includes all of our emotions. It includes our mind states like calm, concentration, mindfulness, boredom, confusion. It includes the emotions of anger, patience, impatience, frustration, irritation. It includes bliss, joy, calm, pride, conceit. Thoughts are in this realm of mental formations. Beliefs, agendas, views—also mental formations. It's a lot of what we observe in our minds.

So that's kind of the "what" of our experience, but in this realm of mental formation it's really helpful to recognize the process nature of mental formations—even more so than some of the others, in a way. Not only are mental formations formed, they are formed. We see that, we recognize that anger, for instance, comes into being in dependence on conditions. It's shaped by conditions, by history, by our state of mind in the moment, by something that's being met in our senses. It's shaped in that way. It comes together based on conditions.

But mental formations also have this nature: not only are they formed, they form. They construct. This is the process of mental formations.

mental formations in the suttas that points to this. I'm going to read this just as it is here, and then I'll talk about it a little bit.

"Why are they called volitional formations? They construct the conditioned, therefore they're called volitional formations."

Now, there's a note here that this doesn't translate into English very well, because in the Pali, the word for volitional formation, the word for construct, and the word for conditioned or constructed are all based on the same word. So you might say something like, "Why are they called volitional formations? Because they form things that are formed." That would be kind of what it sounds like in the Pali.

But they construct the conditioned—therefore they're called volitional formations. And what is the conditioned that they construct? They construct conditioned form as form. They construct conditioned feeling as feeling. They construct conditioned perception as perception. They construct conditioned formations as formations. They construct conditioned consciousness as consciousness.

This is the engine. This is how the aggregates tumble on. This process of mental formation is constructing them, continuously constructing feeling, perception, knowing, form, and mental formations.

For example, with anger as a formation: the volitional formation of anger affects our body. It can be experienced as pressure and heat internally. It can affect the face—we may have a scowl or distorted muscles in our face when we're angry. This is how anger shapes or constructs the body in some ways. It tends to construct feeling as unpleasant when we're angry; things tend to be unpleasant. It tends to construct our perceptions in terms of that anger, so we perceive things through that lens—perceiving things in ways that justify our feeling that anger. Anger tends to construct more anger. And our consciousness is affected and directed by this filter.

I talked about this in the delusion talk—how when we have a filter, our consciousness will land on certain things and not others. So it shapes what we know. Again, it's not that we are taking all experience in; what we know is shaped by our mind state.

This points to the power of our minds to construct our experience. This is a really important exploration: looking at how experience is affected by our minds. What is the state of this mind having this experience?

Something like anger potentially has more obvious ways in which it affects our aggregates. Other mental formations are a little less obvious, perhaps, but still have incredible power to shape our minds. Views and beliefs are very powerful mental formations, often below the level of our conscious awareness.

In this country, in this culture, we tend to have this belief that America is the land of opportunity—that anyone who works hard enough can achieve their dream. This belief pervading our culture creates a kind of blindness on the part of the dominant culture, a failure to see how the power structures, the institutions, the organizations support people with white skin and not so much people with darker skin tone. This not-seeing—essentially the blindness of white privilege—views shape our minds in this way. Not seeing that the whole structure of how institutions are put together creates an inherent imbalance.

So much suffering comes from these kinds of views and beliefs when they are not seen as views and beliefs—basically just taken to be true. "America is a land of opportunity. If you're not achieving your dream, you're not working hard enough." That can be the belief there.

So a lot of suffering comes in this terrain of mental formations. And essentially what we're doing in our practice is exploring how to shape wholesome mental formations—bringing in mindfulness and concentration, peace and patience and equanimity. This has a transformative effect on our minds, and it begins to reveal the way this all works.

Then there is the aggregate of consciousness, of knowing. This is the bare experience of knowing. Every single moment of experience, whether we're mindful or not, there is a knowing. I think I mentioned at one point that we can walk down the street, completely lost in thought, and yet we're still not walking into trees and falling off the edge of the road. Something is knowing where we are, what we're doing. So whether we're mindful or not, this knowing is functioning—this simple, very simple aspect of every contact with the sense base.

There's the eye, and there's form and sight, and then there's the knowing of that. There's the ear and sound and the contact, and there's the knowing, the consciousness. Each sense base has this consciousness aspect to it: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, mind consciousness.

Every experience, whatever experience there is—a sound—there's the sound and the knowing of it. There's the sight and the knowing of it. There's a mind state and the knowing of it. And it's possible in mindfulness for mindfulness to recognize this knowing side of the experience. We tend to gravitate, especially before we start looking at our minds, toward the object, toward what is known. That seems to be the way our minds are basically oriented. And yet we can know the knowing itself. We can be aware of the knowing itself. It's possible to distinguish between sight, the seeing, the object of sight, and the knowing of it; the sound and the knowing of it.

One of the places this became most obvious to me, one of the early places I could really begin to see this distinction and recognize that the mind was actually landing on the knowing side of the equation—I was sitting one time and having a real unpleasant experience, an unpleasant physical sensation, a lot of strong bodily energy. There was some aversion there. So there was the aversion to the physical sensation, and I was recognizing the aversion and noticing the unpleasantness. Noticing the unpleasantness of the unpleasant sensation, and noticing the unpleasantness of the aversion—both of them.

And then at some point the mind kind of got interested and actually shifted its orientation. I don't know if I did this intentionally or not, but the mind began recognizing, "Oh, aversion is known. Aversion is known." And with that, the mind kind of settled back. It was more interested in the knowing of the aversion. The feeling tone—the thing

that was so clear to me in that moment—was that the feeling tone was neutral. The entire experience felt completely different because it was no longer unpleasant. The mind was interested in knowing. Aversion is known. Wow, knowing is happening. And when it was paying attention to the knowing, the feeling tone of the knowing was neutral.

So sometimes we can be curious about the knowing. I invite you at times to explore experience in this way. Seeing is known. Hearing is known. Frustration is known. Just see what happens in your experience with that.

This last little piece I'm going to drop in as a forward pointer—not so much something I'm going to go into right now, but probably in a week or so, the next time I get to give a talk, I'll explore this in a bit more depth. This is an exploration of how we can begin to understand these processes as not-self. It uses something that we can actually really recognize in our experience.

So I'll read this to you. This is the Buddha speaking: "Form is not self. If form were self, this form would not lead to affliction. And it would be possible to have it of form: 'May my form be thus. May my form not be thus.'"

But because form is not self, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of form: "May my form be thus. May my form not be thus."

Wouldn't that be nice? "May my face be thus. May my age spots be thus. May my arthritis be thus." Wouldn't that be nice?

And the Buddha points to this as evidence for not-self—this lack of control, that we cannot say, we do not have agency over, we do not have complete agency over our five aggregates.

I can have some agency. I think this is where we get confused. I can say, "I'm going to move my hands like this," and I can do that. But that's a very limited aspect of control. And so the Buddha is pointing to this—that we do not have control—as being a pointer to, or evidence for, not-self.

And so with mental formations, to get specific here: wouldn't it be nice? The Buddha says, "Concentration is not self." I'm putting concentration in where mental formations is what's used, but this will give you the flavor. "Concentration is not self. If concentration were self, it would be possible to have it of concentration: 'May my concentration be thus. May my concentration not be thus.'"

Wouldn't that be nice?

With respect to all the aggregates, the Buddha points to the fact that they are not inherently controllable, and therefore that is evidence for not-self.

And so this is a piece of the exploration—recognizing it's not a mistake when we can't control our minds. It's not a mistake. It's the nature of the mind.

So let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 13

Wisdom at Work

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella responds to a practitioner's question about the nature of wisdom (paññā) in Buddhist practice. Drawing from her training with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, she presents wisdom not as some distant, grand achievement, but as an active mental process that can be observed working in our minds in subtle and profound ways.*
>
> *Fella outlines the classical Buddhist framework of wisdom: the Four Noble Truths as orientation, understanding skillful and unskillful mental states, and recognizing causes and conditions (paṭicca samuppāda). She explains the three levels of wisdom development—sutamayā paññā (wisdom from hearing), cintāmayā paññā (wisdom from reflection), and bhāvanāmayā paññā (wisdom from direct meditative insight)—showing how practitioners progress from intellectual understanding to embodied realization.*
>
> *Through personal anecdotes, including experiences of thoughts bursting like bubbles and anger simply not arising, Fella illustrates how wisdom operates moment to moment. She references the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's instructions on knowing experience as experience—breathing, feeling, mental states—as wisdom already at work. The talk illuminates how even small recognitions, like seeing a thought as just a thought, represent wisdom functioning in the mind, gradually conditioning it toward freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion.*

Sometimes it seems very hard to improve on the silence.

This morning I was looking through the questions in the bowl, and one of those questions struck me. My talk is something of a response to a question about what wisdom is—what is the nature of wisdom?

We can have knowledge and wisdom about many things, and yet the wisdom that the Buddha offered is fairly specific. It's not the wisdom about everything we could possibly know—about how to cook or drive a car or program a computer. It's the wisdom about understanding suffering, understanding how our minds are caught, how we suffer, why we suffer. Ultimately, this wisdom that the Buddha offers becomes not just something that we learn or hear about, but actually becomes understood in our system. And that wisdom is what frees us. Wisdom in understanding what suffering is, how it functions—that understanding allows the suffering to release.

My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses this word wisdom more than just about any other teacher I had practiced with. He uses it as an activity. He speaks about wisdom doing things: wisdom acts, wisdom understands this. And it is an activity. In the terrain of the five aggregates, it's in the terrain of mental formation. It's an activity of mind. Much as other mental formations, other activities of mind, impel us in particular directions—anger impels us in particular directions, confusion impels us in particular directions—there's an activity that we can see. We can see these forces arising in the mind, creating and shaping our minds, impelling action that follows from those activities. Love is an activity of mind that shapes our mind. And so is wisdom.

When I heard Sayadaw U Tejaniya talking about this word, using this word, initially I thought of it as something that was out there—some big grand thing—and I was sure I would know it when it hit. But in my own exploration of this, I've seen that wisdom actually shows up in some small ways that we might not even consciously notice unless it's kind of pointed out to us. And so my understanding of wisdom began to be more of a process at work in the mind. Just as other mental formations are sometimes weaker or stronger, so too wisdom is sometimes functioning in very small, almost imperceptible ways, and sometimes in very obvious ways.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya also says that the purpose of our practice, the whole motivation, the whole aim or direction of our practice, is to cultivate this wisdom—this wisdom that frees the mind from greed, aversion, and delusion, that frees the mind from suffering.

In the Buddha's teaching, in the Pali Canon, there are a number of classic definitions for wisdom. The first factor of the Eightfold Path, wise view, is a framing of the wisdom that supports us as we orient towards the path. There's a reason why it's at the beginning of the path. We need to know—it lays out the map for us. In the beginning of a journey we need some kind of a map, and wise view, wise understanding, lays out that map for us.

The classic definition of wise view is: there is suffering; suffering arises with the condition of craving; it's possible to free the mind from this craving, which will free the mind from suffering; and there is a path. One aspect of the map is these sets of steps: wise view, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration. This lays out the map of where we're going and how we might orient our exploration of our minds. It's a map of how to explore our minds to free them from suffering.

So that's one classic definition—the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths define the orientation of the wisdom that we aim towards. We aim towards understanding suffering. This first noble truth has an action associated with it: understanding suffering. That teaching points to how suffering manifests in our minds, and it manifests when greed, aversion, and delusion are present.

Hidden or embedded in the Four Noble Truths is an understanding of what states of mind actually move us in the direction of suffering, keep us caught, and what states of mind move us away from suffering. This understanding of what is skillful and what is unskillful—Jill talked about this over a series of talks on the wise efforts—learning what is skillful, learning what is unskillful, cultivating the skillful, abandoning or letting go of the unskillful. This is another aspect of wisdom: that we begin to see and understand what in our minds creates suffering.

This becomes very experiential. Through the practice of mindfulness we observe our minds. We observe what's happening in our bodies and our minds. And pretty quickly, when we turn with a kind of perspective—another way to frame wisdom in a very practical sense—there is this curiosity about experience in the present moment as experience in the present moment.

I mentioned this framing in the very first talk I gave. This is a perspective for mindfulness: simple curiosity about what's happening. "Oh, this is happening right now—what is this?"

And so something like anger arises, or confusion arises, or greed arises, and we see, "Oh, this is the arising of greed. This is what the human experience of greed is." We begin to directly understand this human experience of greed, this human experience of aversion. This is suffering. This hurts. This does not feel like it's leading to well-being.

This stands in stark contradiction to all the stories that aversion and greed tell us—stories that insist this is what's going to make me happy. But when we actually come into the experience of those states, when we feel what the arising of anger actually is, our system understands: this is not leading to well-being. This is wisdom. This is the experience of wisdom. When the mind understands that directly, it's getting an education.

So this is another aspect of wisdom: understanding the skillful and unskillful. As states like compassion and love arise in our hearts, we feel directly in the moment, as we are aware of them, present with them, how they open our hearts, how they connect us to others, how they lead to well-being. And so again, the mind understands directly: this is skillful.

There's no question in the moment when we're experiencing these states from this perspective of "what is this human experience?" No question at all. "Oh, this is unskillful. This is skillful." Our systems actually seem designed to help sort this out. This is a great thing. Our human organism seems designed to show us what suffering is and what not-suffering is.

We have simply been so confused that we haven't been noticing it. We've been caught by our views, our beliefs, our ideas—conditioned by culture, conditioned by being in this human body, never having learned about this very simple but very profound tool of looking at experience from such a direct perspective. Instead, we look at experience more often as "how can I use this to get ahead?" or "where is this leading me?"

Understanding the skillful and the unskillful—this is another big piece of wisdom. And then also understanding causes and conditions: that experience is conditioned, that there is a cause-and-effect nature to experience.

This was actually another question I pulled out of the bowl: "What does this phrase 'causes and conditions' mean anyway?" Let me unpack that a little. This is my unpacking, so take it for what it's worth.

Conditions, for me, are the many, many factors—everything that's happened up to this point. Everything. That includes all the conditions of weather, all the conditions of health, all the conditions of nature, the conditions of culture, the conditions of family.

Some of those fall within what we typically call human conditioning: how our families operated, how we learned to treat others, how we were treated on the playground, all the various ways we affect each other as human beings. That's part of the conditioning.

And yet we are also born with a particular body, with genetics, as Winnie was talking about—the genetics of our particular system. That affects us and affects our experience. It affects what things are pleasant and unpleasant at times.

For instance, this body has a very strong sensitivity to bell peppers. When I eat bell peppers, I basically have to spend the next two hours very close to a bathroom. It's a pretty unpleasant experience. So that affects my time here. I've noticed that IMS uses a lot of bell peppers, which affects how I choose my meals. I do not want to have bell peppers if I'm going to be teaching a dharma talk. This is not a good plan.

So it affects me. And yet it's not quite the same kind of conditioning as how my parents treated me or what my culture infused my mind with.

It's more of a physical thing. And then there are simply the conditions of nature itself. Our bodies are made up of stardust. Carl Sagan points this out beautifully. Let me see if I can find this quote: "The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of star stuff." And so in a very real way, we are also conditioned by the Big Bang. Everything from the beginning of the universe until now is a condition.

The Buddha talks about conditions being so vast that we cannot possibly grasp them all with our minds. He said that to try to do so, you'll go mad. So don't try. And yet they affect us. Conditions affect us. This is an important piece to understand with respect to wisdom—that experience is conditioned, and it's not personal. It's not personal that I have this reaction to bell peppers. It's just this body, this configuration of nitrogen and calcium and oxygen, having this effect. That's not personal. It's a really useful reflection to recognize that so much of our experience is shaped by conditions.

The causes piece, for myself, I think of as being more in the moment—what is happening right now for this experience to be arising? In my own exploration, in my own understanding of how it's useful to explore causes, I'm looking at what's going on in the mind right now that is contributing to this experience. In particular, this question around what causes are arising in the mind to create suffering, or to create the release of suffering.

The Buddha in the Second Noble Truth pointed to craving as what arises in the mind and leads us in the direction of suffering. Another teaching, the teaching on dependent origination, points to ignorance. The whole teaching on dependent origination is an exploration of the conditions that give rise to suffering. And the same set of conditions give rise to becoming and selfing. It's the same process being described—these conditions that give rise to suffering.

Within that teaching, there are links we've talked about quite a bit. We talk in particular about the link between feeling and craving—how when pleasant arises in the mind, we tend to like it, we lean towards it, we want it, we want more of it. When something unpleasant arises, we tend to lean away from it. Aversion tends to result. These are conditions—things arising that are pleasant or unpleasant. And yet those conditions will not necessarily cause craving, clinging, becoming, suffering. Not necessarily.

But if ignorance is present in the mind, my understanding is that dependent origination teaches: when ignorance is arising, feeling leads to craving. Unpleasant leads to aversion. When ignorance is arising in the moment, that's what happens. So that's a cause—that's my understanding of a cause in the moment. Ignorance being a cause. And ignorance being basically not understanding this wisdom.

So here we are, back at the question: What is this wisdom? When ignorance is present, or when wisdom is not present, feeling tends to lead us onward to suffering—that reactivity, that kind of immediate reactivity.

In terms of cultivating wisdom, there's a lovely exploration around three levels of wisdom. The first is *sutamayā paññā—paññā* being the word for wisdom, and *suta* being the word for hearing, the suttas. So this is the wisdom that comes from listening, hearing, reading—taking in information. This is a form of wisdom, and we could say this is really where we start our path.

Somebody pointed out in one of the talks how the Buddha understood the path on his own. And that's one of the hallmarks of a Buddha, essentially—that they don't need help. They figure it out through their own experience, this path, this wisdom. And yet the rest of us need help. And so the help is these teachings. This is the first kind of wisdom: listening to the map, hearing the teachings, taking in the teachings. This is a form of wisdom.

Essentially, here in the Dharma Hall, we're just steeping in the teachings. A retreat like this, we just get steeped in hearing and reflecting on—this is the second kind of wisdom—the wisdom of reflection, *chintamaya paññā*, the wisdom of using our thought, using our minds, using our rational capacity of mind to think about the teachings, to reflect on them, how they make sense, to incorporate thought into our system, into our practice.

And the third kind of wisdom is the wisdom of direct understanding, *bhāvanāmaya paññā*, the wisdom of insight.

These first two kinds of wisdom—the wisdom of hearing, the wisdom of reflecting—are kind of where we start our practice. You all have a story of the first time you heard the teachings and felt something. It made sense to you in some way. That's wisdom landing in your system. And then there were reflections about it, thoughts about it. Maybe a kind of intuitive sense of, "Hmm, this makes sense." Or maybe a not-so-intuitive sense—not-self? I don't know about that one. But this suffering thing, that makes sense to me. And so this is using our reflection, thinking about it, reflecting on it, using our minds to support us.

And then we begin to practice. Those two kinds of wisdom—the hearing and then the reflecting—kind of lead us or impel us into action. This is the way wisdom acts. At the beginning it feels like I'm acting. At the beginning, that sense of self, still very strong, stays very strong for a long time, comes and goes, different kinds of self. And yet certain kinds of senses of self pick up this teaching and this understanding and get interested

and want to act. And yet it really is wisdom impelling that sense of self. There's a kind of wisdom that's part of that action. It may not be so apparent in that time. It more feels like I'm thinking about this, I'm doing this. And yet something has entered and is creating the conditions for different choices to be made. And that's wisdom.

And so we begin to practice. We begin to explore and start to understand some of these teachings for ourselves. It's no longer just something that we're hearing and thinking about, but direct experience. And yet we can often still use these first two kinds of wisdoms even as we're engaged in active practice.

Here on this retreat, sitting in the hall, Greg gave a beautiful description of sitting and taking in Dharma—not with the mind, not with the intellect, not with our usual conception of mind, but more just almost letting it be like Dharma rain. How does it land? How does it feel? So that's taking in the *suttamaya pañña*.

In my own experience with the practice, especially with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, I would go and practice and sit in the interview room with him, and I'd describe my experience. He would say something to me about some aspect of experience I hadn't noticed. And then I'd go off and I'd try to look for it. I'd go do something with that information. And I'd come back, maybe saying, "I got a real headache as I tried to understand awareness itself." He said, "Were you trying to do that?" I said, "Yeah, I thought that's what you told me to do." He said, "No, nothing I say is something to do. It's just information. Just do your simple practice. That information goes in and it changes the conditions. You do your simple practice, the conditions are different now. Different things get seen."

You don't have to do that. What a relief.

And so that's a way that the Suttamaya Panya can work in our practice. I have said this to many of you—this is a refrain of mine. I talk about how you might be able to see this or that, and then I say: don't do it. Don't try to do it. You might notice it. You might see it.

And then there are ways we can also bring in Chintamaya Panya, the wisdom of reflection, in the midst of our practice—bringing in wisdom reflections that might help balance the mind when we're caught in something. Sometimes, in the midst of being caught in some kind of storm, we can just remind ourselves, dropping in some wisdom phrase: "This is impermanent, it's not going to last." Or: "This is not me, not mine, not who I am." We bring in wisdom that we have either heard from teachers or read from Dharma books—or sometimes wisdom that we have experienced ourselves already.

You have noticed, I think, at times that you experience some kind of insight, an understanding about something where it's like, "Wow, I really see—it doesn't make any sense to cling. It's all changing. There's no point in clinging." And then the next hour, the mind is grabbing on. "Wait a minute, didn't I learn that?"

Well, this is the way the mind works. At times wisdom is active, strong and arising, and we have access to the direct understanding that there's no point in clinging. And then delusion comes back. Ignorance comes back. And we don't see that there's no point to clinging. In fact, our mind is telling us just the opposite: "Cling! That'll make you happy. Cling."

And so in those moments when we see that the mind is caught, and yet we have seen it not be caught, there's an opportunity essentially to borrow wisdom from ourselves. We can borrow wisdom from our teachers, we can borrow wisdom from books to help us. When we haven't had an understanding, we might just drop in: "Well, the teachers say it's all unreliable and impermanent and it will change. Okay, maybe I can hold that possibility." But when we've seen it for ourselves, it can be easier in a way to borrow that understanding—just to remind ourselves: "Yes, I do know. I do know that things are impermanent. The mind is deluded right now. It's not seeing things as impermanent. And yet this is impermanent."

And so we can drop in wisdom reflections at times, like phrases in our mind that sometimes can help us to balance. This is a way of using wisdom in the practice.

And then there's the experience of wisdom—the actual wisdom operating in the moment, creating the conditions for some kind of release, some kind of understanding. You have all experienced this kind of wisdom. Even just the simple curiosity, as I said earlier—this curiosity about what is the human experience of this, what is this—that curiosity and that perspective of observing experience already contains wisdom. Because our habit is not that. And so it begins to shape the mind in a new way.

An object is just an object. Over and over again in the Satipatthana Sutta it points to this kind of thing: when breathing in, one knows one is breathing in; when experiencing aversion, one knows one is experiencing aversion; when experiencing love, one knows one is experiencing love. Actually, that's not in the Satipatthana Sutta.

But non-aversion is in the Satipatthana Sutta. When experiencing non-aversion, one knows one is experiencing non-aversion. Just that simple. Recognition. This is the experience that's happening. This is a pointer. This is wisdom operating in the mind.

When we are curious in this way, wisdom is active. Now, it doesn't feel like any big mind-blowing kind of wisdom. But it grows. It accumulates.

We also might begin to notice a little bit more surprise around this simple understanding of, "Oh, this is an experience arising in the present moment." For instance, around a thought. Thoughts are so potently delusive. They contain such power to fool us into believing them. When we see that a thought is just a thought, when we recognize that these thoughts I'm thinking are about the past, we wake up into this recognition: "Wow, I am not there. I'm not in that situation right now. I'm sitting in a meditation hall, breathing in and breathing out. And that is arising in the mind." That thought, that situation—it's like a bubble bursts. We see that bursting of the belief in the thought and recognize, "Oh, this is a thought of the past happening in the present moment." That kind of surprise or recognition—that's wisdom. That's wisdom at work, opening our eyes to recognize that's not what's actually happening, that scenario or content or story.

At one point I had a very powerful recognition of this, a seeing of that bursting of the bubble. I had been in a relationship for a very long time—ten years—and we'd broken up several years before. I'd done a lot of work on the anger and reactivity about that person, and by this point, when thoughts arose about them in my mind, I no longer experienced distress at all. There was no anger, no sadness, no confusion. Well, confusion—there was confusion, as I'll tell you about. But there wasn't that kind of pain anymore when thoughts would arise. It was clear, it was clean.

And yet one day I was walking down the street and I woke up from being lost in thought—a thought about this person I had been in relationship with. In the moment of coming out of that thought, I realized I had been lost in it for a fair amount of time. Basically the mind had constructed that I was back in that relationship. What are we going to do next week? When are we going to go? This whole world was born, and I was born into that world.

And then the bubble burst. Wait, what? That was two years ago. What? I'm not in relationship with that person anymore. So there was confusion. And yet in that moment of seeing, it was like seeing just how much the mind had believed that thought. The bursting of that, that feeling of clarity—"That is just a thought"—that's wisdom.

So sometimes just seeing, "Oh, this is just an arising in the present moment" is kind of like, "Wow, this is just an arising in the present moment. Oh my gosh." It can have these gradations of intensity around this wisdom arising.

And sometimes as that wisdom arises in the moment, we can feel a kind of shift that happens. We might experience this recognition around a mind state that we're caught in and notice, "Oh, this is anger arising in the present moment." Instead of being caught

by it, we recognize it as a phenomenon. It feels like there's space, a feeling of space around the experience. "Oh, this is just anger. This is just impacting the body in this way—a feeling of heat and pressure. Oh, and here it's beginning to disperse."

So the first experience of the feeling of space—that too is wisdom at work. Holding that state of mind in a completely different way. No longer confused or buying into the deluded power of that mind state, but just noticing: this is a mind state. This is wisdom at work in the mind.

And then sometimes the wisdom is even stronger. Many of you have come in and described being caught by something, some state of mind, and then suddenly you got curious about it, began to just observe it, and then it's like—it's gone. Where did it go?

The first time I experienced that, I did not believe it. I thought I'd done something wrong, actually. I went into my teacher and said, "I don't know how to observe emotions." That was what I led in with. "I want some instructions on observing emotions."

And she said, "Well, what did you experience?" Wonderful teacher, Carol. "What did you experience?" Yes, you hear us asking this a lot.

And I said, "Well, I was experiencing a feeling of abandonment. And at first I was feeling some compassion for myself about it, but then I got curious about the abandonment. And it's like I turned to say, what is this anyway? And it wasn't there."

And she said, "Well, did it feel like you were still feeling abandoned, or did it just feel like it disappeared?"

I said, "It felt like it disappeared."

She said, "Trust your experience."

That was such a lesson for me. I had all of these ideas about practice and what it meant. And the curiosity of the mind turning to look at something—basically that curiosity itself created the conditions for wisdom to hold that experience, and it just vanished. It didn't wither; it was gone. I couldn't find it anywhere. I was like, "Oh wow, I feel pretty good right now. I guess I'll just go..." But what happened to that abandonment? I'll ask Carol about it. I must not know how to observe emotions.

Well, wisdom took care of it. That is wisdom at work.

So when we turn towards experience and see a shift, maybe see a releasing, see something fade and wither and maybe even vanish—that is wisdom at work.

We also start to see at times this conditioning process. I'm revisiting some of the pieces of wisdom that I named at the beginning: the seeing of suffering, the understanding of it as suffering. Part of that seeing it as suffering is part of how and why wisdom begins to release it. Because wisdom understands what leads to well-being.

So seeing causes and conditions at work, seeing how the mind is conditioned, how action follows from intention—we can start to see this. Maybe you're outside taking a walk and feel a kind of cold breeze on your cheek. You feel the unpleasantness of that but don't quite notice it as unpleasantness. But then it's like, "Oh, that's unpleasant. I want to stop walking." And that tumbles into the intention to go inside and have a cup of tea.

When the mindfulness is more continuous, you might actually see that unfolding. In a moment, you notice the plan, the intention in the direction of "stop, time to stop walking, time to get a cup of tea"—and you've barely taken another step and that has happened. If you've seen it, then you're seeing how conditioning unfolds in the mind.

Often what happens is our direction simply changes; we go inside. When we're not mindful, we'll just follow through on that conditioning. But we can start to see the conditioned nature of experience as a process. Rather than "I'm doing that." Rather than "I'm the one that's choosing." We see that choice is conditioned by a whole series of ripple events leading up to it.

And then there's another way that wisdom can work that's a little more—it feels a little more mysterious at times.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the fourth foundation refers to noticing the non-arising of the unarisen hindrance. What does that mean—that we can notice the non-arising of the unarisen hindrance? Basically, this points to the fact that we can recognize when something is not arising. A hindrance is not arising.

The first way we might start to see this is by noticing the absence of a hindrance, which is pointed to in the third foundation: noticing the presence and absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. Yet we can also begin to recognize this more directly. In some ways, knowing the non-arising of a hindrance can be more of an understanding than a direct experience. There is a way that we can see a non-arising, and I'll describe an experience of my own where that happened. But much of the time, this understanding of the non-arising of unwholesome states is more of an understanding than a direct experience.

We can know, for instance—and many of you have talked about this—seeing over time that these things aren't bothering us so much anymore. This thing that used to happen, something that used to spin us out completely, now it's barely a ripple. We're noticing that the reactivity is not arising, but it's more of an understanding in terms of contrast over time.

At times we may see much more directly the mind heading in the direction of a defilement, heading in the direction of reactivity. And then almost as if—you know how when you reach out and accidentally touch a hot pan on the stove, your body withdraws on its own? Well, sometimes that kind of thing happens in the mind too. The more we understand that anger is suffering, that it is not well-being, the more we understand that actually in our direct experience, then we may start to recognize the mind heading in the direction of some kind of reactivity. And the mind, in seeing that, may just go, "I don't think so," and simply redirect.

At one point, after having spent quite a bit of time observing anger, getting to know it really well, getting to know the suffering of it, I was cutting an apple in my kitchen. In that moment, I wasn't really trying to be mindful. There was just a kind of field of continuity that I had cultivated over some time of practice. This was not very long into my practice—maybe three months—so this kind of thing can happen in daily life. I had been using a lot of mindfulness in daily life, orienting around seeing anger, noticing it when it arises.

So I was cutting this apple and I saw a thought arise in my mind about a person I was angry with. I noticed there was a connection in the thought because I had been at a fruit stand with that person. There was a connection between what I was doing, cutting the apple, and the memory. I was seeing the associative nature, the conditioned nature of that arising. That was wisdom, seeing that conditioned nature.

And then I saw this urge, this impulse—it felt like a freight train of desire to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry at that person. I was not angry in that moment, but that urge was so strong. Yet it was seen, that desire to get angry. All of this took place in about a split second. The mind recognized, "Ooh, that's not a good idea." I didn't decide that. The mind understood that way lies suffering. There was wisdom in the mind that understood: jumping on that freight train, not a good idea. The mind just said no, not going to do that. And that urge just kind of collapsed.

I stood there with this knife in my hand, waiting to get angry—because I had not had this person arise in my mind without anger also arising. And I did not get angry.

Now, that might have had a certain life to it. It was maybe a couple of seconds that I didn't get angry. But what happened in the next moment was mind-blowing: "Oh my gosh, this practice works! Wow!" That amazement took over my mind.

At this point in my practice, I have less of that kind of mind-blowing amazement sometimes. My sense is that sometimes you get a little break from the anger, and then the thoughts keep going, and then you pick one of them up, and anger arises. I've seen that happen too. But in that moment, this was really—I think that was the moment I stepped on the path.

I was like, yes, I'm doing this for the rest of my life. This is good stuff.

That is wisdom at work. The seeing of that—and in that case, it was really seeing that anger didn't arise. That was the gift of that moment. I had been made non-functional by the arising of anger. And to see that it didn't have to arise, what a gift. This too is wisdom, wisdom at work.

So these moments of seeing wisdom at work—hopefully my description of various ways that you can see this will help you recognize, oh yes, wisdom is working. Wisdom is growing. Wisdom is being cultivated here in this mind. All of you are already cultivating so much wisdom.

And these moments of seeing, they're a pointer. The moments of sensing a little release. I can be with this. This is just whatever it is. Or the moments when we see something let go, or see the mind simply recognize, that way lies suffering. These moments are a pointer. They're a taste, a little taste of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. A little tiny taste of the direction of freedom. Just a taste.

And these insights too—the wisdom that arises in that moment to create the conditions for seeing in that moment—wisdom too is a conditioned arising. It is impermanent. The conditions to see through something, to understand something, you know that experience of, "Wow, this seems so obvious. How could I not see this? I must be enlightened because it's just so obvious. I'm never going to suffer again." And then a few minutes later, we're caught again. It's like, wow, I guess it wasn't so obvious. When we're in the midst of that wisdom being there, it seems very clear. It can seem so clear at times.

And yet, as I pointed to in the delusion talk, those moments of seeing through delusion—really, in a way this talk is the flip side of the delusion talk. Because those moments of wisdom arising are moments of seeing through delusion, of seeing clearly in a moment. And when delusion returns, when the wisdom passes away, it's not that there is no lingering effect. That wisdom has a conditioning power on our minds. We under-

stand something that we didn't before. And so now we can know, oh, this is delusion. This being caught by this mind state—oh, maybe this is just a thought. A thought is creating this state of mind. Having seen maybe a thought just being the kind of trigger for the arising of a whole complex of self-hatred—in that moment seeing through it, but then not seeing through it at other times—we can bring that wisdom in, remind ourselves, oh, this is just a thought. So there's a way in which that wisdom is available to be borrowed from ourselves even as it's not actively present in the moment.

So there's a trust that begins to grow as we begin to recognize wisdom, how it works, and that it leads us in the direction of well-being and towards letting go of the states of mind that create so much struggle and suffering and stress. We begin to trust this practice more and more.

And so it's kind of a spiraling—we get a little taste of wisdom and a little bit more trust grows. And that impels us to work, to explore, to investigate. Sometimes that means settling back and just receiving. But we gain some wisdom, some understanding, and that impels us further on the path, deepens our understanding, which gives us more trust, which gives us more understanding. And so there is this spiraling nature of the unfolding of the path, and it becomes very organic at some point. And we can begin to trust wisdom to lead the practice.

CHAPTER 14

Disenchantment and Dispassion

Andrea Fella · 1h04

> *In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella illuminates the teaching of transcendent dependent origination (lokuttara paṭiccasamuppāda), which describes the conditions that support liberation rather than suffering. While the traditional twelve links of dependent origination explain how dukkha arises, this parallel teaching reveals how suffering itself becomes the first supportive condition for freedom—when met with wisdom and the willingness to practice.*
>
> *The talk traces the natural unfolding from suffering through faith, delight, rapture, tranquility, happiness, and concentration to knowledge and vision of things as they are. Andrea then offers an intimate exploration of nibbidā (disenchantment) and virāga (dispassion)—two crucial links often misunderstood or glossed over. She candidly describes how disenchantment can manifest as groundlessness, fear, disgust, homesickness, boredom, or even aversion to practice itself, emphasizing that these difficult experiences are not signs of failure but natural responses as the mind releases its habitual ways of seeking security.*
>
> *Drawing from her own practice experiences and the commentarial tradition, Andrea explains that dispassion represents a gradual 'fading away' of attachment—first to sense pleasures, then even to meditative states—revealing freedom not as an acquisition but as relinquishment. The talk concludes with Bhikkhu Bodhi's insight that nibbāna is realized precisely through understanding the conditioned, not by escaping from it: 'The understanding of the conditioned is the way to the unconditioned.'*

We've been talking a lot about conditioning and the conditioned nature of our experience, particularly the conditioned nature of suffering. The Buddha offered a description of the conditions that lead to the arising of suffering. Many of you are probably familiar with this teaching—the teaching of dependent origination. That is not the topic of this talk, and yet it's close.

This teaching of dependent origination describes a process by which suffering comes to be: conditions that basically support the arising of suffering. Feeling leads to craving, leads to clinging, leads to becoming or selfing, leads to birth, leads to aging, sickness, and death, leads to suffering.

Yet this teaching of conditioning, the conditioned nature of our experience of dependent co-arising, has a more general form, a more general frame. In one place the Buddha said that this teaching of conditioning could be described something like: When this is, that is. When this arises, that arises. When this isn't, that isn't. When this ceases, that ceases.

This understanding about conditioning—especially this part about the ceasing, "when this isn't, that isn't, when this ceases, that ceases"—allows us to recognize and understand that if there are conditions that come into play to create suffering, then when those conditions cease, suffering ceases. This is one way to understand how conditions might lead to freedom. The ceasing of the conditions that create suffering can lead to the ceasing of suffering. When we let go of the conditions that create suffering, suffering doesn't arise.

For example, in the chain of dependent origination, one of the ways I really understand it is that the head of that chain is ignorance. Sometimes this chain of dependent origination is called dependent co-arising, and we could say that when ignorance is arising, all the conditions co-arising with ignorance means that suffering is arising. So when ignorance is arising, suffering is arising.

We often think about this chain as: this happens, then this happens, then this happens, in a kind of causal link. But I actually understand it more as a co-arising. When ignorance is present, suffering is happening. When ignorance is not present—when feeling, for instance, when pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is met with mindfulness and wisdom rather than ignorance—then the conditions are different, and feeling doesn't lead to craving. The craving not arising means the clinging doesn't arise, means the becoming doesn't arise, means the suffering doesn't arise.

This is one way to understand how the conditions and this teaching of conditionality can support us in freedom. In that exploration, the work is really to understand suffering and understand the ignorance, creating different conditions so that that chain of suffering doesn't happen. It really is a kind of letting go of the conditions that lead to suffering. A lot of what we've been talking about here is how to cultivate conditions that support letting go.

This is actually another framing of dependent origination. The traditional teaching of dependent origination talks about how suffering is created. There's another teaching of dependent origination called transcendent dependent origination. This is the topic of the talk. It describes the conditions that support freedom—another way to look at it, the conditions that support the mind releasing, letting go.

The Buddha actually asked this question. At times he asked, what is it that makes suffering arise? There are teachings where he describes how he came to understand this chain of dependent origination almost by working backwards: when suffering arises, what needs to arise in order for suffering to arise? Birth needs to arise for suffering to arise. And what needs to arise in order for birth to arise? Becoming. He worked his way back to understand ignorance at the root of that chain.

But he also asked the question: what are the supporting conditions for freedom? He did a similar kind of reflection and exploration, working his way back, and came up with twelve links—at least in this framing—that lead us to freedom. Freedom has supporting conditions.

One of the things I find most interesting about this is that the first link in this chain is suffering. Suffering is a supportive condition for freedom. It's not just that suffering in and of itself will support the movement in the direction of freedom—we know that.

We see the world not naturally heading in the direction of freedom. And so understanding this as a supporting condition, there are some other things that come into play to create the conditions for suffering to be transformative, for suffering to lead in the direction of freedom.

The first piece is really meeting it, acknowledging it as suffering. Really understanding: yes, this is suffering. And the second is hearing some teachings, hearing essentially that there may be a path that would lead us to freedom, to the release of suffering.

The Buddha is said to have said that suffering leads to bewilderment or to search. And if it leads to search—if it leads one to, as in his own journey it is said, ask the question, "Does anyone know a way out of this suffering?"—if it leads to that kind of reflection, we begin on a journey to look for perhaps teachings or supports to help us find a path. And if we encounter a teaching, if the mind is receptive and able to hear that teaching, then suffering becomes a supporting condition for faith. And this is the first link in this chain.

Now, I'm not going to approach this talk on transcendent dependent origination in a typical way where I might go through all of the links in some detail. I'm actually going to skim over many of them and focus on two in particular in the later part of the chain. But I'm going to give you the broad brushstrokes, the big picture of this teaching.

So just to begin: suffering is a supportive condition for faith to arise. Faith supports delight. Delight supports rapture or joy. Joy supports tranquility. Tranquility supports happiness. Happiness supports concentration. That part is really what we've been doing on this retreat—those six links. Concentration supports knowledge and vision of things

as they are, seeing experience clearly. This knowledge and vision of things as they are supports disenchantment—basically disenchantment with our usual ways of finding happiness, seeing that they're not really very reliable methods or ways to find happiness. Knowledge and vision of things as they are supports disenchantment. Disenchantment supports dispassion. Dispassion supports release. And release is followed by basically understanding that one has been freed.

The sutta in which this teaching is described offers an analogy about how this process works. It says, just think about a mountain. When rain runs down the mountain, it will naturally run downhill and find crevices and gullies. Those crevices and gullies will fill with the rain, and they will overflow and then run further down to the streams, to the rivers, to the ocean. Inexorably, the water landing on that mountain runs downhill because that is the nature of things.

Similarly, this unfolding of the path, this unfolding of these conditions, is a natural unfolding. As the conditions for faith arise, as suffering is met with some wisdom, some hearing of a teaching, and that hearing of that teaching inclines one to engage—that's really where faith begins, with the willingness to put these teachings into practice.

And so while there is a natural unfolding, it's not a natural unfolding where we sit back like a lump and let something happen. Because part of the natural unfolding is engagement. That hearing—yes, there is a way; here are some teachings; here are some practices; put these practices into place. As the Buddha said, "Here are the roots of trees. Sit, meditate, lest you regret it later." There are actions that we are encouraged to take up, and an inspiration that this heads us in the direction of freedom.

Some of us hear that and begin to engage. And so this path, this very natural unfolding—part of the natural unfolding is that our system responds and engages. It's not a path of non-doing. There is engagement. It doesn't mean that we don't do any work.

And yet as the path unfolds, as these conditions unfold, we can start to see how these conditions are like feedback loops between some of these links. Every pair essentially can be looked at this way. For instance, faith supports delight. When we have faith, delight can arise partly from the sense of, "Oh, maybe there's a possibility for freedom." So there can be some inspiration, some willingness to engage. And with that delight, and perhaps a little bit of engagement, it can feed back to support more faith. These kinds of feedback loops are everywhere in this teaching.

The first time we touch into really seeing something clearly—the other night I described that experience of cutting the apple and seeing how the mind was, how the memory arose and the mind was inclined towards jumping on that thought to think more thoughts, to get angry.

But then, seeing that that way lies suffering, the mind just dropped it and let it go. That moment was a very powerful confirmation of the power of the practice. I think I said I was kind of blown away. It's like, "Wow, this stuff works. I'm going to do this." So that experience really supported faith, supported more engagement. And there are multiple feedback loops in this process.

This first part of transcendent dependent origination describes the wholesome states that condition opening to understanding: faith, delight, rapture, tranquility, happiness, and concentration. Suffering supports the arising of faith when wisdom is applied, when wisdom is heard. That arising of suffering can lead to the arising of faith, and with that faith there's the willingness to engage, a delight perhaps in finding the path, the engagement in ethical conduct. The delight of seeing how being engaged with care with our fellow human beings in this relational field—as Brian was talking about—being engaged with care and love creates delight, non-remorse. The delight of non-remorse.

As we begin to engage more in the practice, joy can arise as we start to experience moments—maybe sometimes short moments, sometimes longer—when we recognize the hindrances are not so strong. Sometimes they fall away completely. This experience of the hindrances falling away is said to be—there's a term for it in the suttas—it's called the bliss of seclusion. We're secluded from those unwholesome states of mind, and very naturally in being secluded from those unwholesome states, there is joy.

And yet I've seen in my own experience of the practice that there are times when the wisdom of meeting experience, just the mindfulness and wisdom meeting experience, there's a joy in the engagement. Sometimes I've seen something arise like, "Wow, there's impatience. Wow." So much delight in seeing the mind able to hold this—joy in being able to meet what we previously got pulled under by. So it's not always that this sense of joy comes when there aren't any hindrances in the mind. Sometimes it's the ability to hold those hindrances with wisdom and mindfulness that can bring joy also. Amusement, delight.

And then, as the mind settles further, it begins to recognize that sometimes that joy, that rapture, has kind of an energetic quality to it that feels just a little bit agitating. As the mind begins to get more attuned to even a subtle agitation—the subtle agitation contained in joy—the mind just... it's not that it's agitated by hindrances, but it's just

agitated by energy, maybe slightly restless with energy. Then the mind begins to release that, and tranquility follows. The mind settles even further, and then very naturally happiness arises—a sweetness of being present. These three together can interconnect in our practice.

One time I was sitting at my kitchen table, just having a meal and present for what was happening, and there was this upwelling of joy, a really powerful upwelling of joy. My mind was like, "Whoa, that's intense. I don't think I can handle that." There was a little bit of trying to hold it down because it was so intense. A little bit of wisdom just whizzed through my mind in that moment, which said something like, "Well, it's okay, it'll pass." At that point, the mind that had been pushing down to try to contain that joy just let go. Then the joy got really strong—it was like this huge wave—but in not being either repressed or fed, it just arose and then ebbed. That ebbing was experienced as a releasing and a tranquility, and on the other side of that was just sweet happiness. So these three—rapture, tranquility, and happiness—can have this kind of interrelationship at times.

Another thing I really love about this teaching is how much it's pointing to the conditions leading to freedom. It starts with suffering, and yet faith, delight, joy, and happiness are part of our journey, part of our path. Jill talked about the brahmaviharas the other day. This is similar terrain in a way—this terrain of beautiful wholesome qualities. They're a very natural part of our path. Sometimes they come as we incline the mind towards the qualities, and sometimes they're just naturally arising as a consequence of meeting experience with wisdom.

Sometimes minds will tend to orient more towards the cultivation of the beautiful qualities, the brahmaviharas, and the wholesome qualities of love and joy. That's an easy doorway for some. For others, the doorway may be more the wisdom doorway. But all of the doorways that lead into this teaching meet somewhere in the middle. The path of orienting around love and joy can point us towards wisdom, and the orientation from wisdom can also point us towards compassion and love. They're not so separate.

And then happiness is the supporting condition for concentration.

This is useful to remember. It was certainly not what I had in mind when I started my practice. I thought the supporting condition for concentration was simply slogging effort—forcing my mind to stay put. But it's much easier for the mind to gather and collect when it's experiencing a kind of delight in being present.

This happiness of the path is not our usual kind of happiness. It's not the happiness of having something that we want. It's more a happiness related to wholesome conduct, ethical conduct, to letting go, to relinquishment. It's a pleasure that arises in the mind as disturbance is released. And the release of disturbance in the mind creates the conditions for happiness—a different kind of happiness. Sometimes it's a flavor of happiness we have to acquire a taste for.

But that non-disturbance, that condition of non-disturbance in the mind—one way of understanding concentration is as non-distractedness. And non-disturbance supports non-distractedness. So this is concentration: the non-distracted mind.

Different kinds of concentration are possible in this practice. There is one-pointed concentration, where the mind allows itself to connect with one experience and other experience falls away. The teachings talk about this form of concentration as a supportive condition for freedom, but not sufficient in and of itself. It is the power of that mind that can settle and stabilize that can then see things as they are. The concentrated mind is turned towards noticing things as they are.

The other form of concentration is moment-to-moment concentration—noticing just this moment, this moment, this moment, the continuity of mindfulness that we've been talking about. The term for this in the Pali is *khanika samadhi*, moment-to-moment samadhi. It's a samadhi where the mindfulness is not pulled out of the present moment, so in that way it's not distracted. Each moment the mind lands on experience and it's not distracted to start thinking about it and proliferating about it. The next moment there's an experience and it knows that one, and the next one, and the next one.

Sometimes this kind of samadhi feels unfamiliar to people if you've been mostly doing one-pointed concentration, and it may feel like the mind is distracted because it's not staying with one thing. But the question there is: Are you aware? Is the mind stable in awareness? Moment after moment, is there an awareness of what is happening?

This kind of concentration essentially develops the next link in the chain: knowledge and vision of things as they are. The moment-to-moment concentration develops through meeting moment after moment, and it is developing that capacity to know and see things as they are.

In the one case, where the mind settles into one-pointed concentration, at some point in order to continue on the path towards freedom, there needs to be a turning of that concentration towards understanding experience in its changing nature. Essentially that's the shift we make to transform a concentration practice into a vipassana practice.

We turn that mind that's been stable to noticing changing experience. In the moment-to-moment concentration practice, we're already noticing changing experience. So both of these forms of concentration can be used in the service of liberation.

That framing—those words—were very supportive for me at various times in my practice, particularly when I was doing concentration practice and wondered, why am I doing this? Then I remembered: right, this is in the service of freedom. This is in the service of liberation. That is the purpose here.

The concentrated mind, when turned to changing experience, begins to reveal the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. This is the mind beginning to touch into knowledge and vision of things as they are—understanding the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience.

All those first conditions—faith, delight, rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration—they're creating the mind in a place, in a state where it can meet experience, where it can meet impermanence, it can meet dukkha, and be interested in understanding it rather than trying to fix it or change it.

This is a key tipping point in this chain of transcendent dependent origination: the shift to knowledge and vision of things as they are. The next several links in the chain begin to point to how suffering is released. Knowledge and vision of things as they are supports us in beginning to be disenchanted with our usual framing of living our lives.

This is the next link in the chain: disenchantment. I'm going to spend a little more time on these next two links—disenchantment and dispassion.

Disenchantment is a natural consequence of beginning to recognize at a very deep level the impermanent and unreliable nature of experience. We also see the conditioned nature of experience—that there's no one doing, choosing, deciding. There are decisions made, there are conditions arising. And so we become disenchanted with our sense of self, and we become disenchanted with the habits and patterns associated with that sense of self that have been our usual way of engaging in the world.

I like this translation. The term is *nibbidā*, and I like the translation "disenchantment" because it really does point to how essentially our minds have been caught up in some kind of magic show, believing its story, believing delusion's story that getting this is what's going to make me happy, or getting rid of that is what's going to make me happy. As we see with our own direct experience, that is not very reliable. That kind of happiness—yes, there is a kind of happiness that comes from getting what we want—doesn't last very long. And we see that. We see that unreliability very directly.

We see that we have been caught in this illusion, this enchantment essentially. Ignorance, delusion, creates an illusion that we can be happy in these ways. And the clear seeing, knowledge and vision of things as they are, begins to burst that bubble. We clearly see: yeah, that's not the way. That doesn't seem to work very well.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has a description of the experience of disenchantment that I'll read to you: "*Nibbidā* signifies, in short, the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena when their illusion of permanence, pleasure, and selfhood have been shattered by the light of correct knowledge and vision of things as they are."

That makes it sound pretty peaceful—a serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena. In my experience, it's not necessarily so serene, nor does it even feel very dignified. It can feel pretty messy at this point in practice. This is the point where the mind begins to see the ways that it had been used to finding things to land on, ways to find happiness. When the rug gets pulled out from all of those, the mind is not very happy about this.

In another teaching, and primarily in the commentaries, there's discussion of a whole range of experiences that happen around this point—a whole range of relationships to seeing that things are impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. This is the terrain of disenchantment. It's not simple, like: "Oh, see things as they are. Oh, I'm disenchanted." Deep, deep inside of us there's this deep response: "No, it can't be that way. No, there's got to be some place to land. No, I need my security." Some of those come from a very non-verbal place. And so sometimes at this point in the practice, when we're starting to see just how unreliable things are, our mind goes through something like clinging on to the cliff with our fingernails. No.

There are many different emotional flavors described in the teachings around how the mind responds—these last gasps of deeper clinging around the release into deeply letting go into the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience. Sometimes this experience, starting to feel into that—and I've heard some of you talk about these things—some language that gets used here is: it feels like there's just nowhere to land, nothing to cling to, nothing works, groundlessness. That kind of language comes to us as we recognize that the way we had landed on things is not really a landing. It's not really reliable.

There are different ways the mind relates to this. Groundlessness, nothing to land on, nowhere to cling. Sometimes it can be experienced as disgust or revulsion—that's another translation of the word *nibbidā*. So that can be an emotional flavor that happens at this point, this flavor of "ugh." Sometimes this can have physical effects. Nausea, for instance.

The main work is in the mind, to begin to recognize. And what I will say here is that in this phase of disenchantment, it's not so helpful necessarily to try to say, "Oh, okay, well, yeah, this disgust is happening, but I need to just be with this feeling of groundlessness or this feeling of being nowhere to land." The path here lies in recognizing the relationship. In this place where we really start to have emotional responses to impermanence, reactive emotional responses to impermanence, the path is actually just the same.

Notice the relationship. Notice that reactivity. It's like revulsion to nowhere to land is happening. That's just another phenomenon in our mind. It's a phenomenon—it's kind of deeper forms of clinging that are related to the letting go around impermanence. And so with all of these different relationships, the path is: notice the relationship.

Sometimes the relationship to seeing this impermanent, nowhere-to-land quality is fear. The feeling of security is gone. We've had this illusion of security—*I can create something to land on and I'll land there.* We've had that as an illusion. And when that illusion is burst, when we see that there isn't anywhere to land, our mind isn't just ready to say, "Oh, nowhere to land." It gets terrified at times. Terror can be a response here.

There can sometimes be a sense of overwhelm at how fast we're seeing things change, and that can also lead to fear. It's like, *I can't keep up with this.* Fortunately, you don't have to. The mind will do it. That was one exploration for myself in that place—I felt like I had to somehow try to keep up with the fast pace of the change. *I can't do that.* And then stepping back, it's more just recognizing: wow, instead of trying to remember or recognize all the different things that are changing, there's more just, *wow, this is the experience of change.* It feels like streaming. It feels like popping. It feels like dissolving—different flavors of that. And so not feeling like you have to keep up with all the things that are dissolving or popping or streaming, but just this experience of streaming. That was helpful for me in this kind of place.

Another experience, another relationship that can happen at this point, is something like homesickness. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Janaka, named it this way. He said you can feel homesick. And my understanding of that is we're homesick for the familiar, for the way our mind was used to being. It's like that's not there anymore. We're not home in our familiar home. So there can be that sense of feeling a little bereft. Again, notice the relationship. Notice the relationship. Homesickness is arising. A feeling of bereftness is arising.

This point of practice is not pleasant. And this is partly why I'm talking about it, because we do sometimes believe that if we were doing it right, it would always be pleasant—or at least it would feel like the mind was balanced. But this point in practice can feel spectacularly unbalanced.

Another flavor of relationship at this point can be boredom. Like, enough already. Had enough of this seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching. Just feeling like you're constantly being impinged upon. It can have a flavor, initially perhaps, of oppressiveness. Seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching. Ugh. Ugh.

At one point I was on retreat and I was in this terrain, and it was like every sense impression was so strong, so overwhelming. And a frog—this is at Spirit Rock—the frogs were out. One night a frog started croaking. At first there was one frog, and it felt like this screeching through my whole system. And then another frog, and then another frog, and then it was like a whole chorus of frogs. I could barely hang in there.

It was so unpleasant, so oppressive. And I didn't really know at that point to notice that oppressiveness is happening. I was trying to stay with the frog sound, which isn't so helpful. But recognizing "Oh, oppression—the feeling of oppressive experience—that's what's happening" changes everything.

After that kind of feeling of oppressiveness passes, sometimes what remains is just boredom. It's just more seeing, smelling, hearing. Is this everything? Is this all there is? Seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, stuff in the mind? Yes. And as Joseph says, only six things ever happen. That's all that goes on. At a certain stage it can feel like there's disinterest—the mind loses interest in phenomena. That's another flavor of relationship at this point.

What can arise here too is not wanting to practice. The mind just gives up. If you notice that, that too is just an arising. When I finally recognize, "Oh, not wanting to practice is arising," I can practice with that. What a relief! The mind might believe "not wanting to practice." It's just a thought. But if it believes that thought, at least initially in my mind, I felt betrayed. I felt like I either had to change that state—because if I didn't want to practice, it meant something, it meant that my mind was betraying me somehow—or it meant I should stop practicing. The middle way is recognizing that "not wanting to practice" is happening. That can be known.

So the mind goes through this variety of relationships at this point—a variety of relationships to the impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience. As our minds get more balanced around this, the mind comes into more of a sense of equanimity. Then a deeper letting go can happen. This is where the mind moves into dispassion.

The Buddha talked about how this kind of fades—this word *viraga*, translated as dispassion, actually means fading away. It's a fading away of our desire, of our clinging, of our craving. The Buddha talks about this: "I abandoned craving for sensual pleasures. I removed the fever for sensual pleasures and I abide without thirst, with the mind inwardly at peace. I see other beings who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures being devoured by craving, and I do not envy them. Why is that? Because there is a delight apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, which surpasses even divine bliss. Since I take delight in that, I do not envy what is inferior."

This points to some of the ways that the fading can happen. He points to the fading away around sense desire—that craving toward wanting to have pleasant and get rid of unpleasant in the sense realm. That attachment to sense pleasure begins to fade. And that may be replaced by a little bit of attachment to meditative states, to the bliss, the delight, the joy, the happiness—those first parts of this chain of dependent origination where there may be some attachment. It's almost like we can let go of the attachment to sense pleasure by picking up this attachment to these wholesome states.

And yet the whole of the practice leading to non-attachment points us at some point to also letting go of those wholesome states—the fading away of attachment to any state. When the Buddha said there's a delight apart from sense pleasures which surpasses even divine bliss, that's what he's pointing to. The divine bliss is the delight of concentration. There's a delight that surpasses that, which is the letting go of attachment to any state. This is the fading away, this dispassion. And even the term "fading away" points to how this might be a gradual process.

Cloth fades when left in the sun. The dye in the cloth fades gradually. And so this fading away—maybe initially there's a fading away of certain levels of attachment or clinging. Perhaps we do pick up an attachment to concentration or happiness that helps us to let go of attachment around sense pleasures. And so there's this kind of fading happening almost in a staged fashion—not necessarily, again, just like, "Oh, disenchantment, dispassion, done, done." It's not like that in my experience. It's much more gradual, this awakening.

And sometimes the fading away experience, the sense of understanding that letting go—even that can come and go. There might be times where we recognize, "Yeah, nothing to cling to," and we feel, definitely recognize, a kind of sense of balance and equanimity around that. A clear seeing of that. The mind really lets go. But then delusion returns. At a later time we might find ourselves caught in the grip of wanting again. And so my sense of this unfolding isn't that it's like a continually deepening linear progression. It has much more ebbs and flows.

This dispassion is understood really as being the release of attachment. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in a commentary about this sutta, says this is really the taste of freedom—this mind opening to releasing attachment. And this word *dispassion* is sometimes used as synonymous with nibbana, with freedom. There's one definition of nibbana: "This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana." And so there are these similes for nibbana: the destruction of craving, dispassion, the relinquishing of attachments.

Another definition for freedom is the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion—we could say the non-arising of greed, aversion, and delusion. And to me this points to the fact that freedom is not an acquisition. The releasing, all of these descriptions—relinquishing of attachment, the destruction of craving, the non-arising of greed, aversion, and delusion—freedom is not about acquiring anything. It's all about letting go.

We might feel into this a little bit, this quality of dispassion. Very naturally as we age, we become dispassionate about things that we used to be very passionate about. What was your favorite toy when you were five years old? Maybe when you were seven, you held onto it a little bit. But at this point, until I mentioned it, there wasn't interest or disinterest in that. It just didn't arise, this idea of that favorite toy. This is the kind of dispassion.

The other piece of this is that it's not about non-feeling either. That word *dispassion* maybe evokes for us a sense of not feeling. But dispassion—the releasing of greed, aversion, and delusion—leaves space for compassion, for love, for joy.

I'll end with this quote and one little comment about it regarding freedom, realizing freedom. Another framing for this—and this is kind of a paradox of this teaching—is that we are looking at conditions that support the arising of freedom, conditions that support opening to freedom, I should maybe say, as a better way to frame it. Conditions that support opening to freedom. Because freedom is understood to be unconditioned. Nibbana is sometimes described as the unconditioned. And so there's a kind of paradox here: we are creating conditions that allow us to open to the unconditioned.

Here's how Bhikkhu Bodhi speaks of this: "Though the realization of the unconditioned requires a turning away from the conditioned, it must be emphasized that this realization is achieved precisely through the understanding of the conditioned. Nibbana cannot be reached by backing off from a direct confrontation with samsara to lose oneself in a blissful oblivion to the world. The path to liberation is a path of understanding, of comprehension and transcendence, not of escapism or emotional self-in-

dulgence. Nibbana can only be attained by turning one's gaze towards samsara, towards suffering, and scrutinizing it in all its darkness. The understanding of the conditioned is the way to the unconditioned."

We turn towards suffering.

That is the path to freedom. Suffering itself becomes a supportive condition for liberation—when met with wisdom.

Let's sit for a minute.

May our practice together be the condition that supports our own freedom and the freedom of all beings.

CHAPTER 15

Practicing Freedom

Andrea Fella · 58 min

> *In this reflective dharma talk, Andrea Fella shares her deep appreciation for the Aṭṭhakavagga, a collection of sixteen poems from the Sutta Nipāta that scholars consider among the oldest strata of Buddhist teachings. She explores how this text presents freedom not as an abstract metaphysical goal, but as recognizable qualities embodied by liberated beings—calmness, wisdom, gentleness, and freedom from anger, fear, and attachment to views.*
>
> *The teaching examines three perspectives woven throughout these poems: the ordinary person caught in clinging, the practitioner in training, and the fully liberated sage. Fella highlights the text's emphasis on how attachment to views creates conflict and suffering, noting the Buddha's teaching that even true views should not be clung to. She also explores the Diṭṭhi Sutta (AN 10.93), where the householder Anāthapiṇḍika demonstrates a view that contains within itself the seeds of its own transcendence.*
>
> *Particularly practical is Fella's exploration of "modeling freedom"—the practice of acting peacefully while fully acknowledging inner irritation, not through repression but through conscious intention. Using her own experience with impatience in a drugstore, she illustrates how this practice can interrupt the feedback loop that sustains unwholesome mind states. The talk offers an inspiring vision of liberation as something achievable in this very life, grounded in everyday experience rather than cosmological speculation.*

There is a story about a Zen teacher who was giving a dharma talk in English, though English was not the teacher's first language. In the spaces between the words, while searching for the right English expressions, the teacher fell asleep while giving their own dharma talk. The colleague who told me this story, Gil Fronsdal, said, "I aspire to be so relaxed that I could fall asleep while giving a dharma talk." I have that same aspiration, and today my colleagues actually reminded me of this as we walked in here, because I have very low energy today. I even commented that I can't muster the energy to have any adrenaline before the talk, which is really unusual. So we'll see how this goes. The laughter helps to brighten my energy, which is partly why I told the story—to help lift the energy for myself.

Tonight I wanted to share some poems, in particular one text composed of sixteen poems. The text is called the Aṭṭhakavagga, found in the Sutta Nipāta. It's a favorite text of mine. I was asked at one point when I was in teacher training to teach a daylong re-

treat on this text. Gil asked me to do this, and I said I didn't know anything about it. He said, "Well, study it." So I spent six months studying this text, and it has become one of my favorites. I won't be able to go over the entire thing tonight—I'm not even going to try—but I'd like to offer some of the flavor of the teaching.

The title itself: Aṭṭhaka basically means "eight" and vagga means "chapter" or "book," so the English title would be "The Book of the Eights." There's some question about why it would be called that, because there are sixteen poems and none of them are limited to anything like eight verses. They're not about sets of eight or anything, so there's no particularly clear reason for the name. And yet that is what they're called.

There's general agreement among scholars who study the Pali texts that these suttas are fairly old within the strata of the Pali canon. They have a different flavor to them. Many of the teachings in the canon are very codified, with a lot of repetition and lists. In this teaching, it's much more organic. You get a picture of the Buddha as somebody wandering around India, meeting up with people who ask him questions, and he responds. You get a different picture of the Buddha in this teaching.

Another reason scholars think this is an older text is that the Pali used is more archaic. Some scholars say the fact that they're poems might account for that. But the real indication that they're an older stratum of the teaching is that this is one of the few teachings referred to elsewhere in the texts as a text. There are places where monastics are asked, "Have you memorized the Aṭṭhakavagga?" So it's referred to as teaching poems—poems to memorize and allow to infuse and inform your practice.

The main theme repeated throughout virtually all the poems is a reflection on clinging and its drawbacks. Clinging to sense pleasure and clinging to views are both highlighted. The teaching covers these from different perspectives. Some poems come from the perspective of an ordinary person who's clinging, someone not exposed to the teachings—the perspective of someone who hasn't particularly practiced. Then there's a set of poems relating to how somebody on the path works with these teachings. And finally, there's a set describing someone who's free from clinging.

When I started studying this, the comments by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu were particularly helpful. He said it's really useful to recognize which of these three flavors is present as you read a particular poem: Is it about the ordinary person? Is it about the person in training? Or is it about the liberated person? You get slightly different teachings from each angle. Then there are verses that describe the training itself—how to move from being an ordinary person to being a liberated person.

Let me share some of these with you. For an ordinary person and their relationship to clinging—clinging to sense pleasure—here is one verse. All of these poems have been translated differently by various scholars; some I've taken from Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, some from Bhikkhu Varado, others from Sadātissa and other translators. But in all cases, I have altered the translation slightly to be gender neutral:

If one, longing for sensual pleasure, achieves it, yes, they're enraptured at heart. The mortal gets what they want. But if for that person, longing, desiring, the pleasures diminish, they're shattered as if shot with an arrow. One who is greedy is overpowered with weakness and trampled by trouble, for pain invades them as water a cracked boat.

Longing for what's over or for what's to come, yearning for pleasures in the present and pleasures of the past—those who are greedy for pleasure, hunting for it, deranged, selfish, have entered the wrong road. Look at them floundering amidst their cherished possessions like fish in a dwindling stream.

Some of these images have actually come to me directly. At one point, this image of fish in a dwindling stream—my mind actually felt like that. In one retreat I was sitting there watching my mind flopping around, looking for something, looking for something that would satisfy it. And the image of the fish flopping arose in my mind, and it actually brought some humor into the experience. Look at this mind flopping around looking for pleasure. I think this may be some of the reason why we're encouraged to memorize these verses.

And then there's something about clinging to views—some of the drawbacks of clinging to views and how an ordinary person relates to them:

Abiding by fixed opinions and pleased with themselves, they say, "My opponent's a fool, they're no expert." Upon whatever basis they regard their opponent a fool is the same upon which they regard themselves as an expert. To the extent that they rate themselves expert, they despise anyone else who makes the same claim. Those attached to perception and views roam the world offending people.

And then a questioner asks the Buddha: "Those who maintain a view and dispute, saying 'this alone is true'—is criticism all they experience? Do they not indeed also receive praise?"

And the Buddha responds: *What they receive is trifling, not enough to bring them any peace of mind. I say there are only two consequences of dispute: praise and criticism. Seeing this, you should not dispute, regarding instead non-dispute as the grounds for peace.*

So this points to several things about views. One of the key pieces is attachment to views, which is highlighted in several places. "Those attached to perception and views roam the world offending people"—attached and regarding oneself an expert. It's not necessarily saying, at least here, that views are bad, but that attachment to views is something to be on the lookout for.

One of the ways to be on the lookout for this attachment is by noticing whether there's dispute, whether there's quarreling. The ground for conflict, the Buddha points to here and in some other places in the texts in general, but also elsewhere in the Aṭṭhakavagga—the Buddha points to this attachment to views as being the root source of conflict. Any conflict in the world comes back to attachment to views. "This is what's true. Anything else is wrong." That framing is often used in the text to describe attachment to views—when somebody says, "This is what's true, everything else is false." It really highlights that distinction of picking something up as truth, as opposed to recognizing, "This is a view."

I hope to have more time to explore some of the ways this teaching talks about views. But I'd like to go back to the overarching direction of this teaching and then explore a little bit: What does this teaching have to say about, or how does it describe, someone who's free? How does it describe a liberated person?

What I found in exploring this and in reflecting on the descriptions here—the poems about liberated people—is that liberation is described in terms of the person who is free, the qualities of that person, and descriptions of how they are in the world. It's not described as something separate from the one who is free.

Here are some verses describing someone who's free. A questioner said to the Buddha: "I want to ask you about the perfect person. There are these people, those people we call one who is calmed. Can you tell me how they see things and how they behave?"

The Buddha responds: *One who is calmed, who has extinguished all cravings before the time the body disintegrates into nothing, who has no concern with how things began or how they will end, and no fixation with what happens in between—such a one has no preferences. They have no anger, no fear, and no pride. Nothing disturbs their composure and nothing gives them cause for regret. They are wise who are restrained in speech. They have no longing for the future and no grief for the past. There are no views or opinions that lead them. They can see detachment from the entangled world of sense impressions. They do not conceal anything and there is nothing they hold onto. Without acquisitiveness or envy, they remain unobtrusive. They have no disdain or insult for anyone. They are not*

full of themselves or addicted to pleasure. They are gentle and alert, with no blind faith, and show no aversion to anything. The sage, free from greed and selfishness, does not speak of oneself as among those who are superior, equal, or inferior.

The sage regards nothing in the world as one's own and does not grieve because of what does not exist. Not blindly following religious teachings, such a one is called peaceful.

To me this is a description that's very recognizable. We can imagine someone being calm and peaceful and wise. The descriptions are largely about what they are not, how they do not behave. They are not angry, not fearful, they don't have pride, they're not fixated, they have no preferences, they don't have blind faith, they have no aversion, no comparisons, nothing relied on. It's what they're free of that comprises much of the description, and we've been exploring this understanding that freedom is not about acquiring—it's release. Freedom is release.

There are a few positive descriptions here of how the mind might be experienced, the qualities of the mind: calm, wise, gentle, alert, composed, peaceful. And elsewhere in other parts of the teaching there are additional descriptions. They're mindful. They see and know. They understand. They are equanimous.

This is actually quite inspiring to me—that the description of liberation in this teaching portrays the liberated state not in terms of some abstract idea, but in terms of the qualities and actions of people who are free. One of the things I also find inspiring about this teaching is that the whole flavor is very much what I would call a this-worldly teaching. The descriptions of freedom, the descriptions of the practice are very grounded in what seems recognizable. It's not a metaphysical teaching of some kind of freedom from rebirth.

There are a couple of places in this text where it could potentially refer to freedom from rebirth, but it could also just refer to letting go of clinging to the future. The flavor of this teaching actually contrasts quite strongly with the standard Theravada perspective of liberation, where there is this metaphysical alteration of being that means one is no longer subject to taking birth. In this teaching, that's not what is of interest. It is a teaching interested in looking at what freedom means here and now. What does it mean in this very life? And how can this happen in this very life?

One scholar, Grace Burford, reflecting on this particular aspect of this text, wrote her graduate thesis on it. Her thesis was published as a book, and that was one of my main resources during my six months of study. She wrote: "The Aṭṭhakavagga is exceptional even within the early Buddhist literature in its non-metaphysical presentation of the

highest good achievable by humans. It is significant as an example of how the Buddhist ideal goal can be presented without all the usual problematic cosmological and metaphysical accessories that accompany it in its traditional Theravada doctrine."

Another scholar, Luis Gomez, says: "The Aṭṭhakavagga sets out to find or describe a practical solution to human sorrow—not merely the abstract sorrow of rebirth, but the everyday sorrow of strife and aggression."

This is one of the flavors of what I really love about this text. It points to freedom in this life, this possibility. What does it look like?

And then there are the poems that describe the path to liberation. These include poems about how someone in training should be. The path to liberation is basically describing how one should engage while being on the path. I'll read some of one text—there are several that do this kind of exploration. As I read this, listen to see if it sounds familiar.

The questioner asks the Buddha: "Now venerable sir, speak about the path of practice."

And the Buddha responds: "A person should not have covetous eyes, should close one's ears to ordinary chatter, should not be greedy for flavors, one should not cherish anything in the world. One should be meditative, not footloose. One should desist from worry. One should not be indolent. One should live in lodgings where there is little noise. One should not sleep too much. One should be devoted to wakefulness and keen endeavor. One should abandon laziness, deception. One should not fear blame, nor be conceited when praised. One should drive out greed, selfishness, anger, and malicious speech. One should not be a boaster, nor speak scheming words."

One should not cultivate impudence, nor utter quarrelsome speech. One should not be drawn into telling a lie, nor deliberately be treacherous. One should not despise others for their lowly way of life or wisdom or precepts and practices. If ascetics or ordinary people irritate one with their talkativeness, one should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate. Knowing the Buddhist teaching, an ever attentive person who investigates it should train in it. Knowing the cooling of desire as peace, one should not be negligent in applying the teachings. With regard to the Blessed One's teaching, one who is diligent should constantly venerate it by following his example.

A couple of pieces stand out here in this description of one who is in training. It sounds a lot like the same kind of language we saw in the previous sutta describing somebody who is free—only here it is "should be" as opposed to "is."

And then these last two verses are particularly striking: "If ascetics or ordinary people irritate one with their talkativeness, one should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate." And: "With regards to the Blessed One's teaching, one who is diligent should constantly venerate it by following his example."

To me this points to a teaching that is encouraging us to model freedom. In the process of training, when we see that there is irritation, we don't respond with irritation but instead model peacefulness.

I want to talk about this for a little bit because for me this has been such an amazing teaching, especially in daily life. It points essentially to the notion that the path and the goal are not so different. If you want to be peaceful, act peacefully. If you want to have love, act lovingly. If you want to be loving, act lovingly. It's pointing to this modeling—and all of these "shoulds." As I said, it's almost like this sutta could have been taking the previous one and changing "is" to "should be."

I've explored this in my own practice and found that there's a very powerful edge of practice around this kind of teaching. It takes a lot of honesty and a lot of integrity to explore, because it could sound like: if people irritate one with their talkativeness, repress the irritation and pretend you're peaceful. That's not what works.

What does seem to have some power is to acknowledge and recognize, "Oh, there's irritation." Really fully knowing there's irritation, and yet exploring the possibility—I sometimes use the language of seeing if you cannot let the irritation leak out of any pore. Completely, fully knowing in the mind, in the heart-mind, that this irritation is happening, and yet exploring the possibility of behaving in a way that is peaceful.

This calls on intention. It calls on the intention to cultivate peace even as we are feeling irritation. We're drawing on that wisdom, that wish, that aspiration: may there be peace. Not through repressing the irritation, but also exploring—how might this irritation be leaking out of my system? It can be in very subtle ways: just a gesture, or an expression on the face, or a quickness of movement. Exploring what it might be. Modeling.

This is where there was great fortune for those who lived at the time of the Buddha, when there were many enlightened monks walking around. You could see how they were. You could explore modeling their behavior. We might have to conjure it up in our minds a bit, or model it after people we do admire—such as the Dalai Lama, or others. Greg mentioned the monks in Burma that we met: the deep peace of one Sayadaw that our colleagues named "the Angel Sayadaw," or the happiness and delight of the other monk we sometimes called "the Happy Sayadaw."

One practical example from my own practice: I was practicing this kind of thing around impatience. I had taken on a study of impatience because I noticed it was a major force in my life. So I began to get curious about it—looking at it, seeing it whenever it arose, noticing it with curiosity.

At one point I was wandering around a drugstore, shopping, and I noticed that I was moving quickly, picking up things and throwing them in my basket. That gave me a little bit of an "Oh, what's happening here?" I noticed that I was impatient. It was a kind of wake-up—the way my body was acting.

My body was acting impatient.

And so I picked up this exploration around modeling patience while fully recognizing, yes, there is impatience—but what might it mean to act as though I were really patient? And so I slowed down. I reached slowly out to the shelf, picked up the bottle of shampoo, and placed it very carefully in my basket. I did this with several things, really resting at this edge of knowing the feeling of impatience while holding the intention to see what it might mean to know that and to behave as if I were patient.

What surprised me—and this was one of the first times it really dawned on me how this works and how powerful it can be—within about thirty or forty seconds the impatience had vanished and the mind was patient. The impatience had gone away. And I understood that it wasn't repression of the impatience, but rather that in very subtle ways the impatience had been reinforcing itself through the action. That was how it was feeding itself. When I recognized the impatient quality in the mind and created the conditions for not letting it leak out into my behavior, it was like the foot came off the gas pedal and that state of mind could simply release.

This is a practice we can do when we're in the grocery store, when we're walking down the street, when we're driving. What mind states are arising? And how is that leaking out in how you are engaging? It's really important—I can't emphasize this enough—not to repress the inner state in doing this. It's not about repression. It's about connecting to that intention. The intention has a rebound effect on our minds when we engage in a way that follows it.

Now, a little more dive into what this text has to say about views and clinging to views. There are different kinds of views. The deepest level is the view "I am"—that's a form of view. Then there are views about what we take to be metaphysical reality. This was a major category at the time of the Buddha. People explored and thought that wisdom and understanding would come by knowing the nature of the cosmos. There were views about the cosmos being infinite or finite, stretched in one direction or another.

And we may have views like this too. They may not be so common in our culture, but even something like your views about rebirth are in the realm of metaphysical views—something beyond what we can actually directly know in this experience.

Then there's a whole other terrain of views: our ordinary views in daily life, the views connected with greed, aversion, and delusion that keep us engaged in those patterns. Clinging to views is understood to be one of the key ways we suffer. They're almost at the root of how we suffer, because even sense desire—clinging to sense desire—is based in a view that having that pleasure or getting rid of that unpleasantness is what's going to make me happy. It's based in that delusion.

As I mentioned earlier, clinging to views is also recognized as one of the main reasons we live in conflict, why we have wars. It's rooted in the human mind. Seeing this was actually a very powerful moment in my practice. At one point, watching my mind around anger and noticing what it did with that anger, particularly when there was anger at a specific person, I noticed this arising of a wish that the other person suffer.

That was a painful recognition. And yet it also opened my heart to compassion, because there was the recognition that the seeds of war are right here. An arising of anger connected to that wish that the other person suffer—that's where war begins. This understanding isn't just personal; it reveals how these states condition dispute, quarrels, anger, the picking up of weapons, and harming each other. The Buddha points to views as being the source of this conflict. So views are really worth examining.

One thing that's interesting in this teaching is that a liberated person is described as someone who does not cling to any views at all—maybe even something deeper than that. One description in the translation suggests something profound, though it's hard to know exactly what the original conveys. I don't read Pali, so I don't know the exact words. When I study a text, I read multiple translations to try to get a sense of what's being said.

But there's one place in describing a liberated person where it says there are no views or opinions that lead them. That's a pretty strong statement. "One who is pure has no preconceived view about anything in the world. Having abandoned delusion and pride, they remain without attachment. Therefore, by what view would they go? One who is attached argues over religious teaching. But how and about what can you argue with one who is without attachment? There is nothing they either take up or throw off. They are indeed free of every view in the world. Abandoning what has been taken up, free from any basis of attachment, they do not rely even upon knowledge. Amongst those in dispute, they do not take sides. They do not revert to any grasping of opinions whatsoever."

One of the teachings in the Aṭṭhakavagga around this non-attachment to views—one of the keys in terms of the training—interestingly, I did not see anywhere in there where it said one who is in training should not hold the view of the teaching, or that one who's in training should not hold any view whatsoever. It does not say that. There's some debate about this particular aspect of the teaching, whether the teaching around freedom from views is something that should be modeled on the path.

But in my read of this text—this is my own looking at it—when I read through it from this view that Thanissaro Bhikkhu suggested, distinguishing when it's describing someone who's attached or an ordinary person versus when it's describing someone who's liberated, the places where it talks about freedom from views, freedom from all views, that's when they are liberated. The training around freedom from views looks more like: one should refrain from quarrels, one should refrain from retaliation.

What's interesting too, however—and I think this is an important piece—is that elsewhere in this text the Buddha acknowledges yes, there is truth. But the instruction around not clinging to views points to basically this: whether or not a view is related to truth is irrelevant. It still should not be clung to.

Here's what it says: "A person who associates themselves with certain views, considering them as best and making them supreme in the world, they say because of that that all other views are inferior. Therefore they are not free from contention with others." So regardless of whether it's true or not, the Buddha encourages us not to cling to it.

To me this points to something very profound about wisdom and what wisdom is interested in. Our culture—and not just our culture, I think human culture broadly—is often interested in propositions and whether propositions are true or not. Interested in statements. Is this statement true or false? We feel like it's important to know whether it's true or false, that that's where wisdom will lie.

And yet the wisdom that we are cultivating here, the wisdom that frees us from greed, aversion, and delusion, that moves in the direction of liberation—that wisdom is not interested in the objective truth or falseness of a proposition. It's interested in the fact that a thought is arising in the mind, and it's a thought. And a thought is ceasing in the mind. This wisdom is interested not in the objective truth of our thoughts or our beliefs, but in the fact that they arise and cease.

This is a different kind of approach to truth. What is true about any experience is that it is arising and ceasing.

There's another text, another one of my favorites—I've got a lot of them, a lot of favorite texts—that points to the kind of view that might be useful to hold while one is in training. It's a text called Views, the Diṭṭhisutta, in the Aṅguttara Nikāya 10.93, for those of you who are interested in these things.

One of the other things I love about this sutta is that it's a layperson having a conversation with ascetics from other traditions. This is Anāthapiṇḍika, the Buddha's patron, who is a householder, not a monastic. Anāthapiṇḍika was wandering one day and came upon these ascetics from other traditions. They had been talking and chatting with each other, and when they saw Anāthapiṇḍika coming, they hushed each other, saying, "Be quiet, don't make any noise. Here comes Anāthapiṇḍika the householder, a disciple of the contemplative Gotama. He's one of those disciples clad in white who lives in Sāvatthī. These people are fond of quietude and speak in praise of quietude. Maybe if he perceives our group as quiet, he will consider it worth his while to come our way." So the wanderers fell silent.

When he approached them, they said, "Tell us, Anāthapiṇḍika, what views does the contemplative Gotama have?"

And Anāthapiṇḍika, holding to sīla, says, "Venerable sirs, I don't entirely know what views the Blessed One has."

And they seem to think this was rather telling, saying, "Well, so you don't know what views the contemplative Gautama has. Perhaps you can tell us what views the monastics have then."

"I don't even know entirely what views the monks have."

"So you don't know what views Gautama has, and you don't know what views the monks have. Well, maybe you can tell us what views you have."

And he says, "It won't be difficult for me to tell you the views I have, but please let the venerable ones first expound your positions. Then it won't be difficult for me to expound to you what views I have."

When this was said, each of them—there were about ten—said something different. One said, "The cosmos is eternal. Only this is true; anything else is worthless. This is the sort of view I have." Another: "The cosmos is not eternal. This is the only true view. Everything else is worthless." Others proclaimed: "The cosmos is finite." "The cosmos is infinite." "The soul and body are the same." "The soul is one thing, the body is another."

These metaphysical views were what they were debating, each one insisting this is what's true. And clearly they can't all be true because they directly contradict each other.

After they had all expounded their views, Anandapindika gave the householder's little teaching. He said, "As for the venerable one who says, 'The cosmos is eternal, only this is true, anything else is worthless—this is the sort of view I have'—that view arises from one's own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. Now this view has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated—that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress, suffering. This venerable one adheres to that very stress, submits himself to that very stress."

He was pointing out how holding to views—holding to something that is simply a construction of mind, that has the nature to arise and pass, holding to something that is inconstant—is suffering.

Then they said, "Well, we've told you our views. You tell us yours now."

And this is what Anandapindika says: "Whatever has been brought into being is fabricated, willed, dependently originated—that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress or suffering is not me, is not what I am, is not myself. This is the sort of view I have."

They tried his same argument on him, saying, "So that view has been brought into being and fabricated, so you're adhering to that stress."

And Anandapindika replied, "Venerable sirs, whatever has been brought into being is fabricated, willed, dependently originated—that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is suffering. Whatever is suffering is not me, is not what I am, is not myself. Having seen this well with right discernment as it is actually present, I also discern the higher escape from it as it is actually present."

He was basically recognizing that clinging to view also needs to be released. This view holds in itself the possibility for transcending views—that possibility of recognizing, "Oh, a view is arising again." In some ways we would say this view is pointing to truth. And yet, even holding to that would be stressful, would be suffering. And so seeing, "Oh, this is a view that's arising, this is a view that's ceasing"—understanding it as a view, as an impermanent, inconstant phenomenon.

I offer this reflection this evening. For me this is inspirational, this teaching, this text around the freedom possible in this life. Teachings given by householders that contain deep wisdom pointing to freedom in this very life. Not sometime in the future. That possibility—the poems that Greg mentioned, the enlightenment poems of the nuns. In any moment, putting out a candle, the mind can be free. Right now, in this life.

Let's sit for just a moment.

Thank you for listening to the Dharma.

CHAPTER 16

Qualities Of Wise Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a detailed exploration of the opening definition from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), examining what it means to practice wise mindfulness. She breaks down the Buddha's instruction—"One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, putting away desires and discontent for the world"—revealing how each word points to essential qualities of practice.*
>
> *Fella distinguishes between ordinary self-reflective awareness and the transformative quality of wise mindfulness, which involves curiosity about experience as experience rather than focusing on content or self-reference. She explores the meaning of key terms: "abides" (suggesting ease and relaxation), "observing" (connected to the root of vipassanā, meaning close engagement), and the phrase "body as a body" (pointing to direct experience below the level of concept). The talk clarifies the important distinction between mindfulness and attention—how attention can function even when mindfulness is absent, as in the common experience of driving on autopilot.*
>
> *The teaching addresses "ardent" (atāpī) as engaged curiosity and "fully aware" (sampajañña) as clear comprehension of impermanence. Fella explains how understanding the changing nature of experience naturally releases craving, making space for wholesome motivations like compassion to arise. She reframes "putting away desires and discontent" not as a prerequisite but as an ongoing process of allowing experience—including our reactions to experience—to be known as mental states rather than remaining caught by them.*

It's so quiet in here. Sometimes it feels like it would be nicer to just sit quietly. And yet my task here is to give a talk, and so I will break the silence.

The main practice that we're exploring here together is mindfulness. The Buddha offered instructions for us. One of the main teachings in the texts, called the Satipatthana Sutta, explores how we establish mindfulness and the kind of experiences that we attend to.

The Satipatthana Sutta describes four establishments of mindfulness. Sometimes the word Satipatthana is translated as "foundation of mindfulness," but Bhikkhu Analayo has made a case for the word "establishing" or "establishment." To me, that has a more resonant feeling, because what these practices do—these descriptions of these practices—help us to cultivate this quality of mindfulness so that it becomes established in our

minds, stable in our minds. That kind of stability, establishing stability, is another way we could look at what a foundation is. But to me, the word "foundation" sounds like a noun, and "establishing" feels more like an activity. And that's what we're doing: we're establishing mindfulness.

These four areas, which I'm not going to go into this evening in detail, I'll just briefly name. The Buddha explores establishing mindfulness of the body, which is very much what we're looking at in these first few days. Then feeling—whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant—the second foundation, mindfulness of feeling, or feeling tone as we sometimes say. The third foundation is mindfulness of mind states, qualities in our mind, wholesome qualities, unwholesome qualities. Particularly in this foundation we begin to understand the difference between wholesome and unwholesome qualities of mind. Such an important exploration for us in our practice.

The fourth foundation is a little harder to describe. It's called the foundation of Dhamma. Dhamma can be translated simply to mean experience, so basically mindfulness of experience or mindfulness of phenomena. But that particular part of the text explores mindfulness of phenomena—one of the definitions of the word Dhamma—through various Dharma lenses, some of the various lists that the Buddha talked about. In a way, this fourth foundation is exploring experience in terms of the Dharma.

So this is a little bit about what we explore in our mindfulness practice. But at the beginning of this teaching, at the beginning of the sutta, there are a few words, just a few sentences, where the Buddha encapsulates the teaching in summary before he goes on to elaborate it. There's one phrase that gets repeated a few times that basically defines what our mindfulness practice is. I'll read that to you.

This is repeated four times, one for each of the four foundations. The first time I say it, I'll use the body: "One abides, observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, putting away desires and discontent for the world." And he repeats that: "One abides, observing feelings as feelings, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, putting away desires and discontent for the world." And likewise for mind states and for phenomena.

I want to explore this sentence. What is it pointing us to? It really begins to help us understand what we're doing here—not only what we pay attention to, but how. How do we pay attention? What does wise mindfulness mean?

This definition includes the word "mindful." The establishment of mindfulness, the definition of how mindfulness is established, includes the word mindful, which is kind of interesting. I'll start with that word since it's the one we're most familiar with, just to make sure we're all on the same page around what mindfulness is.

Actually, the more that I practice, the more mysterious mindfulness seems to me. It seems more like a state than something we do. And yet there is a way in which we begin to get familiar with what it's like when we know that we're aware. Maybe that's a good working definition for mindfulness: knowing that we're aware, being aware that we're aware. Other words that evoke what this quality often means to us include "presence." Awareness is a good word, actually. I love the word awareness for mindfulness. To me, it's much more evocative of the quality of the feeling that's present when mindfulness is strong. The word "mindfulness" is such a technical kind of term, and it sounds mental. Mindfulness, when it's established, has much more of a...

It doesn't just feel like it's up here in the head at all. It feels much more pervading. And awareness has that quality for me—a sense of... it's got a softer feeling to it. The word awareness has a softer feeling. It feels more evocative to me of the experience that I've come to understand is mindfulness.

Sometimes we explore mindfulness through words like witnessing or observing. Other ways to touch into it more at the sensory level: the feeling of being connected with, feeling into, being with experience. These kinds of words evoke what we mean by mindfulness. And perhaps we could say in a more simple definition: we know what's happening while it's happening. In real time—he keeps using that phrase—in real time we know what's happening while it's happening.

Mindfulness, the quality that the Buddha talks about in the Sutta of establishing, points to a kind of mindfulness that supports us to understand what is skillful and what is unskillful, what leads us to suffering and what leads us away from suffering. This quality of wise mindfulness is based, I think, on an ordinary capacity of our minds—this capacity to be able to know that we know, this kind of self-reflective capacity that we have. It's a human capacity; not all animals have it, though apparently some do. But this is one of those things that really makes us human: this capacity to be aware of ourselves, to be aware that we are aware.

And yet this simple reflective capacity, the ability to know that we know—while I'd say that wise mindfulness is based on it, it's not the same thing. Wise mindfulness is more of a perspective, a way of turning that capacity to know that we know, to observe, to be with experience in a particular way.

To reflect on this a little: this morning when he brought up the example of somebody being angry, and they know that they're angry, that kind of knowing isn't exactly what we're talking about. Much of the time, if somebody's angry and you go up to them and say, "Do you know you're angry?" they'll say, "Duh, yeah, I know I'm angry." But what they are focused on, what they are attending to, what they are aware of is the content of why they're angry. It's focused on the situation about which they're angry. It is not generally curious about what does it feel like to be angry. That's the shift of wise mindfulness. We get curious about experience as experience.

Another simple way to reflect on what we're doing here: looking at experience as experience, as experience happening right now. It sounds like nothing. But this is not our usual perspective. This is not usually the way we go about relating to experience. Mostly we relate to experience from the perspective of: What does it say about me? What should I do about this? How can I do something with this?

Much more rarely—at least for me, until I actually met this teaching—and it was kind of not intuitive to me. I got this book; I was experiencing a lot of anger, and a friend of mine asked me if she could send me a dharma book. I said, "Well, nothing else has worked, sure, go ahead." I read this book and basically what I gleaned from it, in terms of my anger, was: try being aware that you're angry when you're angry. And I thought, what good is that going to do? Isn't that just going to make me more angry? But I had nothing else better to try.

So I tried it. And the first moment of waking up into it, it was like: oh, I told myself I'd be aware of this. And wow—this hurts. This doesn't feel very good. In just that simple instruction of knowing that you're angry when you're angry, it pointed out to me something very fundamental about that anger: it's painful. And in that experience, in that particular moment, what happened was: wow, I have no idea what to do with this. I guess I go back to work.

That actually, in retrospect, was a pretty powerful shift for me. In previous times when the anger had been running, it had just been running. The mind had been caught in the anger, thinking about the person I was angry with, spinning it up, and it was just amping up. It wasn't even possible to go back to work. I was just sitting frozen in front of my computer.

And so this simple, simple tool, the very first time I tried it, allowed me to recognize: wow, that hurts. Okay, don't know what else to do—I guess I go back to work. What a difference in experience.

To be curious about your experience as experience. We could say being curious about what it is like to be a human being experiencing whatever's happening right now. What's it like to be a human being feeling knee pain? What's it like to be a human being feeling vibratory energy in the body? What's it like to be a human being hearing? What's it like to be a human being experiencing frustration or confusion? This turns us towards the experience in and of itself.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta has these categories of what we pay attention to. It points to establishing mindfulness of the body, establishing mindfulness of feeling, establishing mindfulness of mind states, and establishing mindfulness of phenomena through a Dharma perspective or lens. We might think that this limits us in terms of what we pay attention to, but this set of descriptions of things to notice encompasses everything in our human experience. There's nothing you experience that is left out of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Whatever is coming up for you, there's a way in which we can attend to it from this perspective—being curious about it as experience.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta points to both what we attend to and how we attend to it. Being attentive to experience as experience is a key piece of this. In the definition itself, this comes out in the phrase that says "aware of" or "abides observing the body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states." This, to me, is what the Buddha is pointing to, and I'll get into that in more detail shortly.

I want to think about the words associated with this phrase: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, mindful, fully aware, putting away desires and discontent for the world." The first word there—abides—I love that word. It has an evocative feeling for me. If you're told to abide with something, how does that feel? Abide with your breath.

I was teaching this at one course, a kind of interchange—not a long silent retreat but a study course. I invited the room to offer phrases or words that the word "abides" evokes. Some folks said things like relaxation or home. These are some of the meanings of abide. Ease is a quality this word evokes for me. And somebody said, "What it brings up for me is 'the dude abides,'" from that movie The Big Lebowski. Well, yes, that's kind of what it's talking about! The dude abides at ease. No problem.

Now, it may not be that laissez-faire feeling of just "yeah, whatever." It's not that. But it is this quality of ease and relaxation. I love that this is the first word in this sentence. It has been a long time coming for me that relaxation was really understood to be a foundational part of the practice.

Our system, our organism, is kind of designed to be aware. This natural quality of mindfulness I spoke about earlier, this being aware in the present moment—a baby is born and that's what they are. They are just aware. You can see it in their eyes, how curious they are, alert and interested in what's going on. That's a natural quality in our system. What gets in its way is our mind being caught up in thoughts or worries or concerns. Tension in the mind gets in the way of this very natural capacity. And tension in the body affects tension in the mind. So if we can relax the body, we may find that it supports an easing of the mind, a relaxing of the mind.

I was talking to somebody in the last couple of days about how the face is so closely connected with the mind. The expression on the face and the feeling in the mind are very closely connected. There have even been studies about this. Just try it now: take in how you are in this moment. And now let the corners of your mouth turn up in a little smile and see what happens.

The studies show that the expression on the face can influence the state of the mind. Relaxing the face can help relax the mind. Relaxing the body can support relaxing the mind. And then there's more access to this natural capacity for being aware in the present moment.

We can begin to aim this awareness in the direction the Buddha is suggesting. So we don't just abide—this is where the Dude is not quite right. The Dude abides, full stop. The Dude abides. But the Buddha goes on: the practitioner abides *observing* the body as a body.

This word "observing" is significant. The root of the word is the same as what's in the word *vipassanā*. The *passanā* part means "to see." And the full word is *anupassanā*—that's the word translated as "observing." The commentaries say it has this feeling of being closely connected to, really engaged with. So: observing, seeing, connected with, closely connecting with. To me it's kind of like a meeting—meeting experience. There's abiding and meeting, connecting.

And what do we connect with? The body as a body. Feelings as feelings. Mental activity, mind states as mind states.

So what does this phrase mean—"body as a body"? I've explored it a little bit. To me this really points to what we almost think of as mindfulness. It evokes one of the more famous suttas, the Bāhiya Sutta, which perhaps one of us will speak on in more detail as the retreat goes on.

That sutta contains a famous instruction, a short instruction from the Buddha to someone who wasn't a follower but just kind of showed up and said, "I hear you've got good things to say. What do you have to say?" And the Buddha responded with a very pithy teaching: "In the seen is only the seen. This is how you should train yourself. In the seen is only the seen. In the heard is only the heard. In the sensed is only the sensed. In the cognized is only the cognized. This is how you should train yourself."

The teaching goes on to explore the ramifications of that exploration, which are understanding and freedom. But this seeing or observing the body as a body—to me this is pointing to something similar. In the sensed is only the sensed. In the seen is only the seen. It's not things added, extra ideas or concepts. It's coming to what we might call the bare experience, closer to it. What's actually happening?

We are often relating to experience through concept. At a very deep level in our human system, this is how we navigate the world in so many ways—through perception. We look out at the world, we look out in this room, and we see people and walls and fans and light and zafus. That understanding of what is seen happens because we have a lot of experience from the time we're born. We begin to be taught what things are. This shape is mom. This shape is food. We begin to make these associations.

And so perception at work helps us identify what's going on. But perception is a mental object, a mental formation. Perception doesn't happen at the eye.

Perception happens in the mind. And so in a very real way, as we're navigating the world, we are relating very much through concept—and we need this. There have been times when I've been meditating that the concepts around seeing fall away. And I do not want to get up and try to walk across the room when that's happening, because what remains is pretty much just form and color. The mind is not landing on the concepts.

So what is it in our experience? We get closer and closer to this. And in my experience, this is something that unfolds gradually. We don't start there, and we cannot try. Don't try to see things as just form and color—you will get a headache. But over time, we begin to recognize that perception is working, that ideas come in with perception.

And so we're not just seeing a person. We're seeing a person and we've already got, even before we meet somebody, a whole bunch of ideas about them. We have ideas about them based on how tall they are, how much they weigh, what their gender is, what their sexual orientation appears to be, what their skin color is. We have ideas

about them that we're bringing along because, again, this is the conditioning of being human. And it's natural for this to happen, these conditionings. What we don't often recognize is that they're happening.

And so "in the seeing, in the seen is only the seen" is recognizing, well, there's seeing. And "in the cognized is only the cognized"—wow, there's all these thoughts and ideas and attitudes and views happening about that seeing. We're not even trying to stop necessarily all the things that are going on, but it is helpful to recognize that these things are going on as experiences in the present moment, instead of simply being swept along by the beliefs and views that we carry.

There's a difference between believing something and acting out of that belief. That often happens—the beliefs are kind of undercover for us, oftentimes. They're hiding under the surface. When we don't know that they're there, we are just acting on them as though they are truth. We just assume that this belief is true, that that's the way everybody sees things—or everybody should see things that way, at the very least.

And so there's a big difference between believing something and acting on that belief, following that belief, and being aware, "Oh, there's a belief arising in this moment." Huge difference between those two. And so that's "in the cognized is only the cognized." Awareness in this phrase "mind aware of abides observing mind states as mind states"—a view is a form of a mind state. So that's knowing that mind state as a mind state: "This is a view that's arising." This is not our usual perspective.

And so we explore our experience. Right now we're focusing to some extent on the body. As Winnie said this morning, this is an easier place to begin to get a sense of what this kind of attention is like—being curious about body experience as body experience. The human experience of tingling and vibration and pulsing. Not so much in reference to I or me or mine. That's another piece, I think, of this instruction. Body as a body. Not my body, but a body. What is the actual sensation level of experience right now in your experience?

Abide observing the body as a body. And maybe just like the whole body—one place in the sutta says it's kind of sufficient to just know there's a body. Abide observing. There is a body. There is a body.

These two words together, "abides observing"—I like that they're combined because it to me brings together the kind of relaxed and alert quality we've been speaking of. It's connected and relaxed. Observe the body as a body. Abide observing the body as a body. And it also points to two aspects of attention, two ways of exploring attention. There's choosing what we pay attention to.

This is directing the attention. We've talked about this a little, and I've used the analogy of the radio—tuning the channel, tuning the station. So that's the aiming or directing. We're choosing which channel to listen to. Maybe for the anchor, for instance, we're choosing the breath, and so we tune to those sensations. That's the observing part, that attunement. We're directing the attention, aiming it in a particular way.

But then how do we meet that experience? With abiding—receiving the experience. To me, that word *abiding* also points to this receptive quality. Mindfulness can have a very receptive quality.

I'm going to get a little technical here, but I think this is a useful distinction to understand in our experience. There's a quality of mindfulness which is just this simple capacity to know that we know. And we're working on establishing a wise form of that knowing—one that is aimed towards or curious about experience as experience in the present moment. But mindfulness itself is just this simple knowing that we know.

Attention is a factor of mind that selects what we know. And this factor of attention can be directed. We can choose. We have a capacity—there's an agency in our system that can choose to aim the attention somewhere. So right now, I can suggest: attend to the sensations of your hands. Maybe you can attend for a moment to the breath. This is a function of our minds. We can choose to direct attention.

And yet this factor of attention is also something that, if we're not choosing where to put our attention consciously, our habits and patterns—how we've been shaped, how our conditioning has unfolded to this moment—will choose something for us to pay attention to.

In some ways it's similar to how the breath works. We can choose to breathe in and breathe out. We can control that to some extent. We can decide, "Okay, I'm going to breathe in now. I'm going to breathe out now." And yet we don't have to do that. If we don't, the breath will just breathe—fortunately. It's similar with this factor of attention. We can choose where to put our attention, but if we're not consciously choosing, attention will be connecting to something regardless.

So that's a little bit about attention. Now, how does that connect to mindfulness? Mindfulness and attention are not the same thing. We can know this through a simple remembering of experience we've all had—walking down the street, lost in thought, not consciously aware of our surroundings.

Recently I was driving to teach a class at the center where I teach in California. I was driving down the main road near where the center was, and I was tracking where I was and noticed, "Oh, the street that I need—I saw it. The street I need is coming up. I'm go-

ing to be turning left soon." Then mindfulness went away. Completely. And the next time I woke up, probably thirty seconds later, I was sitting at a stoplight. My eyes gazed up at the sign and it was like, "Oh, that sign says Whipple. I've gone too far."

There was no awareness of where I was during that time. In that moment, as mindfulness came back, I remembered what I'd been thinking about. So there was a kind of awareness of where the mind had been, what it had been wrapped into. But even in reflecting back, there was no remembering at all of seeing. I did not remember having driven past the intersection where I was supposed to have turned. I could remember what I'd been thinking about.

And yet, that absence of awareness, that absence of mindfulness—because it was absence of mindfulness—did not mean that attention was absent. Because I didn't crash the car. I managed to get through the stoplight and through the intersections and stop at the stoplight. I had no memory of seeing that stoplight and stopping there. I woke up sitting at the stoplight. And so attention was continuing. Perception was continuing, even though mindfulness was not there.

We can tell from this kind of example—and I'm sure you all have stories like this, where you're walking down a street lost in thought and suddenly it's like, "Wait, where am I?"—that mindfulness is this capacity to wake up into what's happening. And yet our system takes care of us. Perception goes on, mental formations go on, attention continues. Attention and mindfulness are not the same thing.

And yet early in my practice I confused them, because I thought that if I was not consciously choosing where my attention was, then it meant I wasn't being mindful. Paying attention to the breath, choosing that, being with the breath—I was being mindful. But as soon as my attention shifted to hearing, I thought I'd lost mindfulness. But that's just a shift of attention, and we can be mindful of that.

Mindfulness is kind of like a mirror. It's just reflecting all of these processes tumbling on—including attention, including perception, including all these body sensations.

One experience that often happens in the style of practice that we're teaching right now: we're encouraging you to rest, or have a preference for the anchor. And while you're doing that, a very common experience is we're with the anchor and then suddenly the attention is on the sound of a car going by. We didn't choose to have that happen, but it happened. We may feel like we lost mindfulness—"I didn't choose to do that, so that was not mindful." But what often is going on there, if you see that, is you're seeing a shift of attention. You're seeing the attention shift. And then because you're mindful, you can choose what to do next.

When the attention just shifts like that, it usually means that something strong is pulling the attention. And so we can be aware of that, as Winnie was describing this morning. When the attention is pulled to something else, we just practice being aware of that.

Sometimes this has been described as, if the attention is drawn to something else, you let go of the breath and turn to that. Well, but you've already let go of the breath. The attention has already shifted. It's more about having that "abides observing" quality come in with whatever it is—that hearing. "Oh, hearing. Abide observing hearing right now. Hearing as hearings."

For me, this was an important thing to begin to understand: that it didn't necessarily mean that mindfulness was lost when the attention shifted to something else. Sometimes it did mean that. It's a very common avenue for mindfulness to get lost. We're paying attention to the breath, or whatever our anchor is, and the attention shifts to something else. But our mind is kind of attuned to the breath, and then the mind goes off to that car, and thinks about cars, and thinks about driving down Pleasant Street, and what's at the end of Pleasant Street, and what maybe I can get in the store at the end of Pleasant Street—and we're gone. Because we didn't notice that attention shift. When we notice that, we just say, "Oh, it's hearing. Hearing is happening." And maybe recognizing the perception that comes with that hearing, seeing an image of a car in our mind.

I wanted to bring this in because for me, this phrase "abides observing" conveys both the receptive and directed qualities of awareness. We can attune the attention to an object and then receive. Just receive that.

The next word is *ardent*. The word itself doesn't have a juicy quality for me. Maybe it has a little bit of harshness or something, I don't know. For some people, it really evokes something. We're just using translations here. But what it points to is engagement, connection. Ardency—even the word "ardent" may have a connection to heart—so maybe it's heartfelt. A heartfelt connection to experience. This is, again, about how we attend. How do we attend to experience?

It also brings in something of energy. Attending with a persistent quality—engaged, diligent, wholehearted, heartfelt, interested. That word really resonates for me: interested. Interested in what's happening. Curious about what's happening. This is a quality that supports witnessing, observing the body as a body. Can we get curious about how this being actually works?

So ardency has this quality of energy and engagement and curiosity—an engaged quality. But remember, the instruction includes "abiding." Abide ardently. This brings a different quality to it for me. Abide with interest. There's a kind of relaxation and alertness again. One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, curious.

One abides observing the body as a body, curious, interested, fully aware. This next word, *sampajañña*, is sometimes translated as "clearly comprehending." One of the main ways this is spoken to—the way most people are familiar with—is in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, in the Foundation of the Body. There's a section on clear comprehension, full awareness, where the instructions are to be aware of all your activities. When walking, know that you're walking. When standing, know that you're standing. When walking back and forth, know that you're walking back and forth. When carrying something, know you're carrying it. When eating, know you're eating. When being silent, know you're being silent. Simply an awareness of what's happening, of all activities.

Elsewhere in the suttas, however, clear comprehension is defined in a more subtle way. It's defined as experience being understood as it arises, remains present, and passes away. Essentially, being curious about the impermanent nature of experience. Fully aware that experience is not stable—it's arising, persisting, and passing away.

To me, this phrase brings in some of the wisdom component. Several of these elements have brought in the wisdom component. "The body as a body" brings in some wisdom because we're encouraged to drop below the level of concept. We begin to recognize how much we often overlay onto our experience through the concept of self, through ideas and views and beliefs. That brings wisdom into this definition. But this phrase also speaks to some of the understanding that begins to happen as we attend to our experience in this way. We begin to understand its impermanent nature.

As we begin to understand this impermanent nature, the whole project of the way we usually go about our lives—holding onto things, hoping that we can arrange our lives, get things we like, get rid of things we don't like, construct a world in which we'll only have pleasant experience—we realize that whole project is hopeless. It's not useful. And so this begins to help the mind let go of craving and clinging.

Yesterday Rebecca talked so much about *dukkha dukkha*, the craving around unpleasant experience, the craving to get rid of it. As we begin to see the impermanent nature of experience, the holding on to something or trying to control it or manipulate it—the mind begins to understand that this project actually creates stress. The craving itself is already stress in our system. Not useful.

Now, that doesn't mean we don't take action. There are times in our experience when we see things that are unjust, harm being caused in the world. Becoming aware of that, yes, there might be craving or aversion. And yet there is also the possibility of being motivated by compassion to alleviate that suffering. This is a kind of understanding that begins to happen as we explore our experience in this way.

The Buddha at one point heard that in his home country there were warring factions fighting over water. He went and stood in the middle of the battlefield and tried to stop the water war. He took action—but not out of anger, not out of hatred. Out of compassion.

When we're hooked into the view or belief that craving has—the delusion embedded in craving—we think we've got to do this thing, and we've got to do it on our terms, otherwise everything's going to fall apart. What can happen as craving begins to fall away is that we discover a whole host of different reasons to act that are based not in greed, aversion, and delusion, but instead in wisdom, generosity, kindness, compassion. These qualities are active. Craving is a mind state that motivates action—it tends to motivate us to do things dictated by that craving.

Compassion is also a mind state, and it motivates action too. Wisdom acts. Compassion acts. As the craving begins to fall away, we find there are other reasons we would engage in the world.

When we're caught by craving, craving has no clue that there are other possible motivations for acting in the world. It has us caught in that belief that if I weren't angry about this, why would I do anything? If I weren't angry about it, I'd be like, "Yeah, the dude abides." But that's not what happens.

Through this kind of training, as the heart releases greed, aversion, and delusion, beautiful qualities—the Brahma Vihara qualities of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity—begin to arise as the emotional map of a heart that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion. And these are what motivate us to act in the world.

This full awareness, this attuning to the changing nature of experience, begins to support the understanding that craving is not the only motivator out there. It supports the mind releasing craving and beginning to see that there are other motivations that take us through the world.

There's one more phrase which I'll say something briefly about—the last phrase. I'll read the whole thing again: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, curious, interested, mindful, fully aware, putting aside desires and discontent for the world."

Sometimes this is translated as "free from desires and discontent for the world." That's a pretty high bar. I'm not there yet. Bhikkhu Anālayo points out that the Pali term can actually be understood as an active verb—so "putting aside" or "setting aside." That's how I chose to speak it: setting aside desires and distress for the world, freeing oneself from. It can be understood as a process that happens as we engage in this practice, not something we have to accomplish first, but something that unfolds while we practice in this way.

To me, this points to what we've been exploring about allowing what's happening. "Free from desires and discontent for the world"—the phrase "the world" often points to the world of experience. The Buddha says, "What I mean by world is this fathom-long body, the experience of this fathom-long body." So free of desires and discontents in relationship to experience, the experience that's happening.

Freeing oneself from desires and discontent often unfolds as we begin to recognize and explore the possibility of allowing what's happening. Whatever's happening, we've said this many times, it's okay. The breath can be as it is. Body sensations as they are. Can we explore this possibility of allowing it to be as it is?

And yet it's not always possible. There's body sensation arising and the mind doesn't like that body sensation. There's aversion. Can there be an allowing of both of those? What's happening right now is unpleasant body sensation—that's the body in the body. Feelings in feelings. And there is aversion arising—mind states in mind states. Can that be allowed?

For me, at a certain point, it was kind of like, "Oh, that's what's happening. There's an unpleasant sensation and I don't like it. Of course, of course I don't like it. Okay, I can allow that to be what's happening." And there we are, stepping into freeing ourselves from desires and discontent. Because when we're caught by aversion—this is pointing to the difference between being caught by aversion and knowing that aversion is happening. Maybe the aversion doesn't go away in that moment, but the relationship to it becomes very different.

Caught by the beliefs around aversion—"I've got to fix this, I've got to get rid of this"—versus simply recognizing, "Oh, aversion is arising." There is a huge difference between these two.

And so, can it be allowed? That's how this process of freeing the mind from desires and discontent unfolds. When there's discontent about something that's happening—oh, discontent is arising. Can I allow discontent? Freeing ourselves from being caught by discontent, we come to know it simply as an experience. We abide observing discontent as discontent—curious, fully aware, mindful.

Let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 17

Mindfulness of Feelings (Vedanā)

Andrea Fella · 1h01

In this dharma talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of vedanā—the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality present in every moment of experience. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), she explains why the Buddha considered this simple aspect of experience important enough to constitute its own foundation of mindfulness, particularly due to its intimate relationship with craving and the arising of dukkha.

Fella illuminates how feeling tone functions as a mental process, not an inherent quality of objects themselves. She shares contemporary neuroscience research demonstrating that the same physical stimulus can be experienced as painful or pleasurable depending on context and expectation—findings that align remarkably with early Buddhist psychology. Through personal examples, including her vivid experience with freshly picked apples and her investigation of aversion during walking meditation, she shows how views, beliefs, and expectations profoundly condition our experience of pleasant and unpleasant.

The teaching emphasizes the crucial distinction between vedanā itself and our reactive responses to it—the difference between the "first dart" of unpleasant sensation and the "second dart" of aversion that multiplies our suffering. Fella explores the neutral feeling tone as territory that becomes increasingly accessible as meditation deepens, while also cautioning about the mind's tendency toward boredom or habitual patterns when pleasant and unpleasant fade. Understanding feeling's impermanent and conditioned nature, she suggests, naturally supports the mind in releasing its grip on craving and aversion.

Happy Halloween.

This is a tradition here at IMS, the pumpkins. And it's a real act of love on the part of the staff. In the last few days they've been in the staff dining room carving pumpkins. It's been so much fun to see just how engaged they are, and how much they do this for you and for themselves as well, partly because the act of generosity feels good. It's a delightful part of the tradition here. I hope you all got to see them in the dark. But if you didn't, you get another chance at the chanting tonight.

This morning Greg spoke about an aspect of our experience that is present in every moment: whether our experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. The Pali word for this is vedanā. As Greg mentioned this morning, it is the second foundation, the second establishment of mindfulness.

This very simple aspect of experience—the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality—the Buddha found important enough to emphasize that it gets its own foundation. He emphasizes it a lot in his teachings, this noticing of the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral aspect of experience, partly because of its relationship to craving.

When the mind is caught or doesn't understand the nature of suffering—when there is a kind of ignorance or delusion about how suffering comes to be—then when pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling arises, it will lead to craving. In the case of pleasant experience, it will lead to liking, wanting, greed. For unpleasant experience, it will lead to not liking, not wanting, wanting to get rid of—aversion. Neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience we often miss entirely. Or we space out around it. Or we get bored. We think it's unimportant in some way. We crave something other than that neutral experience, or we crave a kind of follow-on. I'll speak more about that later.

The Buddha pointed to vedanā as a very important part of our understanding. When we can start to be aware, when we can be mindful of the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality, then that awareness can short-circuit the seemingly automatic movement to greed, aversion, or delusion.

I want to read a little piece of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta on this aspect. I'll remind you of the phrase I spoke about last week: "One abides observing feelings as feelings, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desire and distress for the world."

This section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta continues: "And how does one abide observing feelings as feelings?" This is acknowledging that the earlier phrase is shorthand, and with each of the establishments of mindfulness, the Buddha goes into more detail.

The instructions in this part of the text are really simple. I think Greg said it this morning, but it bears repeating: "And how does one abide observing feelings as feelings? Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel an unpleasant feeling.' When feeling a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling.'"

Pretty simple instructions. And yet the feeling which is arising in every moment of experience—every contact with the senses, every sight, every sound, every smell, every taste, every touch, every experience arising in the mind—has a feeling tone that arises with it. The feeling tone is conditioned on that contact. If the contact doesn't happen, the feeling tone doesn't happen.

Every moment of experience, this feeling tone is there. It's understood to be a universal aspect of every moment of experience. There's always a feeling tone present. And yet we often miss it, partly because it can be a subtle aspect of experience.

The neutral, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, is a particularly subtle aspect of experience. And there's a range, at least in my experience. It's not like an on-off switch with pleasant. There's a range—maybe subtly pleasant or very pleasant, slightly unpleasant or extremely unpleasant. These feeling tones tend to bubble into our consciousness on the ends of the spectrum as they get stronger.

Partly too, we don't notice the feeling tone. "Feeling tone" is often the way we translate *vedanā*, partly to distinguish it from the word "feeling." It's not feeling as emotion; it's just this very simple aspect of feeling.

In our usual way of navigating the world, we are responding and reacting to feeling tone, essentially trying to create conditions where we accumulate pleasant and get rid of unpleasant. When we don't understand how suffering arises, when we're not clear about the process by which we get caught, then our usual tendency is this: when there's something pleasant, we like it and we want it. We want to hold on to it. There's greed around it. When there's something unpleasant, we don't like it, we want to get rid of it. There's aversion there.

Very often, with our habitual tendencies, we miss the actual experience of pleasant and unpleasant because we're so busy responding or reacting to it—trying to hold on to it if it's pleasant, trying to push it away if it's unpleasant. We leap over the pleasant or unpleasant in favor of doing something about it.

The Buddha pointed out that not only is this feeling tone a universal experience, happening with every sense contact, but it is also present for everyone, including people who are fully awakened. This immediately puts a damper on the idea that if we become fully enlightened, we'll never experience anything unpleasant again.

The Buddha says: "An untaught worldling"—someone who hasn't met the Dharma or is caught in the views of needing to get what I want, needing to get rid of what I don't want—"experiences pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, and neither pleasant nor un-

pleasant feelings. A well-taught noble disciple likewise experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant feelings. So what's the difference between them?"

He goes on to say: "When an untaught worldling is touched by a painful bodily feeling, they worry and grieve, they lament, beat their breast weeping, and become distraught. Thus they experience two kinds of feelings, one bodily and one mental. It is as if someone were pierced by a dart, and then following the first piercing is hit by a second dart, so that person will experience feelings caused by two darts."

This is our habitual response to feeling before we learn the Dharma, before we learn about the value of wise mindfulness.

"In the case of a well-taught noble disciple, when touched by a painful feeling, they will not worry nor grieve or lament, will not beat their breast and weep nor become distraught. Only one kind of feeling is experienced, a bodily one, but not a mental one. It is as if someone were pierced by a dart but was not hit by a second dart following the first one."

What he's pointing to is this: when someone who hasn't met the Dharma is touched by an unpleasant feeling, they react with aversion—"woe is me, this is a problem, got to figure something out, got to fix it, got to get rid of it"—or they collapse in despair. When a person who has understood the Dharma experiences an unpleasant feeling, they simply experience an unpleasant feeling. It doesn't ripple on.

This teaching points to the difference between the unpleasant experience, or the pleasant experience, and our response to it. We might think that the unpleasant and the not-liking of unpleasant are the same thing, that aversion would automatically be there with the unpleasant. Likewise with pleasant—there's often a very quick follow-on of liking and then wanting. But that liking is different from the pleasant itself.

It is possible to experience unpleasant and have zero ripple in the mind of not-liking. It is just unpleasant feeling. It is possible to experience pleasant feeling and not have a ripple of liking in the mind. It is just pleasant feeling.

This points to our habitual movement from feeling tone—a kind of leaping. When our mind is in its ordinary state, carrying the view that pleasant is good and unpleasant is bad, that we need to have pleasant and get rid of unpleasant, we leap past the feeling itself.

When there is feeling arising in a mind state of ignorance and craving, the mind will leap off of that unpleasant or pleasant experience right into greed and aversion. When the feeling tone is not seen, it becomes almost like a launching pad into dukkha. So it's really worth starting to be curious about it. When that feeling tone is met with wise mindfulness, there doesn't have to be this automatic, habitual movement from feeling to craving to clinging to identification to suffering.

The feeling tone is understood to be associated with every experience that we have. Every physical experience, every mental experience, every sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, everything arising in our mind—there's a feeling tone associated with it. This feeling tone itself is understood to be a mental process.

The aspect of vedanā is understood to be one of the five aggregates, the five processes of body and mind that make up the whole of our sense experience. These five aggregates include the bodily processes or physical form, then there's feeling—this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral aspect of experience. Then there's perception, the recognition piece we've talked about a little. There's mental formations, the intentional and motivating aspect of our experience. And then there's consciousness, the quality or aspect of our minds that knows things.

The Buddha divided up our experience this way. Everything that we experience will have these five threads coming together in some way. Every experience is a kind of weaving of these five threads. In the five aggregates, one process is bodily; the other four are understood to be mental processes. Feeling, the experience of feeling something, is understood to be put together by the mind. Perception likewise, mental formations likewise, consciousness. These are all mental functionings.

Feeling is understood to be mental, even the feeling associated with physical sensations. This might not be so intuitive, so let's explore that a little bit, because it points to something pretty important about feeling tones. The feeling tone is not in the experience. It's not inherent in a sense contact. There's a sense contact, and then processes in the mind, out of conditioning, put together the feeling.

Here's a study. I want to just say that the current psychological and neurological research agrees with the Buddha here—that feeling is mental. There was a study done about the feeling of pain, and the lead-off is: pain isn't always a pain. Sometimes it can feel good.

The way they did this study is they had two parts to it. In the first part, people were exposed to a series of stimuli that were either moderately painful or not painful. They rated the moderately painful stimulus, like a mild electric shock, to be painful.

In the second part of the experiment, they were exposed to either a moderately painful or a more strongly painful experience. They were warned ahead of time—shown a screen that told them what kind of stimulus was going to be coming up. And in the rating of this part of the experiment, the moderately painful sensation was rated as pleasant.

I'll read a little bit about this because the researchers were surprised by this result: "Interestingly, participants rated the moderate pain as actually pleasurable in the second setup, when the alternative was the intense pain. During the moderate stimulus in the second setup, participants' brain activity also showed less activation in the pain region of the brain, the brain stem, and more activation in a region in the middle of the frontal lobes that's associated with pain relief and pleasure."

So it wasn't just what they were reporting. Their brains were actually experiencing pleasure with this moderately painful stimulus. The researchers said, "The likely explanation is that the subjects were prepared for the worst and thus felt relieved when they realized the pain was not going to be as bad as they feared. In other words, a sense of relief can be powerful enough to turn such an obviously negative experience as pain into a sensation that is comforting or even enjoyable."

This points to how conditioning affects whether we experience something as pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. I experienced a little bit of this myself on one three-month retreat—I think it was my first three-month retreat. It was during part one, where they had cut some of the apples, taken some of the apples off the tree.

They were freshly picked apples, and I had not had many freshly picked apples before. When I put this apple in my mouth, it was incredibly pleasant. That experience was very strong. The taste was there, but the pleasure was like bubbles of pleasure throughout my whole body.

That evening they had apples and bean dip, and there was something else—I can't remember what else there was. So I had a taste of bean dip. The bean dip had a completely different flavor to it. It was kind of pleasant, but nowhere near as pleasant as the apple. And then when I had a bite of apple following the bean dip, it was even more pleasant. Something about the contrast of the bitterness of the bean followed by the tartness and sweetness of the apple—it was like the pleasantness was even stronger.

And then as I went on, I noticed that more exposure, that expectation part—like in the experiment, something about the expectation affected the feeling tone. In this case, the expectation of pleasant seemed to diminish the pleasant. Over time, the subsequent

bites of apple, the last slice of apple, it was kind of pleasant, but it was not that burst of rapture. It was like, "Yeah, that's a pleasant apple." A different experience, same apple, same tongue, different expectations, different conditions.

The feeling tone is not in the experience. It's not in the object. It is created in dependence on that contact, along with a whole host of other things going on—views and conditioning and beliefs.

So it can be useful to play with feeling tone, to begin to get familiar with it. The other day in the morning instructions I mentioned that sometimes when we give instructions, it's helpful not to try to do it too much because it might tie you into knots. I would say in this case, you probably don't need to spend the entire day looking at whether you can feel pleasant or unpleasant—that probably will tie you into knots. But on occasion, it can be useful to just be curious: What is the feeling tone here? What's going on? Is this pleasant or unpleasant? Spend some time familiarizing yourself with this aspect of experience, because it does tend to be a subtler experience that we don't have much practice being aware of. It can be useful to take a little bit of time and check in: Can I know the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral aspect of experience here?

Probably the easiest place to begin this exploration is in our physical bodies, especially the touch sense. The nerves of our skin are very wired into this part of the brain that feels pleasant and unpleasant, or interprets things as pleasant and unpleasant. So that can be a good place to check in. Maybe we particularly gravitate toward or notice unpleasant experience in the body. Or maybe we're starting to notice a quality of pleasantness with the breath.

A great exploration around unpleasantness is if you have an itch. An itch is one of those experiences that is almost universally felt as unpleasant. It's a buzzing experience, in my experience. It comes and goes as I've explored and investigated it. It's like a little zinging experience in a very small location that goes zzz and then stops and then zzz. It's almost like a little mosquito underneath the skin. But from my knowledge, nobody has ever died from observing an itch. So while it can drive us nuts, it's a great place to begin to explore pleasant and unpleasant, and also to explore how it's impermanent, how it comes and goes with the sensation. The itch, at least in my experience, has this on-off quality. If we're exploring the unpleasantness of it, we'll see that when the sensation stops—that itch sensation will be on for a few moments and then off, then on and then off—if you are aware of the unpleasantness there, you'll feel also that the unpleasantness stops when the sensation stops. Just exploring that.

And then also exploring the relationship to unpleasant. This is another big piece of the exploration—not only to get familiar with the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but to get familiar with our habitual responses. When there is that unpleasant experience, what does our mind do with it? Usually it's averse. It wants to get rid of it.

It wants to reach up and scratch. It wants to fix it, to change it.

So noticing the aversion, and noticing too an important piece which, as I mentioned earlier, is that the aversion and the unpleasantness are different. They're not the same thing. The aversion is a response to, a reaction to, the unpleasantness.

What we might notice as we explore this is how, when the aversion is strong, there's a multiplicative effect. It's like the two darts. There's the unpleasantness and the aversion, and it's like they multiply each other. It's like ten times ten equals a hundred. The unpleasantness becomes ten times ten—a hundred.

Then you might see that when the aversion weakens, maybe down to three or four, then instead of being a hundred, it's like thirty—the experience of unpleasantness. We can see how with the shifting of the aversion, the overall experience of unpleasant changes. And how we attribute, in effect, that multiplication of the aversion with the unpleasantness—we attribute the entire thing to the sensation itself.

But as we see that shifting of aversion, we might begin to recognize: oh, actually the experience of unpleasantness here is not as strong as I thought it was. We begin feeling how the aversion amps it up. If we can actually connect with the actual experience of unpleasantness, we might find that it's almost an anticipation, or it's the idea of the unpleasantness, that adds to or multiplies with that sensation.

Sometimes it's the idea that this is going to last forever. So not only are we feeling the unpleasantness of this split second, but our minds are picking up: this is going to last for the rest of the sitting. We're picking up the additional forty minutes and multiplying all the unpleasantness by forty minutes, experiencing that multiplication.

So noticing the experience, the unpleasantness, and then what the response is. The aversion and the greed tend to be in relationship to the pleasantness and unpleasantness. We might think that we're reacting to the itch, or we might think we're reacting to some actual quality of the object itself. But our system, our minds, are reacting more to the pleasantness or unpleasantness. It's a very basic part of our minds. It's a kind of normal or natural part of our minds too, evolutionarily. Even single-celled creatures move towards nourishment, towards food, and away from noxious chemicals in their

environment. Single-celled creatures have this kind of movement towards what we would call pleasant and away from what we call unpleasant. It's in our evolutionary DNA, this relationship to pleasant and unpleasant.

And yet in our system, in our human system, a single-celled organism doesn't have any choice in this matter of moving towards pleasant and away from unpleasant. In our case, this is not a hardwired reaction. It is constructed in the mind. We can begin, in experiencing the pleasant and unpleasant, instead of reacting automatically out of aversion and greed, to act with wisdom and compassion.

It's not necessarily that we just sit there and let a painful experience continue. In sitting, sometimes we talk about how if there is a painful experience—if you're experiencing a kind of pain where there's numbness that continues for quite a while after you get up—that's probably damaging a nerve. We encourage people not to physically damage themselves. But that experience of unpleasantness, of feeling the pain, and the recognition that this is a painful sensation that is not helpful for the health of the body—the decision can be made to shift posture, not out of aversion, but out of understanding and compassion.

This teaching might be misunderstood to suggest that all we're supposed to do is sit there passively experiencing this flow of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. That's a training we do to begin to understand how our aversion and our greed are reactions to the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. And yet there is this possibility—the Buddha, as he said, experienced pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. There are stories of the Buddha telling Ānanda, "I'm not going to give the dharma talk tonight. My back is in too much pain. I'm going to do some lying meditation. Would you give the dharma talk, Ānanda?" And I have to understand and assume that this was not coming out of aversion, but just out of understanding.

So noticing the experience, the physical experience, and what's the feeling tone. Noticing the relationship to it. You can also recognize and be aware of the feeling tone associated with mental experience. Some of these are easier than others. Happiness, for instance, does have a pleasant quality to it. A lightness, and the mind feels delighted, and that's got a pleasant quality to it. Fear also often has an unpleasant quality to it. Anger often has an unpleasant quality to it. So we can also be aware of the feeling associated with our mind states. Thoughts may have a subtle feeling tone associated with them.

Maybe not. Some thoughts may or may not carry a feeling tone. The feeling tone might be pleasant or unpleasant, or often, particularly with thoughts, the feeling tone of the thought itself might be neutral. What often happens is that a thought turns into an idea or a belief or a view, and then emotions come in with that, and then there's a

whole collection of feelings that arise in association with the thought. So thoughts can have very complex layers of different feeling tones associated with different threads of what's happening in connection with that thought. Sometimes in our exploration, we can't necessarily say that in this moment it feels only pleasant or only unpleasant. Maybe it feels like it's flickering between pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral with these experiences in the mind—our views, what we're thinking, what we're believing.

This is actually a big part of the conditioning associated with feeling tone. What we believe, what we're thinking, what's in our minds at the time something happens has a significant effect on how we experience something as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The study I mentioned—the expectation of moderate pain versus very painful experience, the expectation of less pain creating a sense of relief—affects the feeling tone. So views, beliefs, agendas, and expectations are one of the leading causes of feeling tone, one of the leading reasons why we feel something as pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

As an interesting exploration, I heard this teaching from the Abhidhamma, which is an early commentary on the suttas. The Abhidhamma gets very precise about things; it chops experience into little bits. It says that the feeling tone associated with our physical touch sense will be either pleasant or unpleasant, but will not be neutral. So our physical touch sense—the feeling that's constructed in dependence on our physical touch sense—the Abhidhamma says, is going to be pleasant or unpleasant. Now I have to say, right off the bat, that I don't know whether this teaching is true. I don't fully believe it myself. But I found it to be a very useful and interesting exploration.

So physical touch sense: pleasant or unpleasant. The other physical senses, the Abhidhamma says—sight, sound, smell, taste—neutral, will not be pleasant or unpleasant. And then there is the mind, where there is the full range of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. The understanding in this teaching is that any time we see something and interpret that sight as pleasant, it is not the sight itself that we're experiencing as pleasant. It's something going on in our minds—a subtle belief, a view, a perception that we interpret as pleasant or unpleasant.

Hearing this, I thought I'd explore it a little bit. Intellectually, it made sense to me in some way, because I know how the eye works. What happens in the eye is that light hits the retina and there's form and color. That's all the eye actually sees; the only contact that's actually there is form and color. There are no objects there already. The objects are created through perception, that mental experience. So if we're perceiving something, looking out and seeing a beautiful flower or seeing a decomposing corpse, from

the eye's perspective—the pure sight—it's just form and color. It takes the mind recognizing it as a beautiful flower, as a decomposing corpse, before there is that quality of pleasant or unpleasant. The form and color is just going to be neutral.

This became an interesting exploration for me. When I'm taking some sense experience to be pleasant or unpleasant, what's going on in the mind? What's happening there?

There was a time, one night, when I woke up in the middle of the night and was having trouble sleeping, so I decided to meditate. This was at home. I had a spot in my room where I would get up and sit to meditate. I often found that if I sat and meditated for half an hour or forty-five minutes, when I went back to bed, the mind would be very relaxed and fall back asleep easily. So I got up and sat.

This one night, as the meditation went on, sometime into the sitting I began hearing a very quiet noise. It sounded like it was in the wall, just a little scratching noise—that kind of sound. My experience was that it was unpleasant. I noted that as unpleasant and went back to my breath or paying attention to whatever was present. Then the sound would come back and I'd notice it as unpleasant. At one point—the sound came back many times during the sitting—I noticed a subtle flash of fear. And the fear was definitely unpleasant. As I watched that and kept watching it, I began to see there were maybe some thoughts, even images, like the image of a rat in the wall. This was unpleasant. As the mind began to see all these different components—when the sound came back and I recognized that the mind was reacting to the idea that it was a rat in the wall with some fear—when I heard the sound again, I realized the sound itself was pretty neutral.

What was going on was that the interpretation of the sound was what the mind was reacting to.

This kind of exploration can be very interesting for us. What are we actually reacting to? You're sitting in the hall and you hear a noise. If there's aversion with that noise, is it the noise? Is it the sound itself? Maybe you're exploring, experiencing that sound as unpleasant. But is it the sound itself that's unpleasant? Or is it some idea that your mind has created that's unpleasant?

This was mind-blowing to me. I began to see that when I was averse to things, I was not averse to what was actually out there. I was averse to something my mind created. I started to feel so amused by this. The mind creates something and then hates it. Does it have to do that?

I would say that most of our reactivity—though I don't know whether this teaching that taste and smell and sound are inherently neutral is entirely accurate. Particularly with taste, I think there may be something in the taste itself, like those taste buds at the back of the tongue that kind of gag if something bitter passes over them. Maybe there's something inherently unpleasant there. I don't know. But I have found this teaching interesting in terms of curiosity about what I'm actually reacting to. What is actually unpleasant when there's aversion? When aversion is happening, there's a kind of curiosity: what is the mind actually reacting to?

At one point I was doing walking meditation in the hall just on the other side, the upper walking room. I experienced a lot of aversion in walking meditation. I had aversion to the people around me. Greg mentioned the other day that he appreciated when people moved over and let him squish in. Well, when that kind of thing would happen, my aversion would go through the roof. I probably looked fine, but I was working intensely with my aversion.

One time a person came in and squeezed right next to me. This mushrooming of aversion happened. I thought, okay, Carol said that when there's aversion happening, there's something unpleasant going on. What is it? So I started getting curious. I went through all of the senses. Looking at the person—they were not unpleasant physically. Check, that's not it. They didn't smell bad. They weren't touching me. I went through all the senses. None of those physical senses was where the unpleasantness resided. Well, it must be something in the mind. But I didn't see it. I didn't really see what was going on there. So I just kept walking back and forth, asking: what's going on in the mind that there's something unpleasant there?

And then I saw a thought. The thought was: they're weird. My justification for that was that it was the middle of winter, freezing cold, and they had bare feet. As soon as the mind saw that—saw that this was what the aversion was about—the whole thing just collapsed. And in the next pass, there was mettā for the person.

Curiosity about this can be so powerful.

Exploring neutral is also tremendously helpful. Neutral is that place where we often don't even notice it. We kind of blow right over neutral experience. But as our meditation deepens, as our mind becomes more balanced with greater equanimity, there tends to be more neutral available. Partly this is because our minds, in their habitual reactivity, are constantly searching out pleasant and unpleasant. I definitely noticed this at one point.

One of my teachers asked me to just close my eyes and let my attention roam through my body, choicelessly allowing it to land on something. And he said, "Okay, and do it again. And do it again." I was doing this in silence, and he just kept guiding me. "What's the next thing your attention lands on? And the next thing?" He used the word "choiceless" there—just don't have it be a choice, just let it land.

When he stopped me in the exercise and asked what had happened, I said, "Well, you know, I wasn't searching anything out, but it couldn't possibly have been completely choiceless, because every single thing my mind landed on was unpleasant." Every experience my mind picked, every most obvious thing it oriented to, was unpleasant.

I understood in that moment that it was a conditioned kind of habit of the mind. This mind has had a tendency towards aversion. And what does an aversive mind do, actually? It searches out the unpleasant so that it can get rid of it, so that it can fix it. That was like a revelation to me—to see that this mind is not just receiving information neutrally, like a camera and a microphone. It's filtering things in based on habit, based on a habit of aversion in this case.

Some of you may have more of a habit of greed. You might walk into a room and immediately think, "Oh, I like that plant. Look at these pumpkins—they're so cool!" There might be a tendency to gravitate towards the pleasant. We all may have an underlying tendency in one direction or another. But as the mind gets more equanimous, these underlying tendencies weaken, and we start to be more in contact with the neutral. This begins to be a whole new terrain to explore.

A couple of things from my own experience exploring this terrain of neutral. One thing I began to see is that when the mind got more into a place where there was neutral experience—not a lot of pleasant or unpleasant—if the mind was present, able to be with it, there was quite a bit of continuity of mindfulness. But if the mindfulness weakened from that place of neutral, the mind would orient to its most familiar habits.

I was doing walking meditation and experiencing quite a bit of neutral, just noticing the experience. I'd also heard my teachers say this is a sign of equanimity. So I was thinking, "Ooh, this is good." I was leaning into the experience, anticipating that maybe something really good would happen—something I was looking for as proof of something or other.

I was just experiencing neutral and more neutral and more neutral, and nothing "really good" happened in the way my mind expected. When nothing really good happened, the mind immediately went into, "You're a failure. You screwed up. You don't

know how to do this." This was one of my big patterns—this self-negativity, a self-hatred kind of pattern. "You're a failure, you're no good." Out of nothing, out of neutral experience, this is what the mind created, partly because that was a strong habit of mind.

Fortunately, this time I did see it. I saw that first thought—"you failed"—and I could see the movement towards the whole pattern of "I'm no good, I'm a failure" that would cycle into self-hatred. But seeing it, it could fall away.

So exploring what's happening around neutral is valuable as well. Sometimes neutral can lead to boredom. Nothing's happening, and we want something more pleasant—or even some highs and lows. That's what we've been attuned to. As experience gets more neutral, there can be a sense of, "Is this all there is? Is this what I'm supposed to be doing? There must be something better that's supposed to be happening."

So the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* suggests simply recognizing what kind of feeling is happening. When feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands when feeling a pleasant feeling. When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands feeling an unpleasant feeling. Simple. It doesn't say try to get rid of unpleasant feelings. Judge unpleasant feeling. Just know it. It's there.

It's said in many places in the suttas that there's an emphasis on understanding the impermanent nature of feeling. This is understood to lead to freedom—understanding feeling as it arises, persists, and passes away. So that's another piece of the exploration, to be curious about. Notice the impermanent nature of feelings.

We can also, through that, understand that it's unreliable—this kind of attribution of reliability to pleasant and unpleasant. As an aversive type, I would get stuck to unpleasantness, trying to get rid of it. It would be like if this table were something unpleasant, I'd be stuck to it with superglue, trying to push it away. Other people may have a different response to unpleasant. They may, knowing unpleasant, kind of go, "Oh, this is unpleasant. Let's find something pleasant." So there are different responses.

But as we begin to understand the impermanent nature of feeling, the very kind of attachment with superglue to something unpleasant almost creates a solidity to it. The aversion is creating a kind of solidity to that unpleasantness. If we actually look at the unpleasantness itself, we'll see it's coming and going. It's not a reliable place to stick to something trying to get rid of it. Likewise with pleasant—it's coming and going. It's not a reliable experience upon which to hang our hopes for happiness. It is just a fleeting experience.

So familiarity with feeling tone, noticing its conditioned nature, noticing its impermanent nature, its unreliable nature—this will support the mind letting go of its habitual activity of craving the pleasant, craving to get rid of the unpleasant.

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 18

Relying On This, Abandon That

Andrea Fella · 54 min

In this continuation of her exploration of vedanā (feeling tone) in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), Andrea Fella examines the distinction between sāmisa (worldly/carnal) and nirāmisa (unworldly/spiritual) feeling tones. She explains how worldly feelings are connected to sense experience and keep us bound to habitual patterns of craving, while unworldly feelings arise from wholesome states such as concentration, insight, generosity, and the brahmavihāras. Importantly, she notes that unworldly feelings can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—the distress of renunciation and the longing for freedom are themselves wholesome unpleasant experiences that motivate practice.

Andrea draws on the Buddha's own journey, describing how he discovered that the pleasure of concentration and wholesome states provided an alternative to sense pleasure, leading to his teaching "by relying on this, abandon that." She explores this principle through the famous simile of the raft, illustrating how we must hold onto the Eightfold Path to cross the flood of suffering, yet eventually release even our attachment to the practice itself. This teaching acknowledges that some clinging to wholesome states may be necessary while working with deeper patterns of suffering.

The practical wisdom offered here is that suffering itself becomes our guide—we work with the most obvious suffering first, and as that releases, subtler forms of clinging become apparent. Andrea emphasizes that this letting go happens not through force of will but through the mind's natural movement toward well-being when it receives clear information about the nature of craving and its consequences.

Last week in talking about feeling tone, I ended up getting about halfway through the talk, so this week I'm going to finish that and then we'll see how far I go.

The halfway point was basically about a third or halfway through the section of the Satipatthana Sutta that describes the practice of working with feeling tone. Perhaps that's surprising because it's such a simple section of the sutta. I read last time that the section begins: "When one feels a pleasant feeling, one understands, I feel a pleasant feeling. When one feels an unpleasant feeling, one understands, I feel an unpleasant feeling. When one feels a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands, I feel a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling." We explored what that meant and how that might be helpful.

The sutta continues to further distinguish types of feeling tone by what the text calls —the word in Pali is a little hard to translate, apparently—samisa. There are two sides of it: samisa and niramisa. Roughly it means "of the flesh" and "not of the flesh." So the sutta distinguishes feeling tones into feeling tones of the flesh and not of the flesh. There are different translations for this: worldly and unworldly. Bhikkhu Bodhi in one version of his translation uses "worldly and unworldly," and in another version he uses "carnal and spiritual." One teacher describes it as feeling tones associated with the path of practice or not associated with the path of practice—the "of the flesh," the worldly feeling tones, not on the path, not associated with the path, and feelings associated with the path of practice.

I'll read this in one of Bhikkhu Bodhi's translations: "When feeling a worldly pleasant feeling, one understands, I feel a worldly pleasant feeling. When feeling a worldly unpleasant feeling, one understands, I feel a worldly unpleasant feeling." You get the drift. "And when feeling an unworldly pleasant feeling, one understands, I feel an unworldly pleasant feeling," and so forth.

So what is this distinction? Bhikkhu Analayo points to it as possibly being a kind of ethical distinction around feeling tone, with ethical meaning what supports the path of practice, what is onward leading. This begins to ask us to explore the kinds of feelings that we have in terms of what kinds of feelings are supporting the path of practice and what feelings are perhaps keeping us more habitually hooked in our usual modes of experience, our usual ways of wanting things to be a certain way.

This worldly or "of the flesh" feeling tone, my understanding is that it's basically feeling tones associated with our sense contacts: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch—things associated with our usual sense experience. Also with ideas that arise in the mind, thoughts about things. For example, there might be pleasant sensation associated with the taste of food. That would be a worldly pleasant experience. There might be a pleasant experience associated with the thought of food. That would be a worldly pleasant mental experience. These are the kinds of feelings that we're familiar with in our everyday lives, and they tend to be what drives us to stay hooked into the sensory realm, the sense experience.

That teaching Rebecca pointed to on viparinama dukkha, the dukkha associated with pleasant experience—the gratification, the danger, and the escape—is a way for us to understand that the danger, the viparinama dukkha, is the danger hidden in pleasant experience: that tendency we have to crave it, to get hooked to it, to want more of it.

That very being hooked to it, that very wanting, keeps us on this wheel of just having to get more of what we like and get rid of what we don't like. This is one way perhaps to understand what the worldly feeling tone is.

The unworldly feeling tone, my understanding, is feeling tones associated with wholesome emotions, those wholesome states of mind that lead us towards freedom, that lead us to let go of greed, aversion, and delusion. These are feelings connected with the path of practice, feelings associated with concentration, understanding and insight, feelings associated with generosity, the brahmaviharas. We're speaking about the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral aspects of experience, and many of these wholesome states —which Winnie spoke about the other night, the cultivation of the wholesome states— many of them have a pleasant feeling tone.

Happiness has a light and uplifting, very pleasant feeling. Happiness, joy—these are pleasant experiences. Concentration creates a kind of unified state where the unification is pleasant, and the happiness and joy that come with that unification are pleasant. The seclusion from the hindrances is very pleasant—the "bliss of seclusion," as concentration is sometimes called. The experience of being free from the hindrances is very pleasant. These would be understood as being the pleasure of the path.

The Buddha, at one point in his journey, is said to have discovered and said to himself that he had gone through this exploration around indulging in pleasure, being indulged in pleasure as a child. Then in the path of meditative practice, he learned the concentration states and experienced a lot of pleasure there. But that wasn't what he was looking for. Those states of concentration weren't what he was looking for in terms of freedom from suffering, because he found that when coming out of them, the suffering was still there.

It hadn't transformed anything just to go into the states of concentration.

And so he began trying different practices. He began trying mortification practices—extreme, unpleasant practices—depriving himself of food, refraining from breathing for long stretches of time until, it is said, he felt like his head was splitting open.

He experimented with these different practices that were available at the time and found that they weren't the answer to his question: Is it possible to be free from suffering? Is it possible?

It is said that as he was practically nearly dying—the description of his body after doing these mortification practices tells us that he could touch his stomach and feel his backbone, that's how thin he was—he realized, "This is not the way either. I'm going to die before I find whether it's possible to be free of suffering."

And so he began nourishing himself again.

After he recovered his health, he was reflecting on his life and on some of his experiences as a child. I think they arose spontaneously. He remembered this experience when he was a child, sitting under a tree watching his father, and he apparently—I don't know how old he was—spontaneously went into a concentrated state.

His reflection in that moment was: Is that kind of concentration something to avoid? Is it something to fear? Is that pleasure—that kind of pleasure—a kind of pleasure that is not supportive of the path?

And his mind answered the question: No, actually that kind of pleasure feels supportive, it feels helpful.

And he said, "I wonder if that's the way—exploring that kind of pleasure." And the answer he got was that he thought it was.

So he began a new kind of journey and exploration.

These wholesome qualities are on the path. We find them, along with the pleasantness that comes with them, as we practice. And we find, as Winnie was describing, that they are cultivated as we explore working with our difficulties. Even exploring being with anger and frustration and confusion—the quality of being present can create an almost pleasantness.

I've experienced seeing anger arise and feeling joy in the seeing of it. And that joy is this kind of unworldly pleasure, because the heart and mind are resonating with "this is the way, this is the direction towards freedom"—this kind of understanding, this kind of relationship to experience.

There are many kinds of unworldly pleasant experience associated with many of these wholesome emotions: the pleasure of generosity, the pleasure of ethical conduct, the recognition of the bliss of blamelessness, the gift of fearlessness.

And then there's even the simple happiness that comes—a delight, a pleasure—as we come into present moment experience. I know many of you have talked about this. Some of you have described it as the world seeming to sparkle. Just to open your eyes and take in your sense experience—there's pleasure.

This may seem like the pleasure of sense experience, but I think it's really connected to the wholesomeness of being present. We can be walking and see a pile of dead wet leaves and be in awe of that. That's probably not because dead wet leaves are inherently pleasurable to look at, but because the mind is so present that it's experiencing things in a different way.

This too is a kind of unworldly pleasure—the pleasure of being present. Things that wouldn't normally be what we would be drawn to become sources of wonder.

Sometimes we can tell the distinction here because—well, it can go either way. I have been on retreat and seen something like that, and it's like, "Wow, I need to take a picture of that"—grabbing onto it, feeling like I need to hold onto that.

We can and we do cling to these unworldly feeling tones. The unworldly feeling tones do not make us immune from craving and clinging to them.

Many of you have also described how, having some kind of experience—a sitting where things are particularly clear, for instance—the next sitting or the next day there's this craving to get it back, trying to make it happen again. "What did I do? How did I do it? I can't make it happen. I'm doing something wrong."

What's wrong with me? And so we cling. We can cling to these wholesome thoughts and these unworldly pleasant states. And then we suffer, and so we get the feedback that it's not helpful to cling to those either.

But this unworldly feeling, as the sutta describes, it's not just pleasant. What would unworldly unpleasant feeling be? I've wondered about this. I've explored what it might be. What are wholesome emotions that are unpleasant?

There's a little hint in the suttas. There's one place where it describes what's called the distress of renunciation. It says something like there's a kind of longing for freedom from suffering, that kind of movement or wish to be free from suffering as we experience dukkha. And maybe we've had a taste. Sometimes it comes particularly after we've had a taste of a different way, after we've had a sense of meeting dukkha just as it is and having that recognition of, "Oh, this isn't such a problem. It's just unpleasant experience happening," and the mind kind of settling and relaxing around it. There's an understanding that there's a different way to meet experience.

Having had that taste, sometimes when our minds go back to their habitual ways of relating to experience—the ways in which we are clinging instead of recognizing, "Oh, it's just something arising, it's just a thought arising, that's all that's happening"—that recognition is a place of insight, that kind of understanding. "Oh, it's just a thought

arising." No reactivity in the mind around what's arising. When there's no reactivity in the mind around what's arising, that's a state of insight. And it doesn't last often. It's impermanent. And so we find our way back to our ordinary, usual way of relating to things. We start to experience again the habitual ways in which we cling, and we feel like we've done something wrong.

Partly because we have tasted it. Sometimes when we've tasted that flavor of release from suffering, when the habit of suffering returns, this kind of longing can arise. I've heard some of you talk about it. And while it can be mixed up with aversion or greed, there is often a piece of it that is connected with the wish for our own well-being, with the movement towards freedom. And so this is described actually as a wholesome unpleasant experience—this longing for freedom, the pure longing for freedom.

This is connected in a way with the state of mind of samvega, the motivation. This longing for freedom motivates the practice. And so that's a piece of its wholesomeness, its motivation for keeping us on the path, as opposed to throwing up our hands and saying, "Well, I think I'll go back to watching all those movies instead."

There's another description of unworldly pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience based in insight, based in understanding the impermanent nature of experience. Three different descriptions, very similar at the beginning. It says understanding things are impermanent and unreliable, understanding their nature to decay and end—sometimes joy arises. So understanding the impermanent nature of experience, sometimes we experience joy in that place. Sometimes we experience that, as Rebecca pointed to, when there's an ending of something that's unpleasant, there can be joy in that just because of the ending of the unpleasant.

But there can also be a kind of delight just in the seeing of—not because it's pleasant or unpleasant, but just in the seeing of this being doing its thing, witnessing this being's nature, the nature of the experience to be coming and going. It can sometimes be a very delightful experience when we touch into that.

And at other times, touching into that deep impermanence, that things are falling away, this recognition that there's nowhere to land, no place where there's a reliability where the mind can land there and say, "Oh yeah, that's where I'll be. That's where I'll be happy." Sometimes the seeing of the impermanence takes us to this place of longing for freedom, takes us to a kind of distress about the unreliable nature of experience, the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience.

And so sometimes the experience around impermanence can be received and felt as pleasant, sometimes as unpleasant, and sometimes as neither pleasant nor unpleasant—the place where sometimes we touch into that impermanent changing experience and the mind is just balanced.

There's equanimity in the mind—no particular feeling tone, just the understanding of the impermanent nature of experience.

As the mind moves into insight and understanding, different feeling tones can arise connected with these understandings. This is simply something useful to be aware of: unpleasant feeling does not always mean you're not on the path.

There's a teaching in one sutta that connects these feeling tones to a different way of expressing them. I mentioned it briefly earlier around the distress based on renunciation. Bhikkhu Bodhi makes the connection between worldly and unworldly feeling tones and another expression, which speaks about the joy, distress, and equanimity based on the householder life, and the joy, equanimity, and distress based on renunciation.

In that teaching, there's a fascinating way in which they're all linked together. In the Satipatthana Sutta, the text basically encourages us to notice when unworldly unpleasant feeling is arising. So this teaching in the Satipatthana, to me, helps us begin to distinguish those feelings on the path from those not on the path—those feelings that tend to keep us stuck in the usual habitual ways of relating to the world, versus the feelings related to the onward-leading nature of the path. The Satipatthana Sutta offers just a distinction, an understanding of the difference between them.

In another text, the Buddha begins to explore what sounds to me like a stair-stepping process of how we learn to let go, how the mind learns to release its clinging. The sutta says that when we're experiencing worldly pleasant experience, we can transcend it by relying on unworldly pleasant experience.

What does that mean? The Buddha describes his own experience: "Before my enlightenment, when I was the unenlightened bodhisattva, I clearly saw how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and much despair, and how great the danger is in them. But as long as I had not attained to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sense pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I could still be attracted to sense pleasures. But when I clearly saw, as it actually is with proper wisdom, how sense pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, much despair, and how great is the danger in them,

and I had attained to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sense pleasure, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I was no longer attracted to sensual pleasures."

So that phrase in the sutta—by relying on the pleasure of concentration, by relying on the pleasure of wholesome states, or something more peaceful than that even—I think he's referring to the pleasure of Nibbana, of freedom, but also to the pleasure of insight, the pleasure of understanding, the pleasure of being present and seeing things as they actually are. By relying on that pleasure, abandon. By relying on this, abandon that. By relying on unworldly pleasant, abandon the attachment to worldly pleasant.

There's a whole stair-stepping that he does in the sutta, and I'm not going to go through the entire thing. I simply want to reflect on this phrase: by relying on this, abandon that. And perhaps describe some of the ways in which I've experienced this.

The joy of renunciation, the joy that comes with understanding, the joy that comes with concentration—these provide a deeper kind of pleasure that helps us understand that the joy and delight of sense pleasure pales in comparison. And so it becomes easier to let go of that neediness. When we've tasted something different, it becomes easier to release the less wholesome ways our mind has been relating to the world.

And yet then we may crave the concentration. This is what I was just speaking to. By relying on concentration or understanding—there are different ways in. I've seen in my own experience that sometimes, just by relying on mindfulness and wisdom and the understanding that comes from meeting dukkha, being with anger, being able to watch it and see it fall apart, a deep sense of ease and peace enters the mind connected with that seeing and understanding.

Yet then we get attached to that kind of doing. Steve Armstrong, I believe, coined this phrase: we have a particularly good sitting, and the next day we're really struggling to get back to it. He said, "There's nothing like a good sit to ruin your day." That's the craving for that state. So that's not helpful either.

What we start to see is that there are times when we may be holding on to some kind of practice in order to let go of something more painful—picking up the metta practice, for example, when anger is really strong. Perhaps there's a recognition of clinging to the metta practice for dear life so that we can navigate, balance the mind around the anger. Then maybe the anger begins to weaken and fall away. There may be some clinging to that metta. Yet the clinging to a particular practice that helps us let go of some reactive, unwholesome state of mind—perhaps that clinging to the wholesome state, to the metta, is partly what allows us to release the unwholesome state.

By relying on this, abandon that.

But then we're going to at some point have to work on the clinging to the practices, the clinging there.

My own experience with this is that my early practice was so much around exploring anger and self-hatred. And there was some clinging to the practice, clinging to being a meditator. The very first meditation retreat I sat, I could see myself beginning to create an identity as a meditator. But there was a real usefulness to it for years—it helped the mind learn to work with and let go of those really deep patterns and habits around anger and self-hatred.

I wasn't at that point experiencing any suffering around the identity of being a meditator. I mean, I could see that I was identified. I heard the teachings about not being identified. And fortunately I didn't say, "Oh, I shouldn't do that. I shouldn't be identified with being a meditator," because then I wouldn't have done anything. Sometimes we may have to hold onto something in order to meet or work with much more challenging experience.

And then there was a certain point in my practice where that identity of being a meditator—where that sense of investigation was really a big place around the identification, the capacity that this mind has to look into experience and pull it apart and understand all of the different things going on. There was a lot of that kind of putting things under a microscope in my early years of practice.

That putting things under a microscope was helpful for some time. But then there came a point at which that putting it under the microscope was actually experienced as suffering—that sense of, "Oh, there's something happening. Let me find it and look at it and figure it out." That was experienced as suffering because what was being observed was not the bigger, more major kind of suffering. That larger suffering had been obscuring the subtler suffering of the identification with being a meditator, the identification with being someone who could investigate well. But at a certain point, when a certain level of suffering falls away, we get to look at subtler levels of suffering, such as the suffering around the practice itself.

So sometimes I say we can let suffering be our guide. If you find yourself clinging to the practice a little while observing something very difficult, it's possible that this is serving you in that moment. If you're not experiencing the suffering in the practice itself, and the suffering is more in whatever you're working with—the anger or the self-hatred, the confusion or the fear—then that subtle clinging to the practice may be a kind of craving that helps you overcome craving.

There's actually a phrase in the suttas that says exactly this. I was really happy to read it because it matches my experience. I'll paraphrase, since it uses words we haven't defined yet. It's Ananda speaking to a nun, and he says to her: "It is by relying on craving that craving is to be abandoned. There is a case where one might hear that such and such a person has become completely freed of suffering. And hearing that, one may have the thought, 'I hope that I too one day will become completely free of suffering.' And then at a later time, one abandons craving, having relied on craving."

By relying on this, abandon that. In this case, relying on a kind of craving toward wholesome states—that wish for freedom being a wholesome wish—the teaching here acknowledges that craving. When we rely on something in that way, because of how the practice is framed, as the bigger craving gets abandoned, we start to see more clearly. We're looking at craving. We feel the suffering of craving. We've abandoned a bigger craving—oh, here's some smaller craving. And we may even feel it more strongly. This exploration of where the craving is takes us deeper and deeper into subtler and subtler kinds of craving. We may be craving the practice, craving holding on to the practice, craving freedom, craving liberation.

There's another analogy that really speaks to this principle of "by relying on this, abandon that." Many of you have heard this analogy—maybe even all of you—the simile of the raft. In this simile, the Buddha describes coming upon a flood of water, where the near shore is dangerous and you need to get to the far shore to find safety. In order to cross this flood, he says, you can build a raft. Build it out of what's around you. Just build a raft. And using the raft, floating on the water, using your energy, paddling with your hands and feet—I've got this image of lying on the raft, paddling with hands and feet to get across to the far shore.

In this simile, the Buddha describes that the flood is basically the flood of suffering, the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion, and that the raft is the Eightfold Path. He describes that the raft is like the Eightfold Path, and so we use the Eightfold Path to cross the flood. By relying on the Eightfold Path, we manage to float on the surface of the water instead of drowning in the suffering, instead of drowning in the greed, aversion, and delusion.

We manage to stay afloat. We can't let go of the raft in the middle of the river. And perhaps we even have to hold on tightly to that raft. If there are rapids or big waves in the water, we may have to hold on tightly, even cling to that raft to get across. It's not useful to say, "Oh, clinging to the raft—I better not do that. Let's throw the raft away

while we're in the middle of the river." So by relying on this, we can abandon that. By relying on the practices of the Eightfold Path, we can get across the flood. We do get across the flood.

And the teaching goes on. As you cross the flood, as you get to the other side, the Buddha asks: is it useful to pick up that raft and say, "Wow, this raft has been really helpful. Let me carry it around with me on my head"? No, that's not useful. There is a point at which we put down the raft when it's no longer needed to support us in crossing the flood. And so the Buddha at the end of this teaching says that we need to abandon clinging even to wholesome states—how much more so to unwholesome states? And yet this analogy points out that we have to hold on, at least, maybe even cling to wholesome states while we're crossing the flood.

I think partly this is pointing to not picking up the teachings as a thing, carrying them around with us, saying, "I am a Buddhist. This is what I do. This is who I am." That's not relevant or necessary at a certain point. So by relying on this, abandon that. Eventually the teachings let us know there's a possibility of complete release of clinging.

As I mentioned earlier, I feel like we do have to recognize the suffering of clinging to wholesome states. That will be something we need to work with at some point. We'll recognize it. The whole way the teachings are framed is so beautiful because we're always looking at where the suffering is, where the clinging is, where the most obvious suffering and clinging are. Initially it's at this grosser level, and then it becomes subtler. And yet we're always looking at that and exploring the possibility of letting go. That letting go happens not because we decide to let go necessarily, but because understanding develops as we observe what it's like to cling. So that's the practice.

We recognize that clinging is happening. That experience when we're suffering from having had a good sit—a good sitting that has somehow ruined our day—what's the clinging there? The mind having an idea that this experience isn't good enough. Some agenda that something else should be happening. There's this idea that the sitting yesterday meant something, and that its not happening now means something else. All different ways in which our mind is tying itself up in knots, trying to get back to something, as opposed to recognizing in the first place: this is what's happening. There's clinging happening—wanting that state back. And if you look, you're not clinging to the state. You can't cling to that state. It's not here. You're clinging to some idea in your mind. You're clinging to a thought. It's amazing what our minds will cling to.

So we can see what's happening right now. There's a thought in the mind that some other thing would be better, and the mind is holding on to that. Being with that, noticing that, we feel the suffering of it. And it's not a mistake to feel the suffering of it. This is part of how the learning happens.

It kind of feels to me that there's this movement, this direction our system—our organism—wants to move in: the direction of well-being. Very naturally. And there's just been a fundamental misunderstanding about how that's possible.

The mind has all kinds of ideas and views and opinions that obscure or get in the mix in terms of this movement toward well-being. It's as if the system is moving toward well-being, and our thoughts interject: "Oh, this is how we should get to well-being—get what we want, get rid of what we don't want." Our thoughts, habits, and conditioning co-opt that natural movement toward well-being into a set of behaviors that actually keeps us caught in suffering.

Our minds are fundamentally confused. Really.

As we start to turn toward experience and look at it directly, we see: this is the experience of suffering. When I'm wanting something to hold onto or wanting to get rid of something, the experience of the wanting or the aversion—the greed or the aversion—is already suffering. We fundamentally jump over that to: "It's going to be great when I get that thing. It's going to be so great when I get rid of that thing." And we are missing completely that we're suffering right now.

What the practice does is point out that suffering right now, in the greed and the aversion. This is not a mistake. This is actually how the practice works. As our system gets better information, it starts to recognize: "That's not helpful. That way lies suffering. Let's let go of that." The wisdom of our system begins to help the mind let go of the suffering. We don't do that ourselves.

There are times in our practice where we do have a sense—we see, "Yes, that's catching me up. Maybe I should set that aside." But this deeper kind of letting go happens because the mind is understanding at a very deep level: that way lies suffering. It's just not going there. This is a movement of our system, our organism, wanting to move in a wholesome direction. When it gets the information about greed and aversion and delusion, it starts to let that go.

The path of letting go eventually releases all of these ways in which we cling. The Buddha expressed the possibility that it's possible to be completely free from clinging, completely free from craving, completely free from suffering. And in that place, there's the putting down of the path.

It's an interesting image, the putting down of that raft. Our normal minds might think, "Well, if we put down the raft, how do we do anything? How do we orient our minds?" The understanding is that wisdom, love, and compassion will orient the mind toward wholesome action, naturally.

There's a teaching in one of the suttas that describes how someone who is fully awakened possesses the Eightfold Path—actually, the Tenfold Path. There are two more factors that relate to freedom: right understanding and right liberation, right release. This possessing of the path is understood to be simply the natural effect, the natural consequence. We don't have to try to be ethical at that point. We don't have to pick up the path. It's living us, we could say.

The expression of someone who has crossed the flood, released greed, aversion, and delusion, is to live a wholesome, ethical life with freedom.

CHAPTER 19

Neither Tarrying Nor Hurrying

Andrea Fella · 51 min

In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella shares reflections from her own three-week retreat practice, centering on a powerful teaching from the very first sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. The Ogha-taraṇa Sutta (SN 1.1) presents the Buddha's paradoxical response to how he crossed the flood of suffering: "By neither tarrying nor hurrying did I cross the flood." Fella unpacks this evocative simile, explaining how the flood represents not external circumstances but the internal flood of greed, aversion, and delusion in our minds.

The talk explores how tarrying—getting stuck on experience—can arise from both greed (clinging to pleasant states) and aversion (obsessively trying to fix or remove what's unpleasant). Similarly, hurrying can manifest as grasping after the next pleasant experience or rushing away from discomfort. Fella connects this teaching to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's (MN 10) instructions on knowing contracted and distracted mind states, suggesting these energetic qualities offer a simple way to check our mental balance.

Drawing on her meditation imagery, Fella describes how she came to understand that the tarrying and hurrying themselves create the flood—without them, there is simply experience arising and ceasing, moment by moment. She connects this insight to the understanding that all experience is dukkha in the sense of being unreliable and impermanent. This teaching offers practitioners a fresh way to investigate balanced awareness: rather than analyzing whether greed or aversion is present, simply notice if the mind is stuck to something or rushing past it.

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to sit a three-week retreat. That's the longest stretch I've been able to do this year. I appreciated it when Greg said the other day that we could think about how, a couple of days ago, we were starting a three-week retreat. It was great—a lovely stretch of time to settle into practice. I hope you're settling in here in the first few days of your three-week retreat.

When I'm on retreat, often some snippet of poetry or phrase from the suttas can arise in my experience, much as Jaya was describing last night—how our mind can connect or resonate with texts or poems that we've been exposed to. Sometimes it can seem like those arise at just the right moment, almost like an instruction appearing in the mind.

On this three-week retreat, there were a couple of phrases—not whole poems so much, but really just a few very succinct phrases—that kept coming up. Each time they came up, they would illuminate something in my experience, some way in which I was holding or grasping after something, and they supported a letting go. So I thought I would share with you some of those reflections that came for me, partly on that three-week retreat that I sat in May.

This particular phrase that I'd like to explore with you is from a very brief sutta. I'll actually read most of the sutta to you tonight. It just kept resonating for me over and over on the retreat.

The sutta I'd like to share with you is the very first sutta in the collection of discourses known as the Connected Discourses of the Buddha, or the Samyutta Nikaya—the very first sutta you run into there. It's very short and succinct, and it's a simile. The Buddha often taught in similes and analogies, and I've of late, in the last few years, really appreciated diving into the similes because they are so evocative.

This is a way in which a particular piece of this simile arose for me as an image in the mind. Similes often evoke images for us, and I think the teaching power of similes is that they can connect to us on many different levels. They can connect to us on the intellectual level, through meaning, and they can also connect with us on a very evocative level through the imagery that's created. This is mostly how this particular simile came for me during this retreat.

This simile is of water—a flood simile. I mentioned the flood last week in my talk. I talked about the simile of the raft a little, and how we cross the flood by using the Eightfold Path. We build a raft out of what's around us, cross the flood on the raft, and then let go of that raft once we've crossed over.

In this simile, there's a flood again. The flood is understood to mean the flood of our suffering, as it is in the simile of the raft. But in this particular image, the Buddha does not have a raft. It's like he's crossing a flood with just his body, walking across the flood.

The imagery of the flood resonates for us. Unpacking the simile a little bit, looking at the various pieces of it—the flood of our suffering, the flood of the ways that we struggle—that language even resonates for us. We talk sometimes about feeling like we're drowning in our emotions or moods, feeling like we can't get our head above water. This imagery speaks to us of a flood of struggle.

In thinking about this flood and its imagery, it seems like something in the conditions of the world. In our experience of suffering, we often connect to stuff happening. Stuff does happen in the world. People engage in certain ways that feel harmful, or there are circumstances or conditions that feel out of our control. Things happen in the world that are a part of why or how we are suffering.

And yet the pointing in the Buddhist teachings, over and over again, is that it's not the stuff. It's not the stuff that is the real suffering. That's actually really good news for us, because if it were the stuff, it would be hopeless. We couldn't become free from suffering. We cannot control the conditions of the world in the way that we'd like them to be.

Yet fortunately, in this teaching the Buddha says it's not necessary to fix the world to be the way we'd like it to be. Instead, he points to this relationship in our mind—how we are with that stuff that's happening is the crucial part of whether or not we suffer. If we are reacting to it out of greed, aversion, confusion, or delusion, we will be drowning. We will be struggling. We'll be feeling like we're swept away, like we can't get our head above water.

This is the flood that's being referred to.

Not the flood of stuff happening in the world, but the flood in our minds of greed, aversion, and delusion. The Buddha offered a very succinct definition of freedom: the ending of greed, the ending of aversion, the ending of delusion—this is Nibbana, this is freedom.

With this simile of crossing the flood, I think the first thing to take in, having understood a little bit about what this flood is—this flood of greed, aversion, and delusion in our minds—is that it is possible to cross the flood. There is hope.

The sutta begins with the Buddha meditating in a grove. A deva came to him and asked, "How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?" The Buddha responded, "By not halting, friend, and by not straining, I crossed the flood." The deva asked, "But how is it, dear sir, that by not halting and by not straining you crossed the flood?" The Buddha replied, "When I came to a standstill, friend, I sank. But when I struggled, I got swept away. It is in this way, friend, that by not halting and by not straining, I crossed the flood."

There is a little more to the sutta, but this is the bulk of it—a pretty succinct and brief teaching. And yet it can evoke quite a bit for us, so I want to take some time this evening to unpack this simile with you.

One thing I like to do when I reflect on a sutta is remember that it's a translation. I find other translations because different language lands for us in different ways. Certain words have more of an evocative feel, resonate more fully for us. Sometimes different translations pull out different subtleties of meaning.

The translation I read for you today was Bhikkhu Bodhi's, and it is not the phrasing that resonates most with me. There's another phrasing by a translator, Jnanananda, that uses the words: "How did you cross the flood?" And the Buddha responds, "By neither tarrying nor hurrying, I crossed the flood." That language is what came up during my retreat, and it was very evocative for me. For this mind, for the way my own mind works, that language lands more with how my mind functions in terms of clinging to things or sticking to things—holding on, tarrying with something, spending excessive time with it, or hurrying, rushing past it. That language is very evocative for me.

Another translation from Thanissaro Bhikkhu: "Without staying in place and without pushing forward, I crossed the flood. When I stayed in place, I sank. When I pushed forward, I got swept away."

What this describes is a kind of what we've been exploring in some of the teachings here. This is a description of how the Buddha met suffering. He's walking across the flood—not hurrying, not straining, not tarrying, not hurrying.

The commentaries say this imagery is meant to be a little paradoxical for the mind. When we normally think about crossing a flooded stream, what would we do? We would stop. We'd search, look for a place to get a toehold. Put our foot down, make sure it's stable, hold it there, and then maybe quickly move the other foot to get to that spot. Then do the same thing—look for another toehold. In actually crossing a flood, we would probably do exactly the opposite of what this teaching tells us.

The commentaries say it's meant to startle the mind a little bit. It's like a koan: What does he mean, "By neither tarrying nor hurrying I crossed the flood"?

This speaks to how we are on the path. It's really a succinct description of how to be connected with experience. It's not so much about what we're experiencing, although the flood is understood to be the flood of suffering—and that's what we're meeting in each moment. Neither tarrying nor hurrying, neither stopping nor straining with this flood, just very calmly moving on.

This is about how we meet experience. It's the attitude of mind that Sayadaw U Tejaniya refers to: How are we in relationship to experience? This neither tarrying nor hurrying speaks to a balanced attitude of mind. In Sayadaw U Tejaniya's words, this kind of balance means being at ease with whatever arises moment after moment, not reactive.

checking in on our experience, checking our relationship to experience. And we've encouraged you to do this at times. It's like, what's arising? And then how are we in relationship to it? If we're looking at a pain, for example, and there's aversion in the mind, that aversion needs to be acknowledged. If there's a thought pattern going on and the mind is reactive to it, if we're not noticing the reactivity and we're trying to observe the thought, probably that reactivity is driving how we are being aware of the thought. And so this checking into the relationship is an important piece to recognize whether the mind is balanced in relationship to what's happening.

So being at ease with what's happening moment to moment, Sayadaw U Tejaniya speaks about checking in. Is there greed in the mind? Is there aversion in the mind? Is there delusion in the mind? The three roots of all of our suffering. And so this balanced attitude is one where there is not greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind.

And yet here in this sutta, the Buddha is not using that language. He's using a different imagery around what it would mean to be on this path with a balanced mind. Neither tarrying nor hurrying, I cross the flood.

Another piece of this teaching that I find inspiring, that helps me in reflecting on my own experience, is the next phrase. How, dear sir, without tarrying, without hurrying, did you cross the flood? And the Buddha responds, "Well, friend, when I tarried, I sank. And when I hurried, I got swept away. So without tarrying, without hurrying, I crossed the flood."

Now this is the Buddha describing his own practice and acknowledging, when I tarried I sank. The Buddha acknowledging he sank, he drowned in suffering in his practice. The Buddha acknowledging he got swept away in his own practice. So to me this is somewhat inspiring because it's like, oh yes, I'm not alone when I'm drowning. The Buddha drowned too. And he didn't give up. He looked at his mind. He began to check in. What are the conditions here? What's going on? And from this teaching, what he's saying is that he understood that the tarrying and the hurrying were the cause of the drowning and the being swept away. It's not the flood that's the culprit. It's the tarrying or the hurrying.

And so beginning to look, well, what's the possibility? What's the possibility in the practice? Is there some agency here? There's not so much agency about the stuff that's happening in the world. Sometimes we can change things that are happening in the world. But where is there some capacity for this being to act? Maybe not about how other people are behaving towards us, but maybe about how we are in relationship to it. Agency in our practice.

He was looking at the conditions of the experience and seeing that certain aspects of the experience were possible to work with within this being, and other parts of the experience weren't something that could be changed. And so looking at what, based on the conditions, what can we do? This is what we're doing here. We're looking at the conditions and exploring how we can learn about the conditions that lead to suffering and how we can learn about the conditions that lead to freedom. It's looking in our experience.

And we've talked a little bit about how this works. Mindfulness and wisdom paired together make this work for us. As we observe our experience, we get to know what's happening. And everything that's happening in this hall is conditions. The dharma talks are conditions that plant seeds in your experience. What's arising in your experience is a piece of what you know and what you learn. The instructions to be present and aware are there, and the mind has interest to act on them.

None of this takes an entity, none of this takes a self to do this. It's simply the way that mindfulness and wisdom inform us.

We've talked about how with mindfulness and wisdom watching anger or frustration or confusion or greed—when we watch that with mindfulness just as an arising, recognizing "this is what's arising in this moment"—the mind learns something different about it. We begin to understand the vast difference between being caught by a reactive mind state and being aware that a reactive mind state is arising. In that difference, the mind learns something fundamentally different about that experience and how it is contributing to its own suffering. Wisdom begins to support the mind in letting go. And so mindfulness is a huge support for us in navigating these conditions.

This is what I believe the Buddha was doing. He was looking at the conditions and seeing that this aspect of tarrying and hurrying was somehow participating in the drowning and being swept away.

There are many different ways tarrying and hurrying come up in practice. As I reflected on these words and the feeling of the experience—because that's what was happening in this particular retreat this past May—the feeling of tarrying and the feeling of

hurrying was what was being pointed to as this phrase arose in my mind: "By neither tarrying nor hurrying, I crossed the flood." Sometimes it was an image of the Buddha walking across the flood that arose in my mind—just very calmly, with that calm abiding, walking across this mass of flooding water.

As I explored these words, there was a clear felt sense of this quality of being stuck to something, of tarrying with something—or a felt sense of skipping over, rushing past something. These experiences seem to be a different way into exploring that balance of mind than reflecting on things as greed, aversion, or delusion. In some ways it felt simpler. Is the mind stuck to something or is it rushing past something?

The mind being stuck to something could be greed, having us stick to something pleasant. "Ooh, this is really pleasant. I think I'll hang out here for a little while." Tarrying with something pleasant. Or it might be aversion. In my mind at least, the aversive nature of mind when there's something unpleasant happening—I would get completely stuck to it, trying to figure out how to get rid of it. Tarrying with the unpleasant, with the difficult. The aversion sticking me to the experience with a tarrying quality.

So the tarrying could be greed, it could be aversion. It might also be a kind of overemphasizing some experience, putting it under the microscope with excessive investigation. That too could come from greed or aversion—aversion if it's "How do I figure this out? Can I pull this apart so I can get rid of it?"

One of the things that really began to intrigue me was getting a sense of familiarity with the quality in the experience of tarrying, recognizing that this was a clue the mind is a little bit—or a lot—out of balance.

Likewise with hurrying. Hurrying can happen out of greed, rushing to get the next thing, grasping after pleasant, after pleasant, after pleasant. Or maybe it's connected with aversion, the wanting to rush away from something unpleasant.

One quality that was perhaps a little subtler in my experience was the experience of searching for something. As the mindfulness got more subtle and there was less clear experience, my mind was whirling about. "Where is there something to land on? I want to find something to land on." A kind of searching, a rushing.

We might be able to get familiar with these qualities of tarrying and hurrying as a different way to explore what imbalance of mind means, and be led toward balance of mind. This is largely how we find our way to balance. Sayadaw U Tejaniya often says that we get to know a wise attitude, a wise relationship with experience, by getting really familiar with unwise attitude. We get familiar with the way our mind wants things to be a certain way, the way our mind doesn't want things to be a certain way.

And that very familiarity begins to help the mind let go. It's that shift of relationship—rather than buying into or observing experience through greed or aversion, we are knowing it as a phenomenon, as an arising in the mind.

The same thing holds true here: by getting familiar with the experience of tarrying and hurrying, the mind begins to understand how to not tarry and how to not hurry. Tarrying and hurrying can have other flavors too—the qualities of the hindrances of sloth and torpor and restlessness seem to map very well onto these qualities.

Tarrying—the sinking into laziness or indulgence, just spacing out, sinking into oblivion. Or restlessness, where the mind is popping all over the place, very much like that quality of hurrying.

In my own practice, as this phrase arose in my mind—"by neither tarrying nor hurrying"—it served as a little reminder. Oh, there's some subtle quality here, maybe even very subtle, like landing on something and holding onto a concept or an idea. Just a little feeling of that, one that didn't even necessarily feel like greed or aversion. It had more this quality of creating or holding onto something—a view. More in the realm of delusion, perhaps. But there was a quality of sticking, a little bit of sticky quality to the concept. This phrase pointed to: oh, maybe we don't have to keep sticking. By neither tarrying nor hurrying.

And so we explore the way to neither tarrying nor hurrying by being curious about tarrying and hurrying. What is that experience? We can know tarrying, sticking to something, with a mind that is neither tarrying nor hurrying. Oh, sticking to something is what's happening. That's what's happening. It's that shift from believing or being bought into something, bought into the perspective of a view, versus knowing: oh, this is a view that's arising. This is being believed right now.

Another teaching feels resonant for me around this exploration of tarrying and hurrying. It comes from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha's Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. In the third foundation, it asks: "And how does one abide contemplating the mind as the mind? Here one understands a mind affected by greed is a mind affected by greed. And a mind unaffected by greed is a mind unaffected by greed. One understands a mind affected by aversion as a mind affected by aversion, and a mind unaffected by aversion as a mind unaffected by aversion." Likewise with delusion.

Here the Buddha points to those three root states and simply knowing, being aware: Is the mind affected by greed, or is the mind not affected by greed? There's the possibility of a balanced mind knowing: oh, this is a mind affected by greed. This is a mind unaffected by greed.

Then, continuing in this sutta, the piece that feels very resonant with respect to tarrying and hurrying: "One understands a contracted mind as a contracted mind, and a distracted mind as a distracted mind." He points to a different way into looking at what might be going on in the mind. Contracted—tarrying, perhaps. Or distracted—the mind bouncing around, hurrying, perhaps. The contracted mind pulling inward. The distracted mind jumping around.

And again, there's almost an energetic experience that can be very simple to check into. Is the mind pulled in, or is it bouncing around?

In this teaching from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it says one understands a contracted mind as a contracted mind, and a distracted mind as a distracted mind. We see that possibility of balance no matter what is arising. Even contraction and distraction can be known. So tarrying and hurrying can be known with a mind that is neither tarrying nor hurrying, with a mind that is balanced. It's just that tarrying is happening right now.

I love that in this sutta it says, "One understands a mind affected by greed is a mind affected by greed." It's not "one understands a mind affected by greed and does something to get rid of the greed." It's just the understanding. It's pointing to the power of that mindfulness, the power of mindfulness and wisdom to support the mind understanding something about greed, which then creates conditions for learning to happen.

We have to acknowledge, and we've been talking about this, that it's not always possible for us to simply understand a mind affected by aversion is a mind affected by aversion, or a mind affected by greed is a mind affected by greed. But it is possible, actually, perhaps more often than we think it's possible. What happens often for us is: oh, there's greed arising in the mind, that means I'm not paying attention properly. We think that. Rather than: oh, there's greed arising in the mind, and the mind can know this. That shift to simply being curious is more available for us than we might realize, especially the further into retreat we are. This deep into retreat, it's much more possible than you might think.

And so give yourself a chance to see: is it possible to neither tarry nor hurry around the fact that greed is arising? Just a moment of greed arising, the mind neither sticking to it nor rushing past it. What happens with that kind of attitude of mind?

Sometimes we can't do that, and so we do need to use our skillful means—to change the channel, to put down some experience and redirect the attention because there's too much agitation in the mind, or to find ways to balance the mind. We all have been working with this; you all have your own tools at this point to help you balance the mind. And that's not a problem when that happens.

For me, this image of neither tarrying nor hurrying is really one of great patience. But it's not a patience that is inactive, because it's not tarrying. Maybe we have the idea of patience as being that quality of tarrying, but it's not tarrying. And it's not impatience. It's not a hurrying. It's meeting each moment of experience—this flood that the Buddha is crossing, the imagery of the flood, the Buddha crossing the flood.

And in this case, as much as in the simile of the raft, there's this notion of contact with the flood. The image for me is the Buddha walking on water, contacting the flood. And somehow, as this image evolved in my mind, as the mind explored this phrase through the imagery, as the Buddha was crossing this flood, touching the flood, touching the suffering—this is a meeting, meeting experience. It's not somehow floating above the flood. This neither tarrying nor hurrying is not about growing wings and floating above the flood. We're in contact with it, learning about the flood as we are connecting.

But in the image for me, it's the Buddha walking across this flood. Instead of hitting that piece of the flood and sinking underneath it, it's almost like somehow in that landing on that spot, a little bit of stability grew in that place where the foot lands. And then the next foot lands, and there's just a little place for there to be some way for the walking to continue—without tarrying, without sticking to it, and without hurrying past it. It's almost like these magic stepping stones appeared in my image of the Buddha crossing the flood. These magic stepping stones growing out of neither tarrying nor hurrying. Just that patient quality, walking, walking across the flood.

And then the image evolved further in my meditation. It became just an image of the Buddha calmly walking, no flood in sight. And that one startled the mind a little bit. The understanding that arose there with this imagery was almost a shock. It's like, oh—it's the tarrying and the hurrying that make the flood. Without the tarrying and the hurrying, the flood vanishes. The tarrying is what's drowning us. The hurrying is what's sweeping us away. It's not separate. And then as we neither tarry nor hurry, there's nothing to drown us or sweep us away. It's just moment after moment of experience.

Another phrase arose during this retreat that felt connected in some way. I wasn't completely clear on the connection, but this other phrase kept arising in my mind. And this evening, as I was reflecting back on the retreat and on the phrases that had been coming to my mind, I understood maybe something different there.

The other phrase that kept arising in my mind was: "One has no perplexity or doubt that what is arising is only dukkha arising, and what is ceasing is only dukkha ceasing."

This phrase, to me, is referring to dukkha in the sense of unreliable experience—dukkha having that meaning at times. Unreliable. What is arising is only unreliable experience arising. And what is ceasing is only unreliable experience ceasing.

The word dukkha means unreliable. It also means suffering. And so this evening I kind of connected: oh, that flood, that flood of suffering—maybe we could think of it also as just the flood of experience. It's the experience, everything we experience. Nothing in our experience is reliable. It's all impermanent. It's all coming and going.

So whatever is arising is only impermanent, unreliable experience arising. Nothing in our experience has the quality of being stable, permanent, lasting—someplace where we could land or tarry. Nothing is permanent or reliable. Everything that's arising is only unreliable experience, impermanent experience arising.

That's it. Everything that's ending, every experience that's ending, is only unreliable experience ending.

With this phrase, this reflection, my mind kind of settles. What's arising is only unreliable experience. Why tarry with it? It's just ending. What's ceasing is only unreliable experience ceasing. Why hurry to it? It's just unreliability arising and ceasing.

Neither tarrying nor hurrying is the way to relate to that unreliability without suffering happening.

How did you, dear sir, cross the flood?

Without tarrying, friend, and without hurrying did I cross the flood.

But how did you, dear sir, without tarrying, without hurrying, cross the flood?

When, friend, I tarried, then I sank. When I hurried, I was swept away. And so, friend, un-tarrying, un-hurrying, did I cross the flood.

CHAPTER 20

Disenchantment and Dispassion

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella illuminates the progressive path from recognizing impermanence to experiencing freedom, drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and teachings on the five aggregates (khandhas). She explains how the Buddha's refrain—observing the arising and vanishing nature of body, feelings, mind states, and dhammas—leads naturally to non-clinging. The talk unpacks the Pāli terms nibbidā (disenchantment) and virāga (dispassion), exploring how these qualities arise as the mind sees through its fundamental misperceptions: taking what is impermanent to be permanent, what is unreliable to be reliable, and what is not-self to be self.

Fella addresses the often-bumpy terrain of disenchantment with honesty and compassion, acknowledging that this phase of practice can include fear, homesickness, boredom, and even feelings of disgust—all natural responses as deeply conditioned patterns of clinging begin to release. She uses the image of dye fading from cloth to illustrate the gradual nature of virāga, emphasizing that the return of delusion after moments of clarity is not a mistake but part of the path's unfolding.

The talk concludes with profound definitions of nibbāna as the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion—visible and attainable in this very life. Drawing from the Sutta Nipāta's Aṭṭhakavagga, Fella offers a portrait of the peaceful person and reminds practitioners that freedom doesn't mean absence of feeling, but rather creates conditions for greater connection, compassion, and authentic personal expression.

Earlier this week, Greg spoke about impermanence and how the seeing of impermanence is such a crucial part of how the mind lets go.

The instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta, which he read and reminded us of, appear in the refrain part of the sutta—a section that is repeated for every single exercise, for every single mindfulness practice the Buddha offers. A part of that refrain is recognizing the impermanent nature of experience.

I'll read it again. It's repeated for the exercises in the body, then for feeling and mind state, and then four or five times in the section on dhammas. So this refrain gets pounded in, and as Joseph said at one point in his reflection on the sutta, when the Buddha says something that many times in that space of time, we should pay attention.

A piece of this is around observing impermanence: "One abides observing in the body its nature of arising, or abides observing in the body its nature of vanishing, or abides observing in the body its nature of both arising and vanishing." Likewise for feelings, for mind states, for dhammas. "And one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world." So there is this connection between the seeing of impermanence and non-clinging.

In another sutta, the Buddha is a little more clear about how this connection between freedom and the direct recognition of impermanence works—how they're related and what the unfolding of that process is. In this teaching, the Buddha uses the teaching on the five aggregates that Jaya mentioned last night: form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness.

The Buddha says: "Form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, mental formations are impermanent, consciousness is impermanent. Seeing thus—seeing the impermanent nature of form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, consciousness—one experiences disenchantment towards form, disenchantment towards feeling, disenchantment towards perception, towards volitional formations, towards consciousness. Experiencing disenchantment, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, the mind is liberated. The mind is freed."

This passage points to the recognition of impermanence leading to disenchantment, disenchantment leading to dispassion, and dispassion leading to freedom. It is essentially describing a natural unfolding process. The nature of seeing impermanence is that disenchantment follows. The nature of disenchantment is that dispassion follows. And the nature of dispassion is freedom. It describes a path, a sequence of unfolding that happens in our practice.

These words—disenchantment and dispassion—are what I'd like to explore with you this evening.

The Pali for disenchantment is nibbida. I like the translation "disenchantment" because it points to how the mind has been enchanted by delusion, enchanted by the views, the ideas, the usual ways of relating to the world as permanent, as reliable, as self. Disenchantment comes about as we begin to thoroughly understand that the normal ways we've been approaching happiness, the normal ways we've been engaging in the world, are not a very reliable way to find happiness.

As we look at our experience with mindfulness, part of this rub of the dukkha that we feel—we start to see that dukkha is related to how we've been engaged in wanting things to be a certain way, wanting to get rid of things, to have things, to hold things. Our minds start to recognize that this has been useless. It's not been an appropriate or useful way to find happiness.

This teaching around impermanence points to how important impermanence is in helping to undermine those usual ways that we relate to experience. These are the three characteristics of experience, three ways that we tend to misperceive experience. Jaya mentioned them last night, using the word vipalasa—misperceptions, misunderstandings that we carry. We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. We tend to take what is unreliable to be reliable. We tend to take what is not self to be self.

This is the misperception that begins to be undermined by the perception of impermanence. And these three misperceptions are connected. Because we take things to be permanent, because we take things to have some kind of lasting quality to them, we assume them to have some kind of reliability.

As we open deeply to the impermanent nature of experience, we begin to understand very directly that these experiences that are changing, that are impermanent, are not reliable. They're not a place where we can find lasting happiness. The mind begins to open to that understanding of unreliability. All conditioned experience is impermanent. All conditioned experience, because impermanent, is unreliable.

Somehow the sense of believing that holding on to something will make me happy—the views or beliefs underlying these misperceptions—begins to be exposed. That sense of "me" is exposed as a misperception, partly through seeing what we take to be me. When we take something to be solid or stable as "me," we discover there isn't anything solid or stable in there.

What we take to be "me," when we start to look at it, it just falls apart. And so the nature of seeing impermanence is that it begins to undermine these misperceptions, helps us to begin to let go. We see basically that our habit of clinging is based on misunderstanding and illusion, and so we become disillusioned.

Another word perhaps for *nibbidā*, another translation we could use, is "disillusioned." We become disillusioned, we become disenchanted. Disenchanted with what we had been enchanted with—the idea that I can find some kind of lasting happiness through this manipulation of my world.

So we see that we've been caught by the spell of ignorance. Ignorance is basically that weaving of illusion, ignorance about conditioned phenomena, believing it to be permanent, reliable, and self. And so seeing that ignorance is happening is one of the steps towards this disenchantment.

We may not necessarily be able to see ignorance directly at first. Actually, the first times we can really clearly see that ignorance had been happening is when it falls away. We get a sense of a different way of experiencing things, and sometimes it's like, "Wow, this seems so clear. How could I miss this? How could I not see this—that holding on to things is suffering?" It just seems so obvious. And then, two minutes later, we're clinging again.

The first few times I experienced this, I thought, "I guess it's not that obvious." Because here I am clinging again, believing somehow that this is useful, that this is helpful, even as it's painful.

When that illusion falls away and then comes back, sometimes we get really frustrated. In my experience, having said, "Gosh, it seemed so obvious. How can I not see it now?"—we almost try to tie ourselves up in knots trying to get rid of that ignorance. But one of the things about that difference when ignorance falls away is that we've seen a different way of being. When it comes back, now we can know it's ignorance. We can see delusion working right there. We can feel the way it creates suffering.

And so this is the first step. Sometimes we see how we're clinging to something, taking it to be permanent and reliable, and yet having seen perhaps—and almost everybody, I think, has been reporting—that there have been times of seeing things in a different light. But then, of course, the delusion comes back. This is not a mistake. It's part of the way this gradual path works. The seeing of the delusion at work helps us to understand why the delusion is not so helpful and how it creates suffering.

In a way, if we use this enchantment analogy, what we start to see here is that we've seen the magic. The curtain's been pulled back and we've seen the magic. And yet now it feels like the curtain's drawn back again. But we know it's magic now. Even if we can't see how the levers are being pulled, we know it's magic. This is a difference. This is a step in the direction of disenchantment. Even though we're caught or woven in the spell, we at least know it's a spell.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has a description of the experience of disenchantment: "*Nibbidā* signifies the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which follows when the illusion of their permanence, pleasure, and selfhood has been shattered by the light of correct knowledge and vision of things as they are."

That sounds like a nice description of disenchantment—the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which happens in seeing the illusion. Well, in my experience, and certainly in the experience I've had talking to yogis, to retreatants, this terrain of disenchantment is often not a smooth place in practice. Becoming disenchanted, it turns out, is kind of painful. There are so many different levels of enchantment, and so the road is bumpy for a while.

Basically, this disenchantment—in terms of looking at things from the perspective of impermanence and the unreliable nature of experience—touches very deep levels in our system, in our organism. Not just at the intellectual, obvious, day-to-day levels, but at very deep human-conditioned levels, deep in our makeup. Our system does not like this truth of impermanence. And when it starts to see it and really get the depth of that impermanent, unreliable nature of experience, our system kind of rebels. It goes, "No, no, that is not how it is. It should not be that way." And it's not happening at our rational level. It's happening much more deeply.

This "no" happens. And so there's a lot of exploration in the practice, on the path of practice, as we start to open to these levels of impermanence in experience. There are many different emotional or relational aspects to meeting impermanence—different flavors of our relationship as we start to see this truth.

I think it's connected to deep forms of resistance to seeing that truth. There's a real screaming from deep inside that says, "No, there should be some place to hang on to. There's got to be some place to land, some place where I can feel safe." So many different flavors of relationship seem to happen for a lot of us on the path.

One of the translations for nibbida is "disgust" or "revulsion"—sometimes it's translated that way. That's not my preferred translation because those words for us often have a sense of aversion in them. But the feeling of nibbida can sometimes have that quality. When we start to see the ways in which our minds are grasping after this impermanent, unreliable experience, our minds kind of shudder at that. Our minds go, "Ugh, don't do that." There can be a quality of almost revulsion or disgust. We start to recognize there's nothing for me in this experience, nothing worth clinging to in this experience. And the deeper part of our system that still wants to cling—this part that's starting to see—just feels this sense of "no," a sense of "there's nothing there worthy of clinging to." So it can have this quality of disgust.

But there are other flavors of what happens as we're in the terrain of disenchantment. Sometimes the flavor can be one of fear—with seeing just how fast things are changing and that there isn't any place to land. Sometimes the mind can feel like it's in free fall, and there's a sense of fear there, sometimes as strong as terror.

Sometimes the quality is what one of my teachers in Burma, Sayadaw U Janaka, named as a kind of homesickness that can happen in this place of disenchantment. That resonates for me because the ways that we used to be at home in greed, aversion, and delusion—those don't work anymore. So there's a kind of wishing that we could go back there sometimes, in this place before we've really understood the freedom of non-clinging. There's a wobbliness to the experience, a sense that there's nowhere really reliable to land and yet our mind still wants to land. So there's this homesickness: "I wish I had that delusion back. I wish I had that ignorance back so that I didn't see that this was the way things are." Homesickness can be a flavor we might see.

Disinterest can be another flavor. Sometimes, with the quality of rapidly seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—things happening in the mind, just these six things happening over and over again—it's like, "Okay, enough already. I've seen this before. Do I have to keep watching this? Do I have to keep watching these six things over and over and over again?" The mind starts to get disinterested.

Some of that flavor of disinterest, at least in my own experience, is the loss of our old interest—related to that homesickness. We used to get really interested in these highs and lows, and it's like those aren't doing it for us anymore. The pleasant isn't giving us a kick, and the unpleasant isn't making us want to snap into control anymore. The mind isn't interested in engaging in the ways that it has. So the quality of disinterest can come in, sometimes feeling like boredom, sometimes feeling like wanting to pack up and go home. "I'm done. There's nothing to see here anymore."

So many different relationships arise as our minds begin to unhook from these very deep levels of clinging. And the practice unfolds through the noticing of these relationships, through the seeing of all these different ways in which we're feeling like, "Oh, I wish I had that back"—that quality of feeling homesick, or this feeling of disgust. This is not a mistake. This is the mind beginning to learn about letting go of something that it had held on to very deeply, very tightly. Our practice deepens through seeing these kinds of attitudes in the mind around becoming disenchanted.

And as the mind more thoroughly lets go of those habitual ways of clinging, it moves in the direction of this other word: dispassion. "Experiencing disenchantment, one becomes dispassionate." Dispassion—again, it's useful to unpack the word a bit. Because dispassion, on the surface of it... would I want to not have passion?

Do I even want that? If that's what freedom is about, is that what I want?

Again, the dispassion is connected to the loss of ways in which we had been passionate. We had been passionate about greed, aversion, and delusion. There's a weakening and a loss of that.

In this place of dispassion, basically the mind is really thoroughly starting to understand that holding on to impermanent, unreliable experience just doesn't make any sense. And so the old patterns of craving and attachment begin to weaken, to fade out. This term "fading out" is sometimes used as a translation for dispassion, because the term itself, *viraga,* actually has this literal meaning of fading out. I believe it's used in a more ordinary way to refer to how the dye in a cloth fades over time.

And so that image of a cloth fading—when we think about how a cloth fades, we wash it in soap, some of the dye comes out in the water. The cloth is just a little bit less bright than it was, but initially we don't really notice the difference. Then a second washing, a third washing, some exposure to the sun. We might start to notice that it's not quite as rich of a color as it was. A very gradual process, this fading out of dye.

I think this is meant to point to us that the process in our practice is also gradual—a gradual fading of these attachments and accumulations and cravings. There are perhaps even different levels of attachments we have that may fade at different times in our practice. The talk I gave on "relying on this, abandon that" almost speaks to this, where we can let go of something more painful by potentially holding on to something that's more wholesome and more helpful. And that fades by relying on this. There can be a fading of that. But then we start to feel the rub or the suffering or the holding or the attachment here. And perhaps there's another "relying on this, abandon that." So there's this gradual releasing of various levels of attachment.

The Buddha spoke about this in his own experience. He said, "I abandoned the craving for sense pleasures. I removed the fever for sense pleasures and I abide without thirst, with a mind inwardly at peace. I see other beings who are not free from lust for sense pleasure, being devoured by craving for sense pleasure, burning with fever for sense pleasure, indulging in sense pleasure—and I do not envy them, nor do I delight therein. Why is that? Because there is a delight apart from sense pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, which surpasses even divine bliss." And by divine bliss, I understand him to mean the very deeply concentrated states. So there's a delight that surpasses even that. "Since I take delight in that, I do not envy what is inferior."

This passage points to these different levels of attachments that can fade: the attachment to sense pleasure, the attachment to states of concentration, the attachment even to any kind of state of insight or understanding—pointing to that teaching on the simile of the raft, where we let go of the Dharma even. Non-attachment to anything.

So this fading away happens in a gradual way, but it's not even just that. With dye, there's a kind of continual weakening over time. It doesn't maybe quite feel like that in the practice. It can sometimes feel like this dispassion or this sense of understanding—oh yeah, nothing to cling to here—but then the delusion comes back. There can be times within a day or even within an hour of a particular sitting when the mind shifts from being clearly disinterested and just not attaching to things, to being caught again, caught in the grip of wanting.

This speaks to the power of delusion, the power of ignorance, how deeply conditioned it is in us. But again, as I pointed out before, having seen some of that fade, when it comes back, there's a different relationship to it. We can understand it now as being caught—being caught in that web, the web of ignorance, enchanted again.

We can go from feeling like there's nothing to pick up, just deep freedom, to being back completely caught again, struggling with aversion. This is the nature of the unfolding of our practice. And it's not a mistake. It's just how our minds work. It points to the power of our conditioning, and so we really have to respect that—to not somehow feel like it's my fault that this aversion has re-arisen. It is the nature of that conditioning, the strength of that conditioning.

The text says, through dispassion the mind is liberated.

Liberation, freedom—actually, in certain texts the word for dispassion is almost equated with liberation, with Nibbana. There's one text that says: "This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbana." All of these can be seen as synonyms for Nibbana, different ways of expressing that freedom—the freedom from, the relinquishing of all attachments, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbana.

Another definition for Nibbana, which we've mentioned quite a few times here, is the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. This is one of the most succinct definitions of freedom offered in the texts. We can experience this absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. Maybe first we experience it through the ending—we really clearly see the ending of greed, or we watch a craving fall away, or we see the ending of an aversion. We see a delusion and it just falls apart; a belief in our minds simply crumbles when it's seen as a belief. We can sometimes feel the release from that craving, release from wanting, release from aversion. It can be a lovely experience, that release—feeling like we're being released from a vice grip, let go of by that craving, by that clinging.

So that's sometimes some of the first ways we really feel that sense of the ending or the absence of greed, aversion, or delusion—when we see it ending. We see greed, aversion, or delusion falling apart, feeling that freedom as it ends.

And then, as the mind more thoroughly starts to understand the uselessness of clinging, more thoroughly starts to understand through recognizing the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience, that any kind of picking up is already suffering—the mind begins to understand this absence of greed, aversion, and delusion in another way. Not through seeing it end directly, not through seeing the cessation or the ending of greed or aversion, but through understanding the non-arising of greed, aversion, and delusion. The non-arising, the not picking up of craving.

Freedom is not about getting anything. It's not even about getting that experience of release.

Maybe we can start to understand this non-arising through a little thought experiment. Think back into childhood. When you were young, in the three to six age bracket, what was your favorite toy? Remember how attached you were, how much connection you felt, carrying it around with you everywhere, or however you related to that toy. I had a teddy bear that was about the same size as I was. I think I rubbed all the fur off of it and it lost its button eyes, and I still carried that thing around with me everywhere.

There's a period of time in our childhood where we begin to maybe forget about it sometimes, leave it, but then we go back to it. There was another favorite toy I had when I was a little older—a dollhouse with these little dolls and furniture. I loved arranging the furniture and making up stories about what the dolls were doing in the various rooms. I spent hours with this thing.

And there was a period of time where I had to hide that because the rest of my preteen friends, the twelve-year-olds, were starting to look down on dolls. It was a painful kind of transition. I still loved playing with my dolls, but it wasn't quite as satisfying as it had been when I was eight or ten. A little bit of fading out there, a little bit of disenchantment with it, not quite as engaged in the stories anymore.

So for you, remembering back to some toy from your childhood that you really connected with, recall the slow kind of letting go of that. That's the disenchantment place—at a certain point, losing interest. That's the disenchantment place in the letting go. It's like we still see it in the corner of our room and it's like, yeah, not so interested anymore. There's that quality of disinterest.

Dispassion, the quality of dispassion—it's more like this: as an adult here now, how long has it been since you thought about this toy, this thing from your childhood? As adults, we don't even think about picking up that toy. There's neither interest nor disinterest in it. It's just not relevant anymore. That's the quality of dispassion. It's not interested or disinterested. There's just no relevance to picking it up. There's no bearing on the unfolding of life.

In hearing Jaya's talk last night, she quoted from one of the Mahamudra poems that she read the other week. I want to read a line from that because as I heard it last night, it resonated for me very much in this place of neither interest nor disinterest: "The noble way of Mahamudra never engages in the drama of imprisonment and release."

It's not even interested in release anymore—that feeling of letting go. There can be a place in time and practice where we're almost looking for the clinging to see it let go. And the mind starts to just realize: not picking it up.

Not to pick anything up.

So this practice that opens us to disenchantment, to dispassion, takes us right through all the ways in which we are enchanted. We don't get to be disenchanted by not seeing how we have been enchanted. We have to see how we've been enchanted for the mind to begin to release. We have to feel the enchantment, feel the unsatisfactory nature of that enchantment. Right in the midst of our suffering is this lesson on how we're holding on, how the enchantment is working, and how the mind can free itself from it.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has another beautiful quote about realizing freedom. In this quote, he uses the phrase "realizing the unconditioned"—the unconditioned being another way of speaking to nibbāna:

"Though the realization of the unconditioned requires a turning away from the conditioned, it must be emphasized that this realization is achieved precisely through the understanding of the conditioned. Nibbāna cannot be reached by backing off from a direct confrontation with saṃsāra, with suffering, to lose oneself in a blissful oblivion to the world. The path to liberation is a path of understanding, of comprehension and transcendence, not of escapism or emotional self-indulgence. Nibbāna can only be attained by turning one's gaze towards saṃsāra, by turning one's gaze towards dukkha, and scrutinizing it in all its starkness. The understanding of the conditioned is the way to the unconditioned."

So it's not a mistake, this struggle in the terrain of disenchantment. It's the nature of the path.

Freedom, then—the realization of the unconditioned, the relinquishing of attachments—there are some quotes I'd like to read about nibbāna. But primarily I want to highlight that nibbāna is primarily described in terms of what it is not. It's the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. It is non-clinging, the ending of craving. It's not described as something, as some state or something we get. It is the absence of, the ending of, suffering.

Here are some quotes about nibbāna:

"The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called nibbāna."

"Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed, with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbāna—immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise."

"And for one thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing more remains to be done. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, nor tastes, nor contacts of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is the mind, gained is deliverance. This is peace."

Another definition of nibbāna: experiences no mental pain and grief. That sounds pretty good. Visible in this life. Attainable here and now. Not some transcendent kind of state—visible, possible to experience in this very lived experience. That's how I take that: visible in this life.

There's another poem I want to read to you, a description of a liberated person. These last quotes have described liberation—the absence of greed, aversion, delusion. This one is from the Sutta Nipāta, a set of sixteen poems called the Aṭṭhakavagga. I'll read a portion of one of those poems, which describes what a person is like when they're free. A different perspective on freedom—not describing the qualities of liberation, but what a person is like.

A question comes to the Buddha: "Having what vision, being of what character, is one called peaceful? Tell me about the Supreme Person."

The Buddha responds:

"A person who is not angered, not frightened, not boastful, not fretful, who gives wise advice, who is calm, restrained in speech—who is indeed a sage.

A person who is not attached to the future, who does not sorrow over the past, who finds solitude amidst sense contact and is not guided by fixed views.

A person who is retiring, not deceitful, not covetous, not greedy, not impudent, not arousing contempt, who does not engage in malicious speech.

A person who does not relish pleasure, who is not arrogant, who is mild and of ready wit, who is not credulous, who by nothing is repelled.

A person who does not take on the training in hopes of material gain, who is unperturbed if they get nothing, who is not hampered by wishes nor greedy for flavors.

A person who is even-tempered, ever-attentive, who does not suppose that in the world they are equal, superior, or inferior, who is free of conceit.

A person for whom there are no tethers, who knowing truth is not tethered in any way, and in whom no wishes are found for existence or non-existence.

This is someone I call peaceful. They are indifferent to sense pleasure."

In them bonds are not found. They have overcome attachment. This is someone I call peaceful."

So again, this is a description of a person, but it's described largely by what's not happening. There are a few positive qualities mentioned here—mild and of ready wit, attentive, even-tempered—but mostly we hear what is absent: not deceitful, not covetous, not greedy. What's not here?

One of the things I appreciate about this kind of description is that it leaves room for personal expression. The absence of greed, aversion, and delusion doesn't mean that we lack feeling. It doesn't mean that we lack inspiration and connection to the world. In fact, it seems to be just the opposite. Greed, aversion, and delusion tie us up in internal spinning and knots. A tremendous amount of energy gets consumed by these forces. As greed, aversion, and delusion fall away, there's a tremendous release of energy toward connection, compassion, care—toward the expression of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. Expression through compassion, wisdom, love, generosity.

Greg mentioned, and Rebecca has mentioned, these monks in the Sagaing Hills in Burma that we've come across. I don't know whether I've met fully enlightened beings or not up in those hills, but the expressions of their freedom were remarkable. Two in particular come to mind in this moment.

One monastery we walked into—just entering the grounds, it felt like I was walking into an ocean of tranquility. It tranquilized me simply to enter the gate. And then I met the monk who lived there. I just wanted to hang out with him. He was so still and content. Michelle McDonald named him the Angel Sayadaw.

And another that Greg mentioned the other day, whom Michelle McDonald named the Happy Sayadaw—he was continually laughing. One day we would go to visit. I was the manager on the retreat, and we would take hikes in the afternoon to visit the monks. One afternoon several of us went to visit, and one of the people I was with asked Myatong Sayadaw if we could take his picture. He agreed and wanted to go outside, so he went outside and one of the people aimed the iPhone at him. Now, in Burma, monks are not supposed to smile for photographs. He couldn't do it. He kept having to cover his mouth. He just could not stop smiling.

Really happy. Very different beings, both expressing freedom in their own way.

So the absence of desire from the world, this dispassion, doesn't mean a lack of feeling. I think the release from greed, aversion, and delusion actually creates the conditions for more connection, more love, more care, more compassion, more joy, more tranquility, more peace to express.

So what's your expression of freedom? What's your expression of freedom?

The sage regards nothing in the world as their own and does not grieve because what does not exist. Not blindly following religious teachings, such a one is truly called peaceful.

CHAPTER 21

Aṅgulimāla's Journey

Andrea Fella · 1h02

In this evocative dharma talk, Andrea Fella narrates the complete story of Aṅgulimāla from the Aṅgulimāla Sutta (MN 86) and its commentarial backstory, using this ancient tale to illuminate timeless aspects of human psychology. The story traces how a promising student named Ahiṃsaka ('Harmless') was transformed into a murderer through a cascade of unwholesome actions—beginning with his fellow students' jealousy, their deliberate lies, and his teacher's confirmation bias that led him to believe the falsehoods.

Andrea draws striking parallels to modern psychological research, including studies on confirmation bias and the famous Milgram experiments on authority and obedience. She examines how views become established in the mind with alarming speed, how we actively seek information that confirms our beliefs while dismissing contradictory evidence, and how authority figures can lead us to act against our own ethical principles. The talk emphasizes sīla (ethical conduct) as a crucial safeguard against delusion—a warning system that alerts us when we're being guided by greed, aversion, or ignorance.

The story's redemptive arc offers profound hope: even after killing 999 people, Aṅgulimāla's encounter with the Buddha's wisdom teaching on 'stopping'—ceasing both harmful action and the deeper ignorance that drives it—awakened his capacity for transformation. Andrea explores how his subsequent struggles in meditation, his opening to compassion through witnessing suffering, and his reconnection with ethical truth eventually led to his full awakening. The talk invites practitioners to reflect on how we influence one another, the importance of remembering our own goodness, and the ever-present possibility of redemption.

Tonight I'd like to tell a story from the time of the Buddha. Some of you may be familiar with at least parts of this story. It's the story of a mass murderer at the time of the Buddha. His name, his first name was Ahimsaka, which meant "harmless." And then he gained the name Aṅgulimāla—the literal meaning of that phrase is "finger garland"—because he is said to have cut off the little fingers of all of his victims and strung them on a garland around his neck. This was a horrific figure, a murderer at the time of the Buddha.

The basic story that most of us are familiar with comes from the suttas. There's a whole sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya, the middle-length discourses, about this person. But there's also in the commentaries a kind of backstory of how Ahimsaka changed

from being harmless to being a mass murderer. To me, that backstory is very moving in many ways—moving in the way of opening our eyes around ways in which we affect each other.

The other night, when Gil spoke about the Buddhist teachings on social and communal harmony and how the way that we engage in the world, if we're acting out of greed, aversion, and delusion, it's not only affecting our own minds, it's affecting those whom we meet. This story demonstrates that part of life. I think you may also notice some resonances in this backstory in terms of things that go on today, and you may reflect on how little our minds have changed in 2,600 years and how applicable the teachings of the Buddha still are to us.

Some aspects of this story seem almost magical or mystical or mythological. We don't actually know how much of this story is true, but it does seem that at least some aspects of it—just as there was probably the historical person of the Buddha—there was probably this historical person of this mass murderer. This story is ultimately a story of redemption. For myself, I find some inspiration in it. There's a way in which, at times in my practice, thinking about this story, I've thought, "Well, if Aṅgulimāla can do it, maybe I can too."

So the backstory. I'll read some of it and summarize some of it.

At the Buddha's time, at the court of King Pasenadi of Kosala, there was a learned Brahmin who held the office of royal chaplain and was thus one of the kingdom's highest dignitaries. One night, his wife gave birth to a son. Soon afterwards, the father cast the boy's horoscope and to his consternation found that his son was born under the robber constellation. This indicated that the boy would have within him a tendency to commit robbery.

On that same day of the child's birth, there was another disquieting event. All the weapons in the armory in the city of Sāvatthī had suddenly begun to sparkle. In the morning, the Brahmin went to the palace as usual and asked the king how he had slept.

"How could I have slept well?" replied the king. "I woke up in the night and saw that my auspicious weapons lying at the end of my bed were in bright sparkle, and so I was afraid and perturbed. Should this mean danger to the kingdom or my life?"

The Brahmin said, "The same strange thing happened in the entire city, and it does not concern you. Last night my wife bore a son, and unfortunately his horoscope had the robber constellation. This must have caused the weapons to sparkle."

The king asked, "Will he be a lone robber or the chief of a gang?"

"He will do it alone, your majesty."

"What if I were to kill him now and prevent further misdeeds?"

So the father was actually proposing, willing to sacrifice his own son for this. But the king responded, "As he would be a loner, let him be raised and properly educated. Then perhaps he may lose those evil tendencies."

There's this nature-nurture question alive even here at the time of the Buddha—the idea that a loving home and a good family and education and ethics would support a mind moving in a wholesome direction. This is why the boy was called Ahimsaka, harmless, to incline his mind in that direction.

He grew up. He was quite well-behaved, very strong in body, but he was also studious and intelligent. His parents had good reason to think any evil tendencies had been removed by good education and by the religious atmosphere of the home. This made them very happy.

In due course, his father sent Ahimsaka for the traditional studies to Takkasilā, the famous university of India. He was accepted by the foremost teacher of that university and continued to be studious, so he surpassed his fellow students. He also became his teacher's favorite.

This made his fellow students very jealous. "Since that young Ahimsaka came, we are almost forgotten. We must put a stop to it and cause a break between him and the teacher."

So they began trying to slander Ahimsaka. This didn't apparently work very well because his conduct was so upstanding. They decided they had to alienate the teacher from his favorite student.

And they realized they couldn't accomplish this through simple means—they had to create a plot, a plan. So they decided to form separate groups of people who would go to the teacher independently, as if they were unconnected to each other, and tell the teacher that they had heard or sensed that Ahimsaka was plotting against him.

The first time this happened, the teacher dismissed it out of hand. The second time it happened, again, he dismissed it out of hand. The third time, the group cunningly added—and I have to say that whatever they were claiming, this plotting, it was all fabrication. There was no truth whatsoever to this. They were lying to his teacher. Fake news.

With the third group, they not only told the same lie to the teacher, but they added this little extra bit. They said, "If you don't trust us, examine it for yourself. Check it out for yourself."

From this poisonous seed, a suspicion took root in the teacher's heart, and he came to believe that Ahimsaka actually wanted to push him out. Once a suspicion is roused, one can always find something that seems to confirm it.

I'm going to stop there with the story because that's something to explore and reflect on in terms of our own minds—how views affect us.

So far what we've had is the jealousy of the students, an unwholesome mind state that clouds our minds. Probably an equal mixture of greed, aversion, and delusion comprises jealousy. Aversion to not having the relationship with the teacher that they'd once had. Envy of Ahimsaka's close relationship to the teacher. And delusion that this was all a problem, that they had to fix this somehow, change this somehow.

From this jealousy, they felt they had to create a separation. And the only way they knew how to do it was through lying, through falsehoods, through unethical behavior—through propaganda essentially, because they consciously crafted this message: "We hear Ahimsaka is planning to harm you, planning to throw you out, plotting against you." And it came in three different ways from seemingly three different directions, unconnected.

This points to how views can begin to develop in our minds. We hear something multiple times and that seed of doubt, that "hmm, maybe it is true," begins to take root. We become more likely to believe it.

The story even points to how once suspicion is roused, one can always find something that seems to confirm it. This is really that function of our minds given the name these days of confirmation bias. If we have a particular view or belief, the way our minds tend to work is not rationally taking in information and weighing it impartially. Our minds actively search out things that confirm our beliefs and actively ignore things that don't confirm our beliefs. This is well researched and documented—how our minds bias themselves toward our views and beliefs, discounting information to the contrary as unreliable while feeling that information supporting our own view is reliable.

This dynamic of people holding different views and how that plays out—this has been happening for thousands of years in human minds. It's not new what's happening in our own minds, in our cultures. It's not new that people try to sow dissent between others out of jealousy or greed or hatred. These are tendencies of the human mind.

In some ways, it's a frightening aspect of our minds, this confirmation bias and the almost willful ignorance. It's not consciously willful ignoring of perspectives that don't support our own view, but it is a function of how our human system tends to work. And it particularly tends to work that way when we aren't aware that it works that way.

There are studies that point to how, if people are given the chance to reflect on their perspective, asked questions about it, and begin to recognize that maybe they don't know as much about something as they thought they did, then they begin to have a more even-handed approach to taking in information. Knowing this about our minds, knowing this piece of information about our minds, is really useful. It's a powerful function, really connected to delusion, this confirmation bias. It's connected to how our minds obscure things.

The creation of views itself is quite a thing to reflect on as well. In this case, the story talks about multiple sources coming at the teacher. But there are studies—I was reviewing an article called "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds," which seems to certainly have some truth to it—pointing to how quickly views become established in our minds.

There was a research study done, and I just have the barest outline of it, but students were given one of two packets of information containing a story about a firefighter who was either a risk-taker or a risk-averse person. In some packets, the risk-averse firefighter had won accolades for his skill, described as a successful and good firefighter. In the other packets, the firefighter was always failing to save lives, had been written up, and hadn't been a very good firefighter.

So there was just one story the people were given in this study. And then, almost immediately, they were told that the entire thing had been made up. They were given this packet of information and then told, "Oh, by the way, that was just a completely fabricated story, no truth to it whatsoever."

Later—I don't know how much later they asked this question—they asked how much participants thought being risk-averse or a risk-taker would affect someone's performance as a firefighter.

And the answers were split right exactly along the lines of the packets they had been given. The ones who'd been told that the risk-averse person was a good firefighter believed that being risk-averse would make someone a good firefighter. The ones who'd been told the risk-taker was successful believed that would lead to somebody being a good firefighter. So one exposure to information, told immediately it was made up, and still it influenced the view.

That to me brought quite a bit of pause. It's almost as if our minds may be predisposed to believe the first thing they hear. And so if that's the case, we really ought to take care with that understanding—that beliefs are happening. This is really a big area of delusion: beliefs are operating and we are not aware they're beliefs. We simply take them to be the way it is.

The more we can be curious about whether we're acting out of beliefs, the more we might ask ourselves: what belief is motivating my action right now? Even if it's just exposed—"oh, this is a belief happening"—that at least gives a little bit of space in the mind to not simply take it to be truth.

So in this story, the information was false, but repeated with confidence, it created that seed of doubt in the teacher's mind. And given that, starting to look for evidence with that kind of proposal—"well, you check it out"—the mind began to overlay that view onto Ahimsaka's behavior and to find things that were evidence of him trying to overthrow the teacher. He found this supposed evidence.

And he decided this was dangerous, that this strong student of his was trying to overthrow him, was a danger to him. The teacher's suspicion grew into conviction: I must kill him, or get him killed. But he considered, it will not be easy to kill such a strong man. Besides, if he's slain while living here as my pupil, it will harm my reputation and students may no longer come to me. I must think of some other device to get rid of him as well as punish him.

So the teacher is taking action now. And he does not know at this point that he's acting on falsehood. He thinks he's done an independent investigation, unaware that his mind was clouded and skewed in the gathering of information. Unaware that the evidence he thinks he's gathered has already been biased from the view that was looking for it.

The students told the lie knowing it was a lie, wanting to get rid of Ahimsaka, wanting to separate the teacher from him. The teacher is acting on what he thinks is truth, and yet his actions too are beginning to be motivated by aversion and hatred, by anger.

I think a big piece of this story—at least one thread that runs through it—is the thread around sila, around ethics. Because at each step, if the students had reflected on the action they were taking as being unethical, as being a lie, as not a wholesome way to engage, then they might not have done that action.

The teacher, behaving based on what he thinks is truth—he had no reason to believe that the students were lying after he confirmed it himself. And yet his actions too are based in anger and motivated by anger. He's looking for ways to harm his student, looking for ways to get rid of his student. Feeling justified perhaps because there is danger.

This happens all over the place. We may feel like we are acting in self-righteousness or self-defense, that the action is justified. And yet this is a place where the teaching of ethics grounds us: these actions are not wholesome. Is there some other kind of action that might be taken? There were many other actions the teacher could have taken—talking to Ahimsaka to find out what's going on, for instance.

The next part of the story is the teacher creating this plot, this scheme. Ahimsaka's course of studies was coming to an end, and the teacher used that as an opportunity. At that time in India, there was a kind of honoring of the teacher at the end of your course of studies. And he points to this.

"My dear Ahimsaka, for one who has completed their studies, it is a duty to give a gift of honor to the teacher. So give it to me."

"Certainly, Master, what shall I give?"

"You must bring me a thousand human little fingers of the right hand. Then you'll be concluding your ceremonial homage to the science you have learned."

Ahimsaka is horrified by this suggestion and says, "I can't do that. My family has never been engaged in violence. My name is Harmless. My family has always been harmless."

The teacher simply said, "Well, if you don't do this, the studies that you have done will yield no fruit."

And with that, Ahimsaka consented.

This is a kind of odd piece of the story.

And yet, if we reflect on the situation here, in this place of the story, the commentaries pause and ask: Why would Ahimsaka do this? Some of it is pointed back to his underlying tendencies—the fact that it's said he was born under this robber constellation, that he had these deep underlying tendencies that might not have been fully redirected by his upbringing. That's one explanation.

The other explanation is the guru devotion aspect that was often a piece, I understand, of the teacher-student relationship. Your teacher asks you to do something, and it's an honoring of the teacher to do it, to trust in the teacher. If we think about how this can play out, it's not only a teacher-student relationship, but there's also a power dynamic there—someone who has more power, more authority, asking you to do something. Almost like there's something in our makeup, our social hierarchy makeup, that gives over our authority to somebody in power.

This is not only true at the time of the Buddha in this kind of teacher-student relationship, but seems to be true now, today. There were questions after the Second World War: How could people do all of these horrible things? Imprisoning and killing the Jewish people—how could that happen? Scientists were curious about this authority piece.

One very famous set of studies, which many of you have probably heard of, were the Milgram experiments done in the early 1960s at Yale University. They were looking at how people would relate to authority and whether they would do something when an authority figure told them to that they wouldn't otherwise do.

The experiment was set up so that a person came to the lab—actually two people came, but one of them was a ringer, an actor. That person always became the one who would be the recipient of a set of shocks. This was supposed to be a study on learning, where questions would be asked, and if the person got the answer wrong, they would be given a shock—supposedly testing the use of negative reinforcement for learning.

The person being experimented on was asked to turn up the voltage on the shock when the "student" kept getting wrong answers. The voltage readout started at 15, marked "mild," and went up to 450, with a big red indicator that said "Danger."

When the person giving the shocks expressed hesitancy—when they didn't want to continue, didn't want to turn up the voltage—the experimenter standing in the room would say things like, "No, please continue," or "You must continue," or "The experiment requires you to continue," or "You have no choice but to continue."

In these studies, two-thirds of the participants gave the highest level of shock. Two-thirds. Everyone gave a substantial level of shocks.

This is what Milgram wrote: "I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because they were ordered to do so by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the participant's strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and with the participant's ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won out more

often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact that most urgently demands explanation."

So this kind of power, this authority, may have played a big role in Angulimala's acquiescence.

Variations on this study revealed that even simple modifications made a difference—like whether the experimenter was wearing a lab coat or not. When they didn't wear the lab coat, the willingness to continue dropped from two-thirds of the people to only 20%. Another variation had the experimenter remind the participants that they bore the ethical responsibility for any harm that would come to the other person. With that reminder, almost nobody followed through.

A simple reminding that our actions are our own ethical responsibility—that reminder was very powerful. Just remembering: "Yes, some authority figure tells me to do it, but it's my responsibility."

So this is maybe what Ahimsaka did not remember—that he was bearing the responsibility for the harm that would come to these victims.

Again, with this story, we see the playing out of ethics. Ethics is about non-harming. In so many places along the way, harming is generating more harming. This influence we have on each other, the conditioning nature we have on each other, the way ignorance and delusion are running the show. And there's a piece here about how grounding ourselves in ethics can help us recognize when we are being guided by delusion.

This is why, I think, the Buddha emphasized sīla so much. It really helps us to recognize: Is this going to cause harm? Basically, I think he's saying, if your action is going to cause harm, there's delusion there. There's danger there. There's greed or aversion there. So take care.

And so the story continues.

Ahimsaka went out and marauded the neighborhood, killing hundreds of people. He reached 999 victims. He started in the forest, but after he had killed people passing through, travelers stopped coming that way. Unable to find more victims in the forest, he began going into the villages, grabbing people from their homes, killing them where they lived. The villages became abandoned, and the people in this area went to the king, pleading, "You must take care of this man. He is creating havoc. He has killed hundreds of people." And so the king sent out an army to find Angulimala and kill him.

At the same time, his mother heard about this murderer roaming the neighborhood. Her suspicion was piqued. She had the intuition that this was her son. No one had identified him—the name given to this person at this point was Angulimala, not Ahimsaka—and yet she had this intuition. Her son had never returned home from the university. There had been that foretelling at his birth that he would become some sort of bandit. And so she was suspicious, and she went out to investigate, to see for herself.

The king was heading there, his mother was heading there, and then the Buddha comes into the story. With his awareness—and this is one of the mystical or magical parts of the story—he surveyed the world with his mind and saw this situation playing out. He apparently had many lifetimes of connection with Angulimala and knew from this surveying that a terrible situation was about to unfold: the mother was going to try to stop her son from getting his thousandth finger, which would have fulfilled Angulimala's duty to his teacher.

According to Buddhist psychology, Buddhist metaphysics, if you kill a parent in this life, there is no way your mind would ever be able to become fully free in this lifetime. And yet one thing about the teaching around freedom is that there is no one who is beyond redemption—there is always the possibility for freedom. What I'm pointing to here is that in *this* life, the action of killing a parent is so agitating for the mind that there would be no way that mind could ever settle, could ever let go into complete surrender, complete release from clinging. It would always be holding on to that action in some fashion—denying it, pushing it away, regret, remorse, self-justification, whatever. The mind would not be able to let go in this lifetime. That's not to say that over the course of many lifetimes a person could not eventually become free, but in this lifetime, it would not be possible.

And yet the Buddha also saw in his surveying of Angulimala's mind that even having killed 999 people, his mind had so much wholesomeness from his stream of previous lives, previous actions, that he had the capacity to fully awaken in this lifetime—if he did not kill his mother.

And so the Buddha decided to intervene, to put himself in the picture. He thought, "If I go there, if I go into the forest, Angulimala will see me and try to kill me instead of killing his mother."

These three scenarios were playing out simultaneously. The Buddha entered the forest and saw Angulimala. Angulimala, from his lookout, saw the Buddha. Though recognizing his mother, still the thought arose to complete the thousand fingers by killing her. At that moment, the Buddha appeared on the road between Angulimala and his

mother. Seeing him, Angulimala thought, "Why should I kill my mother for the sake of one finger when there is someone else? Let her live." And so he turned towards the Buddha.

At this point, the Buddha performed a feat of supernormal power. The bandit Angulimala, going as fast as he could, running to catch up with the Buddha, was unable to reach him. The Buddha was walking at his normal pace—a slow, mindful walk through the forest—and Angulimala, running as fast as he could, could not catch up. Confused by this, he yelled out, "Stop, monk, stop!"

The Buddha responded, turning and saying over his shoulder, "I have stopped, Angulimala. It is time for you to stop."

This shook Angulimala because the Buddha was still walking while Angulimala was standing still. He said, "What do you mean? You're still walking. I've stopped. How have you stopped and I have not?"

The Buddha responded, "Angulimala, I have stopped forever, forswearing violence to every living being. But you have no restraint towards things that breathe. So that is why I have stopped, and you have not."

At this point, Angulimala experienced a turning of the mind. It was almost as if his childhood with love and care—or perhaps previous lives—came back to him, and he remembered something of his other nature.

This is a wisdom teaching here, and it's a teaching on ethics, pointing to the stopping of harm. But it's also a pointing to, in some ways, the stopping of ignorance. Ignorance leads to unwholesome behavior, leads to unethical behavior, leads us to harm others. It also creates harm for ourselves. And so I think that this stopping the Buddha is pointing to here is not only about stopping unethical actions, but the deeper stopping of ignorance—the deeper stopping of the root of what leads to that unethical action.

Angulimala felt like he'd found a new teacher. He asked the Buddha if he could study with him, and the Buddha agreed. Angulimala decided to keep his name, Finger Garland, to help him remember that tendency of mind towards delusion.

I'm not quite sure how all these pieces come together, but Angulimala and the Buddha headed back to the Buddha's monastery. Meanwhile, the king was still looking for Angulimala, intending to kill him. The king, knowing where the Buddha was staying, stopped at the monastery with his army and paid respects to the Buddha.

The Buddha asked, "Why do you have the army?"

King Pasenadi replied, "I'm looking for Angulimala."

The Buddha said, "Great King, if you were to see Angulimala with shaven head and beard, clad in yellow robe, gone forth from the home life into homelessness—that he was abstaining from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, and from false speech, eating only one time a day, living the life of purity and virtue and noble conduct—if you saw him thus, how would you treat him?"

"Venerable sir, we should pay homage to him, invite him to accept the four requisites of a monk, and arrange for his protection. But how could such an unvirtuous person of evil character have such virtue and restraint?"

Then the Buddha extended his right arm and said, "Great King, this is Angulimala." Because Angulimala was sitting right next to the Buddha.

The king was greatly alarmed and his hair stood on end. He entirely lost his composure—so terrifying was Angulimala's reputation. But the Buddha said, "Do not be afraid, great king. There is nothing for you to fear."

When the king regained his composure, he asked Angulimala for his birth name. And he realized that this had been the child born years before, that night when the weapons were sparkling. He knew that this was a child he actually remembered. And so he offered him protection. He offered him robes.

To me, there's an interesting counterpoint that happens here in the story. The Buddha is with Angulimala, the king comes, and the Buddha says, "You have nothing to fear." The teacher, the one in power, the one with elevated authority, tells the king, "Trust me."

This is an interesting counterpoint because it's the flip side of the teacher telling Ahimsaka, "Trust me, this is what you have to do." So what's the difference here? This question comes to my mind: How do we know that the king can trust the Buddha?

And again, the story points back to ethics. Ahimsaka was being asked to do something that caused harm. That should be a warning sign. The Buddha was asking the king to not cause harm. So again, we're pointing back to ethical conduct in teachers and what teachers are asking of us.

This also points to the possibility of redemption for Angulimala, because he has become ordained. And the king is believing in this possibility of redemption at this point. Perhaps we can use ethics as a touchstone, heading back into our lives, remembering how important ethics is for us to combat ignorance and craving, letting it be a kind of warning sign for us.

This part of the story up until now has been very much about the relational dimension of life—how we influence each other. In the first part of the story, we saw how greed, aversion, and delusion generate more greed, aversion, and delusion. In the part where the Buddha comes in, we see how kindness and compassion generate kindness and compassion in the king, supporting Angulimala to take a new direction.

This interweaving, this way in which we impact and affect each other, has been a big part of this story so far. And I think it's a big one for us in going back home—to recognize not only how we are affected but how we affect. What we put into the world is not a small thing. It has ripple effects that we cannot possibly comprehend, rippling out from us.

But there's also an internal dimension to our experience, and the next part of the story picks that up. Because Angulimala sits down and tries to meditate. He goes out for alms rounds and is not very well received in the neighborhood—because at this point, they know who he is. But in his practice... I mean, can you imagine having killed 999 people and sitting down to meditate? The kinds of things that might arise in the mind.

The story proposes something profound about what Angulimala faced in his practice. He had not been able to focus his mind on the basic meditation subject he had received, though he tried day and night. Before his mind's eye appeared the place in the jungle where he had slain so many people. He heard their plaintive voices imploring him—"Let me live, my lord, I'm a poor man and have many children." He saw the frantic movements of their arms and legs in the fear of death. When faced with such memories, deep remorse gripped him and made him get up from his seat and leave.

And so this was a struggle. The practice for Angulimala was not easy. And that makes sense to me—it makes a great deal of sense to me.

There's also a piece of this story where, in going on alms rounds, he's not receiving much in the way of alms. But he continues to do this each day, going through the village. And one day he hears a woman in the pain of childbirth, really experiencing the pains of labor, and his heart is broken open in compassion. He said, "Oh, beings experience so much suffering," and felt compassion for this woman—and also a broader compassion for all beings who suffer.

This is a transformative moment for Angulimala, I think—that moment where the heart is able to take in the suffering of others. When we're behaving unethically, we have to close our hearts to the suffering of others. We have to close our hearts to the harm we cause. Our hearts don't want to feel that when we're behaving unethically, and so it creates a kind of block for us. This part of the story points to the softening of the heart that's happening—the transformation taking place. Feeling the pain of the world.

In response, the Buddha suggests that Angulimala could go to that woman experiencing pain and say—and he actually suggests two things, which is a bit odd. He says, "Angulimala, go to that woman and say: 'Since I was born, I have never purposely deprived a living being of life. By that truth, may you and the infant be safe.'"

Perhaps this was a way of testing Angulimala's willingness to follow blindly what the teacher said. But Angulimala responded, "I can't do that. That is not true. I cannot do that."

And so here is another kind of counterpoint in the story where the Buddha asks Angulimala to do something—but in this case, what he's asking him to do is to lie. And Angulimala says no.

So the Buddha changes the statement. He says, "Then Angulimala, say to the woman: 'Since I was born with the noble birth, I have never purposely deprived a living being of life. By this truth, may you and the infant be saved.'"

This Angulimala felt he could say truthfully—that since he ordained, since he started on the path that the Buddha taught, he had never purposely deprived anyone of life. And the story goes that the woman had an easier childbirth because he said that to her—one of the mystical, magical teachings in the suttas.

But the other piece of it, and perhaps a piece that points back for us, is that it seemed to create conditions for Angulimala to remember that those actions he had done—the memories of the murders rising in his mind—those were in the past, and he was no longer in danger of doing that. The statement was a reminder to Angulimala of his ethical conduct. And the text says that not long after that point, Angulimala's mind settled and he became one of the arahants—as all good Buddhist stories end, with the person becoming fully enlightened.

But this is also something we can reflect on. Through the reflection on sila, remembering your own goodness—if you're finding your mind struggling with things from the past, or just struggling to settle—perhaps recalling your own goodness, remembering your own ethical conduct, bringing to mind what you've been cultivating here, the wholesome qualities, can create conditions for the mind to be able to settle.

I'll end with reading a couple of the verses that Angulimala composed after his awakening:

Who once did live in recklessness
and then is reckless no more
shall illumine the world
like the full moon set free from a cloud.

Who checks unprofitable deeds,
who checks the evil karma,
shall illumine the world
like the moon unveiled from a cloud.

Oh, they are fools who have no wits,
who give themselves to recklessness.
But those of sense guard diligence
and treat it as their greatest good.

Oh, give not way to recklessness
nor harbor love of sense desires,
but diligently meditate
so as to reach the perfect bliss.

I stayed in forests, at the root of a tree,
in mountain caves—
but with an agitated heart.
Now I rest and rise in happiness
and happily spend my life,
for now I am free of Mara's snares.
Oh, for the pity shown me by the master.

free of craving, without grasping, with guarded senses well restrained. Eliminated the root of misery, the ending of all taints attained.

CHAPTER 22

Words of Encouragement

Andrea Fella · 59 min

> *This opening session for the second half of a three-month retreat at IMS brings together continuing practitioners and newly arriving yogis. The teaching team—Andrea Fella, Greg Scharf, Tuere Sala, Jaya Rudgard, Marjolein Jonsson, and Brian Lesage—introduces themselves and welcomes participants into this precious time of intensive practice.*
>
> *Brian Lesage offers the main reflection, drawing on the Zen tradition of Niwazume—the ritual of monastery entrance where aspiring monastics must demonstrate their sincerity by waiting persistently at the gates. He connects this to the Pāli concept of ātāpī (ardency) found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the quality of dhammachanda (zeal for the Dhamma). Rather than being stern or rigid, true sincerity arises from a soft heart filled with ease and kindness. Brian emphasizes that sincerity—not success or failure—is what truly matters in practice, and that this quality has already carried each practitioner to this retreat.*
>
> *The session includes a guided reflection to help practitioners connect with their heartfelt sincerity, followed by the traditional chanting of refuges and the five precepts. Jaya Rudgard offers the beautiful image from the Majjhima Nikāya of the Saṅgha as rivers flowing together toward Nibbāna. The evening closes with a meditation on being both alone and together—walking one's own path while sharing the journey with others in this unique form of community practice.*

Hi everyone.

Many of us here in this hall tonight are new for the first time during this retreat—all of us on the stage and those of you arriving today—and so we all feel welcomed by those of you who've been here already for six weeks.

This evening we are going to introduce ourselves to start, just so you know who we are. Then Brian will offer a talk, and then we'll also have the Refuges and Precepts together. It will be a simple evening, but we hope that it will be the beginning of joining the energy of those of you who've been here with the energy of those of you who are arriving, including us.

My name is Andrea Fella. I've been teaching this retreat for about twelve years or so, most years. I'm happy to be back here this year with this team, particularly my friends here, and just really looking forward to getting to know you and to exploring your hearts and minds together in this form, which is so precious—this time here. It's so pre-

cious. The moment of time in this country really, I feel, needs this kind of energy. So I bow to you all for being here at this time. Thank you for your practice. It's really a great gift to the world. And I look forward to getting to know you over the coming weeks.

I'll add my welcome to Andrea's, to those who've just arrived, including my colleagues up here, and greetings to those of you who have prepared this space so beautifully for us. We get to piggyback on your weeks of practice, and it's a great gift to us to be able to come into the energy that's already been established here over these days.

My name is Greg Scharf and I've been teaching this retreat most falls for fifteen or more years now. I've kind of lost track, but around that many, which is hard for me to believe. And I've been spending the fall in this hall often for well over thirty years now, sitting where you are quite a bit—which is a better place to be sitting than up here, I promise you.

I've just come from my home in Flagstaff, Arizona, in the northern part of that state at the foot of a sacred mountain there, a beautiful part of that southwest part of the country. I've been associated with IMS for a long time in different capacities, including time on staff. I've spent a lot of time, and still do when possible, in Buddhist countries in Asia, a lot of time also in India, and especially in Burma or Myanmar, which is a place that's very deep in my heart. I have spent time there practicing as an ordained Buddhist bhikkhu, so I have that in my background, and a deep love of long retreats. I feel just deeply honored to be here with you, to be entering into this next six weeks of practice together. It's a great honor and privilege to spend this time with you.

I want to briefly introduce Eowyn Ahlstrom, who's a dear friend and will be teaching movement on this retreat. She will be here tomorrow morning and can introduce herself, but I wanted to include her as part of the team this evening. So you'll meet her tomorrow.

I want to echo Greg and Andrea's words. I am so honored to be here with you. I see so many of your sweet faces that I've seen before. We sat these long retreats—it's beautiful, it's unique, something special. For those of you for whom this is your first time, it is special to do this. Difficult, but special. I appreciate both the times I've sat here in this hall on long retreat and the times I've taught here, and I just feel very honored to be here with you, to walk this path with you.

I'm a guiding teacher at Seattle Insight and one of the co-chairs for the Guiding Teachers Council at Spirit Rock. That's where I spend the bulk of my short retreats, but the long ones are here and at Spirit Rock.

I guess the only thing else I would probably want you to know is that I have been practicing sitting for over thirty years. There is nothing—nothing—that you are going to go through or have gone through that I haven't gone through too. So somehow I think we can work through whatever arises.

Good evening. My name is Tuere Sala, for those who don't know me.

So, good evening. Likewise with the others, I really warmly welcome you and appreciate those of you who are welcoming us into what probably has been feeling like your space, as all these new energies are coming in.

My name is Jaya Rudgard, and I'm from the UK. I've been sitting and teaching on these retreats here at IMS for over the last ten years. I'm on the teacher's council at Gaia House Retreat Center in the UK, and my background is that I was a nun in the Thai Forest Sangha in the UK for eight years. That was my foundation.

I will confess that this is my favorite retreat in my favorite retreat center, and I'm so happy to be here with these wonderful colleagues, all of whom I've taught with one or many more times before. I really love this team, and I hope some of that vibe will flavor our retreat.

At this particular time, more than ever, I feel acutely how fortunate we are to have this opportunity. It's something I don't take for granted. Every time I come here to IMS, I realize we don't know what's going to happen in the world. This could be the last time I ever get to be here. It could be the last time I get to teach here or share Dharma here or practice here. And so I really want to make the most of this. My personal intention is to enjoy it as much as possible, and I really hope that you too will enjoy it. I don't think enjoyment and deep practice are opposed—I think they go together. You don't have to suffer too much. You will, and we all will. But I'm really hoping that we can enjoy ourselves also.

Good evening. My name is Marjolein Jonsson. I also want to welcome you all. I'm so very happy to be here and very grateful to get this opportunity. I'm originally from the Netherlands and now live in Richmond, Virginia with my wife. I'm the guiding teacher at the Insight Center in Richmond and also teach retreats on the East Coast.

I'm here in the role of assistant teacher, which means I'm here to support you all as much as I can, as well as the team. I'm also here to learn and grow as a teacher—I'm actually in teacher training with Andrea and also with Gil Fronsdal. Part of the assistant role is that I'll be offering sign-ups most days of the week, and I might sit in with prac-

tice discussions some days so that I can learn and grow in my development as a teacher. I'll also be offering some talks sometimes. I'm looking forward to this retreat with you all.

My name is Brian Lesage, and I'm coming from actually the same town as Greg. We probably live about five or ten minutes away from each other, even though we see more of each other here than there.

What I'd like to share with you about my background might be a little different. I'd like to share what I was doing just a week and a half ago, because it seems like it fits with this retreat. I was on a self-retreat with my partner in a wilderness area outside of Flagstaff—a juniper pinyon forest with no trails in it. There's nobody around, and there can be a real vast, potent silence on this land.

While I was on retreat, what inspired me was the sense that I would be coming here to be on retreat together with you in this role. Because for me, there's something about the silence itself on this retreat that has such potency for one's heart. So you've already inspired me before I've even met you, while I was on retreat.

And it feels so beautiful to be here now at the beginning of this retreat. For me, it really is an honor and delight to get to support you on this journey, whether it's your journey of three months or a journey of six weeks.

As Andrea said, what I'd like to do now is share with you some reflections to begin this retreat together, to begin this journey together. And as a way of beginning, I want to share a ritual that's more in the Zen tradition than this contemporary Theravada tradition—one that's also about the beginning of a journey.

There's quite a striking tradition called *niwazumi* in the Zen tradition that marks monastics' entrance into the monastery. In particular, in Japan, monasteries have different sections to them, and there's a section called the *sōdō*. The sōdō is the place where monastics enter into a life of intensive practice.

What happens in this ritual is the monk goes to the monastery, often with papers from their home temple. They're in their robes. They go up the stairs to the monastery, show their papers, and formally ask to enter. And when they ask to enter the monastery, somebody comes and says to them, "No, you can't enter the monastery. There's no room for you here. What are you thinking? You need to go away, leave."

Then the monastic walks down a few stairs, sits down, usually puts his head in a bowing posture, and stays there.

The midday meal comes. The guest monk comes out and says to this aspiring monastic, "Didn't I tell you we don't have any room? What are you doing here? I told you to leave." And then they'll say something like, "But since you're here, I'll give you some food."

Day goes on, night comes. Somebody from the monastery comes out, exasperated. "Didn't I tell you to leave? There's no room here. But since you're here and it's night, I'll let you sleep in this room for the night. But once the sun starts to come out, you need to get out of here."

So then, sun rises, the monk goes back on the stairs, bowing. And usually this dance, this ritual, goes on for two or three days. At the end of the third day, there's another ritual called *tangazumi* or *tangario*, where it's basically the same process, but then the monk at least gets a room inside the monastery. And then eventually after that, they enter into the sōdō, they enter into the community.

Don't worry, we're not changing things. You don't have to do that.

What's up with this ritual? What is this ritual getting at about beginning a practice period? What comes of this?

For me, when I slow down with the feeling sense of what is kind of now formalized, it's pointing to a particular heart quality: the heart quality of sincerity. The monastery wants to make sure—oh, is this heart that's in front of us, that's on the stairs, is it sincere? Is it really sincere about Dharma practice?

For me, sincerity is the necessary foundation for my Dharma practice, especially for long retreats, whether that's three months or six weeks. To be sincere.

I want to be clear: at least for me, sincerity doesn't need to be stern or rigid. Yes, Zen has that kind of culture to it. But when I sense inside, real sincerity arises for me from a soft heart. A soft heart filled with ease and kindness. A soft heart that says, "Oh, I'm sincere about this."

In the Theravada tradition, there are a couple of Pali words that come to mind that seem similar to the sincerity that this ritual is pointing to. For example, in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, there's this word that's part of the refrain that gets repeated again and again: *ātāpī*, which is often translated as "to be ardent"—to be ardent to practice. Or this other phrase that you find: *dhammachanda*—this zeal, this love, this sincerity, you could say, for the Dhamma.

What I want to point out about this sincerity at the beginning of this retreat—for some of you, the part two yogis, and at the midway point for the three-month yogis—is that all of you already have this sincerity. I find it so important to start to sense into this sincerity that you already have.

For both the part two yogis and you here for three months, it's actually sincerity that carried you here to IMS. You may think that what carried you was a plane or a car, but that's not really what got you here. What really got you here was your sincerity.

And for you three-month yogis, it's your sincerity that carried you through the first six weeks. It's there, even if it's not acknowledged or recognized. Because sincerity has that quality—it carries me forward in these ways towards the Dhamma.

If I were to ask all of you about what you're sincere about, it would be quite interesting, because I think all of you would probably articulate that in very different ways. And there's something beautiful about that. What makes one person feel the sincerity might be different than another person, and yet we're all practicing this path together at the same time.

Maybe for some of you, you are sincere in your aspiration for healing or for awakening. Or you're sincere because you aspire to discover a deeper way of being in this world. Maybe you're sincere about wanting to learn how to truly love yourself and to truly love others. Or perhaps because you're simply in love with the Dhamma, or maybe for the benefit of all beings.

What I'd like to invite you to do right now is to take a moment in the silence to sense into your heart so you can touch your heartfelt sincerity. Notice what comes—how you articulate that sincerity, what you're sincere about, to yourself. Share that with yourself, feel that in the silence for just a minute or so.

Thank you for taking a few moments here to touch your sincerity. I invite you during this retreat to find ways to keep in contact with that sincerity. Because what I've discovered in my practice, especially on long retreat, is that when I'm connected with that heartfelt sincerity, it actually doesn't matter what happens on retreat. It doesn't matter if it's a bad retreat or a good retreat or whatever. What's important for me is just to be sincere about practicing. That's it. That's all that's needed—just to be sincere in your practice. Maybe sincere in your intention to be kind. Sincere in your intention to be present.

And when I'm connected with this sincerity, it doesn't even matter how much of my time I am kind or present. Because it's the sincerity that's important. And that's quite significant, because I'm not in complete control of how often I'm going to be kind and

how often there's going to be presence. Have you noticed that, especially the three-monthers? It's not like you get up in the morning and say, "This morning I'm just going to be present every single moment, and then the afternoon I'm going to decide to slack off for a while, and I'll get back to it in the evening, and then I'm going to switch it up tomorrow." That's never happened for me on retreat. If it has for you, please leave me a note—I'm so curious if that's possible. This mind, it's wild. So I can't completely control, but I can be sincere. And this is the whole art that I'm sure many of my colleagues and I will talk about.

I also find this connection with my sincerity helpful because on retreat, especially long retreat, I've noticed how subtle and sometimes even unconscious notions of "success" can be percolating in my mind, often unbeknownst to me. These are like subtle forms of craving that can creep into this mind. I want to point out that those notions, if you've noticed them creeping around, those notions of success are not the same as sincerity. Sincerity is something deeper. It's not swayed by success and failure. Those words don't even mean anything to my sincerity.

So I invite you to stay close to your sincerity, to keep it close to your heart. And as all of you enter this community of silence together, I want you to stay in contact with your sincerity in a particular way for this transition time. For those of you on the three-month retreat, I want to acknowledge—this isn't always the case for everyone—but this transition time can feel so bumpy and disruptive in so many different ways. You have all these new teachers up here on the stage. Part one, there weren't as many yogis, there was more space, and now there are all these new faces, more of them all around. The heart can be so sensitive. So important, the sincerity, especially around kindness and compassion for oneself and for others.

And for you coming into the middle of this retreat for six weeks, the same thing—being in contact with that sincerity of kindness and compassion as you transition into retreat time. When I'm in contact with sincerity that way, and recognizing that other yogis are doing the same, it allows me to have a sense of kindness not only for myself but for those around me as well. And it's in this way that we can offer each other the needed silence and solitude for the unfolding of this path.

I'd like to end by sharing with you this quote by the poet Rilke, where he's talking about solitude, which I liken so much to retreat. And interwoven in it, what I hear are these threads of him pointing to sincerity. He says, "What is necessary after all is only this:

Solitude. A vast inner solitude. To walk inside yourself and meet no one for hours. That is what you must be able to attain.

To be solitary means as you were when you were a child, when the grown-ups walked around involved with matters that seemed large and important because they looked so busy, and because you didn't understand a thing about what they were doing. And when you realize that their activities are shabby, that their vocations are petrified and no longer connected with life, why not then continue to look upon it all as a child would? As if you were looking at something unfamiliar out of the depths of your own world, from the vastness of your own solitude—which is itself work and status and vocation.

Why should you want to give up a child's wise not-understanding in exchange for defensiveness and scorn? Since not understanding is, after all, a way of being alone. Whereas defensiveness and scorn are a participation in precisely what, by these means, you want to separate yourself from.

So for this retreat, remember, as Rilke is pointing to: you don't have to be like those grown-ups. You just need to be sincere.

I love this idea of vast solitude. It really speaks to so much of what I feel is precious about this retreat. And it also seems precious to me that we get to experience this vast solitude at the same time in the warmth and the structure and the support of community. To me, that is a very powerful combination.

I'm very aware that those of you who are continuing have lost some of the community you've probably become quite fond of this morning. You probably did some kind of ceremony that we often call "parting of the ways." It's as if a river that was flowing together forked—one fork left, another fork flowed on. This evening there's another confluence, and a new river is joining our stream. We continue to flow on, merging these energies together.

We're going to do that in a ritual way, a traditional ritual way, by chanting the refuges and the precepts together. This will be our chance to blend our voices as this particular community—blend our voices and our sincerity and our intentions.

The refuges and the precepts give us a sense of direction: putting our trust in the Buddha, in awakening; in the Dhamma, the teachings, the truth of the way things are; and in Sangha, community. How each of us imagines and experiences those refuges—again, there will be nuances of difference, and it will unfold for us in the course of the retreat. But we're all here because we have some trust in this, or we wouldn't be here on a six-week or three-month retreat.

And then this common intention of ethics—the precepts by which we practice harmlessness towards the world and towards ourselves. They give us a kind of structure. The riverbed is safe and secure, the practice energy is not going to leak, and it's going to move in the right direction. We will look after one another by keeping to the refuges and precepts.

We're also flowing with the tradition and the momentum of everyone who has been practicing in this way, who is practicing in this way, and who will practice in this way in the future. We can tap into some of that energy as we align our intentions with skillfulness—skillful behavior of body, speech, and mind.

And then the piece at the end: *Idam me sīla.*

SĀDHU SĀDHU SĀDHU

I'd like to share a quote from the Majjhima Nikāya about these rivers that we're joining together:

Just as the river Ganges inclines towards the sea, slopes towards the sea, flows towards the sea, and extends all the way to the sea, so too the Buddha's assembly with its homeless ones and its householders inclines towards Nibbāna, slopes towards Nibbāna, flows towards Nibbāna, and extends all the way to Nibbāna.

May it be so.

We're going to have a little sit here to close this session. But before we do, I always think of this little reflection that Ian McCrory wrote in his book, *The Moon Appears When the Water is Still*. He said there were two monks walking together on a long journey. At some point, one of the monks said to the other, "I really like walking alone." And his companion responded, "I like walking with you too."

That's sort of what we're doing here. Each one of us is really walking your own path, your own practice, your own unfolding. It unfolds in its own way based on your own karma and your own life circumstances, causes, and conditions. It unfolds on its own. And at the same time, it's truly beautiful and special to walk that path with other people. We're kind of walking together here, and I really appreciate that we're all going through whatever is in front of our path. We're doing it together, and yet we're doing it alone.

This is the nature of this practice. It's the nature of Sangha that we are alone and together at the same time.

So let us begin this retreat. Our opening ceremony is sitting together, alone.

You can start by just getting a sense of the room itself. Even if you don't close your eyes, you can sense into the room and the people in the room. The sounds. The silence. Your ears have been hearing the same sounds and silence since we came into the room, but now we're turning our attention towards that also.

You can have a sense of just arriving here in the room. It's not a really big effort. You don't have to make the mind go anywhere. You can just let the ears do what they're already doing and hear the sounds that are arising here in the room, and the silence, and the ebb and flow of that—my voice coming in and out of that silence. You could actually sit here, just here. And as Brian was so beautifully reflecting, the sincerity of just being willing to hear the sounds is enough.

You could feel your body's posture sitting here. You could feel the weight of the body on the cushion or the chair. Weight from the underside of the legs or the back of the arms. Feel the hardness of the bones. It doesn't matter that it's soft tissue or flesh—you can still feel hardness, heaviness, pressure. You could feel the tingling sensations of movement that has been moving since you came into the room, but now you're inclining your attention towards it. You could sit here and just feel that movement.

Or you can let your attention rest on the breath and just feel the body sitting here breathing. No big effort. Not needing to go anywhere, do anything. It's really just these simple few moments of sitting here together with each other, and alone with your own breath, body, sounds.

Just have a sense that this is enough. For right now, this moment, this is enough.

CHAPTER 23

Skillful Supports for Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · 1h01

In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a detailed exploration of the opening passage of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), unpacking how each word serves as a practical support for cultivating mindfulness. She begins with a reflection on the transformative potential of mindfulness—our ordinary human capacity to know what's happening while it's happening—when directed toward understanding experience itself rather than pursuing worldly agendas.

Fella examines several key terms from the sutta's foundational instruction. The Pāli word 'viharati' (abides) points to relaxation and a sense of coming home to present experience. 'Observing' suggests both directed attention and receptive awareness—a paradox she resolves through the image of a radio receiver that can be tuned to a channel and then simply receive what arises. The phrase 'body as a body' (and similarly for feelings, mind states, and phenomena) encourages experiencing sensation directly without conceptual overlay, fostering an impartial, allowing relationship with experience that she describes as inherently loving.

The teaching emphasizes 'ardency' (ātāpī) as wholehearted engagement balanced with ease—a light touch of effort applied moment by moment rather than straining toward continuous awareness. Drawing from her own journey with anger and years of practice in Burma with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Fella offers practical guidance for both newcomers and those with established momentum, including the liberating question: 'How little effort do I need to be mindful?'

In the Sutta, the Establishment of Mindfulness, are collected a number of instructions about how to practice mindfulness. And so that really is the topic this evening: the topic of mindfulness. In particular, I want to offer some of the supports for the cultivation of mindfulness that I have found really useful in my own practice. I'm going to do that through exploring some of the words of the Buddha and then talking about how they inform me, how they resonate for me, and how that has supported me in my practice.

So starting with mindfulness—I'll get to the Satipatthana Sutta in a bit. Mindfulness is a word that we're all so familiar with. It's used in our everyday culture a lot, and even the flavor of mindfulness from this Buddhist tradition has entered into the broader culture to some extent. And yet it's such a profound thing. It's an ordinary word, and in

many ways it's based on a very ordinary capacity of our minds—this simple capacity that we have as human beings to know what's happening while it's happening, a kind of self-reflective capacity.

And yet that capacity, when cultivated in a particular way—and this is an important piece—can be aimed or directed towards many different ends. Imagine a thief in someone's house going around trying to be very careful not to disturb anyone, very quiet, knowing what they're doing, very aware of their movements, very aware of where they are. But the whole motivation for that is greed. The motivation is not "What does it feel like when I'm stepping? What does it feel like when I'm reaching?" This is the perspective the Buddha encouraged. And it was really a brilliant thing that he recognized the power of that.

Because it sounds like nothing. Know what's happening while it's happening. Be curious about experience as experience, as a human experience. What does it feel like? What is the experience of stepping while stepping? What is the experience of a breath while breathing? What is the experience of the arising of an emotion while it's happening? It sounds so nothing, but it is profound. It's a profoundly different way to orient to our present moment experience.

We usually orient—even when we know, when we are aware, even when we are engaged—with some agenda in mind, something we need to do or to get. We're kind of in the agenda rather than recognizing what this experience is actually like right here and right now.

Take the arising of a reactive emotion, for instance. Often, at least for me before I started practicing—always—when a reactive emotion arose, I was more interested in the relationship to something happening in the world rather than what was going on in my mind. We think of it more in terms of how we are in relationship to the world.

So that's how it was for me before I started practicing. When I noticed anger, I knew I was angry. If somebody had come up to me and said, "Do you know you're angry?" I would have looked at them like they were nuts. Of course I know I'm angry. But did I feel it? Did I actually know the experience of anger while I was angry? I did not. I was more interested in how miserable I was going to make the person I was angry at feel.

I have to say that when I got the instruction to notice my emotions, to notice what's happening in my experience when those reactive emotions arise—that was the very first meditation instruction I worked with. It was in daily life, and at that point anger was really ruling my life. I thought, well, let's look at anger, because anger is kind of ru-

ining things for me right now. This practice of mindfulness says it will help me if I start to get to know these things, and this one is really driving me nuts, so let's look at that one.

The very first time I really noticed I was angry while I was angry, I was shocked, because it was so painful. I had never noticed that before. I had been so focused on thinking the other person was going to be miserable that I had not actually seen or felt that deeply painful experience of anger right in the moment.

So this is the shift of mindfulness. We understand, we know what's happening in the present moment as it's happening. There is a big difference between carrying an agenda or an idea or a belief along with what we know in the present moment and simply knowing: this is what's happening in the present moment.

associate with mindfulness—presence, awareness, witnessing, observing, being with. But again, the importance lies in observing the experience as experience in the present moment. And that's actually very close to something the Buddha said in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Knowing what's happening while it's happening, we could say, is a kind of working definition for mindfulness.

It's kind of mysterious, actually. We think we know what it is, but do we really know what mindfulness is? We get familiar with the observing side, but what is awareness? What is mindfulness itself? We'll probably talk more about that as we go.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddhist teachings on wise mindfulness, exists within the context of the Eightfold Path. Wise view is at the head of the Eightfold Path—a perspective. And I've been kind of talking around a perspective that will support our path. The classic perspective of wise view is that we need to understand suffering. In my own experience, that exploration carries us through the whole path. Because as we really understand suffering, the mind begins to let go of the causes of suffering—the second noble truth. And as it lets go of the causes of suffering, we experience the release from suffering—the third noble truth. And this whole journey of understanding suffering, experiencing the letting go, and realizing the release is the cultivation of the path—the fourth noble truth.

This perspective of wise view is what supports mindfulness to be skillful. Understanding suffering—that description I gave of knowing anger as anger arising in the present moment. Now, anger is a kind of obvious form of suffering. The word suffering in the Buddhist teaching is more nuanced than just our obvious suffering. But in this case, anger was a pretty obvious form of suffering. When I really felt it, it was clearly suffering. And as I worked with that over years, I began to really understand it—under-

stand what happened, how it arose, what the conditions were for its arising. I saw at times the mind let go of it completely and felt the release from that suffering. My journey around witnessing suffering helped me to understand that that's really a lot of where the practice is. We understand our suffering, and through that understanding, the mind will release the dukkha, the suffering. Wisdom will release the suffering. It's not something we do.

The cultivation of the conditions, the path of practice, creates the conditions for the understanding to arise. And suffering will release. We will experience the letting go. We will experience the freedom. And all of that is the cultivation of the path.

The instruction that I got—the very first instruction that I got, which was no more than "just see if you can know those hard emotions arising while they're arising"—that kind of encapsulated the instruction of wise view. Because the encouragement there was to understand the suffering of those challenging emotions. The way we encourage you to practice sometimes sounds like we're talking about technique, but it embeds the wisdom. The very way we talk about attending to experience is infused with the wisdom of the Buddha.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta has language in it that carries this wisdom. It offers teachings on the establishment of mindfulness. How do we establish mindfulness? The establishment of it is one important piece to recognize. One way to think about the establishment of mindfulness is that it becomes established in our minds. It's not just coming and going—the establishment of mindfulness is when the mindfulness begins to gain continuity and momentum. That's where we explore in our practice.

For those of you who've been here for six weeks already, there's probably quite a bit of momentum of mindfulness. Some of what I say tonight, I can point to the recognition of that momentum as a skillful way to begin, as a skillful way to navigate this establishment of mindfulness. Recognizing when it's easy. Sometimes we over-effort. Sometimes when the mindfulness gets established, we're trying too hard.

At one point, I went in to talk to Joseph and told him how I was practicing, and he said, "You know, when the light is already on in the room, you don't have to keep trying to turn on the light switch. Let go of that."

I am going to be talking about the establishment of mindfulness for those of you who are here just in the first days.

And yet there's some aspect of what I'll say too that's relevant to those of you who've been cultivating mindfulness for these weeks, beginning to feel that momentum of the mindfulness.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha points to areas of experience. When we look at this sutta, these four areas of experience really encompass the entirety of our human experience. Actually, when I look at any single instruction in the Satipatthana Sutta, I can see that any experience can be found in any one of those instructions. It's kind of like a hologram. If something is arising and you're exploring it through one particular aspect of the Satipatthana, you can find your experience in every single instruction. So we don't have to think about it as being that we do this kind of practice and then we do that kind of practice. There's a lot of interweaving and intertwining of the instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta.

The four areas, however, are the body—the physical body. Feeling tone—the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Mind states—the recognition of what's arising in our minds, and in particular, the Satipatthana Sutta encourages us to notice the presence or absence of greed, aversion, and delusion, and the presence or absence of concentration. So right there in that instruction, in any moment of experience, whatever's happening, if you're looking at that foundation, there will either be the presence or absence of greed. There will either be the presence or absence of delusion. Concentration will be present or not. And the instructions are: know when there's aversion arising in the mind; know when there's not aversion arising in the mind. It's quite simple. All of the instructions have this flavor of a simple pointing to something of our experience.

The fourth foundation is a foundation of Dhamma. This foundation is a little more complex to describe, so I'll just give a high-level perspective on it. In this foundation, there's the encouragement to notice experience through the perspective of several of the Buddhist teachings. We're encouraged to notice experience through the perspective of the six sense spheres, through the perspective of the hindrances—which we'll talk about over the coming evenings—through the perspective of the five aggregates, and through the perspective of the seven factors of awakening. Again, the instructions are quite simple. For the seven factors of awakening, with mindfulness being one of them, the instruction is to notice when the enlightenment factor of mindfulness is present and when it is not present. It will always be one of those two things. So there's a very wide inclusivity in the instructions of the Satipatthana Sutta.

These four areas encompass all aspects of our experience. The entirety of the Satipatthana is an encouragement to get to know all of it—all of our human experience. No part left out. Including the reactivity, including the joy, including confusion. All of it.

We start here, especially for those beginning, with an establishment of the body as a foundation. This is quite helpful. As we begin to explore the body, we'll begin to see the difference between the body and all of these other areas. We begin to distinguish body

from mind. We begin to recognize that some things we think of as happening in our body are actually going on in our minds. So we begin to really attune to what is the actual experience of the body, and that begins to highlight: well, what's the difference between our bodies and our minds? What's happening in our minds? We begin to see the conditioned relationship between body and mind.

Early in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha has four sentences that briefly describe what Satipatthana is—how we establish mindfulness, in four brief sentences. There's one sentence for each of the four foundations, and they have a similar flavor, with each of the four categories put into the sentence in one place.

The sentence is—and I'll read it four times, once for each of the four establishments: How does one establish mindfulness? One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desires and discontent for the world. One abides observing feeling as feeling, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desire and discontent for the world. One abides observing mind states as mind states, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desires and discontent for the world. For the fourth foundation, I'm going to translate the word Dhamma, because Dhamma has different usages. Small-d dhamma, which is how it's used here, basically means phenomena. One abides observing phenomena as phenomena, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desire and discontent for the world.

Each word in this phrase is a pointing to a quality that supports the cultivation of mindfulness. He's offering, in this sentence: this is what we have to do.

And so I've spent quite a bit of time with these words. That's what I'm going to reflect on with you tonight—these words and how they inform my practice.

I think the first word in the sentence is one of my favorites: *abides*. Even just that word creates a sense of relaxation for me. Abide. The feeling of the word creates almost a dropping and a relaxation. The word itself is translating the Pali *viharati*, which literally means living, a place to live, or an abode. It's the same root as the Brahma Viharas, the divine abodes. And so there's this sense of abiding at home, a sense of coming home. And really, this is what it feels like as mindfulness becomes established—there's a deep sense of coming home.

So there's this intimacy, this being with experience. Thinking about being at home, that's where we can be most intimate, most ourselves, perhaps. There's this sense of relaxation again. For some of you, this imagery of home may have different connotations.

But I believe the word here is intending to point to relaxation, receptivity, resting, contentment. I feel like this word itself—abide—sometimes I can just use that word, *abide*, and I feel a kind of settling. Yeah, abide. Just be with this. Abide.

I once asked a group of people—it was a conversational teaching I was offering—what does the word abide mean? How does it resonate for you? Some of what I've just shared was what came up. And somebody said, "The Dude abides," from The Big Lebowski. I hadn't seen the movie, but it made me laugh. And I think, in a way, that was the same kind of encouragement. Yeah, the Dude abides. You can bring some humor into the word.

So for me, this really points to the quality of relaxation. And relaxation was not what I thought mindfulness and meditation were about when I first started. I really thought it was about going for it, striving. And the whole container of meditation—that it's really fundamentally based in relaxation—was kind of not on my radar. But it is so important.

When the body relaxes, it can be useful to check in at the beginning of a sitting. How is the body? Is there tension? And if there is tension, you could take a few moments to relax, perhaps do a body scan, just relax the body. I found this useful in the middle of long retreats at times. Weeks into a retreat in Burma, I sat down one day and it was like, wow, this body is so tense. And I spent the entire meditation period just exploring relaxation. By the end of that period, I was so grateful for that teaching. I was practicing with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma, and he really emphasizes this quality of relaxation as a foundation for our practice.

As we explore relaxation of body—which is possible to do consciously—the consequence is that the mind starts to relax. Body and mind influence each other. And when the mind relaxes, it quite naturally is aware. It knows what's happening in the present moment. When the mind is relaxed, when it's not caught up in thoughts of the past or the future, that's what relaxation of mind is. It's just this arriving. And so relaxation is so important.

Sometimes that word *abide* can invite that relaxation. Abide. What does it feel like? Whatever your anchor is, whatever your primary home base of practice is—whether it's breath or body, hearing—abide with that. Can you be with the breath with relaxation? Can you be with the body with relaxation? In fact, relaxation supports our ability to be with the breath and the body.

I will often start a walking practice by just finding a pace that feels really relaxed. It may be sometimes faster, sometimes slower. But allowing the relaxation in walking to support the mind's ability to be present. So that's a wonderful way to begin walking practice—just walking back and forth until you find that pace of ease and relaxation. And then, when there is some measure of relaxation, turning towards the movement, wherever you're noticing it.

So "one abides observing." This word *observing* has the flavor of looking closely at, meeting, seeing carefully, experiencing carefully. This pairing of relaxation with observation—of *abide* and *observe*—to me, it's almost a paradox of the practice that we can be interested, closely attentive, and very relaxed.

This brings in the notion of receptivity. The two together: abide, observing. Those two words together. *Observe* feels like a going out and digging and looking at and finding. *Abide* feels more like settling back. So how do they come together? What does it mean, this sense of abide and observe? This is the investigation I've explored.

Mindfulness can just know. The quality of mindfulness is the quality that knows what's happening in the present moment while it's happening. Attention is another function of our minds. It's the function that picks something out of experience to know. I used to think if I wasn't choosing what the object was, if I wasn't choosing the experience, if I wasn't directing the attention, that I couldn't possibly be being mindful. So I was equating mindfulness and attention, thinking they were the same thing.

But just a little mental reflection can point out to us that they're not the same thing. If you're walking around completely lost in thought, not mindful at all—and I know you've all experienced this, where you kind of wake up and it's like, "Wow, I did not know my last five minutes of walking"—and yet you were still walking. Possibly you were still going on your path, stopping and turning around and stopping and turning. Something was experiencing sight and sound. Mindfulness not present. But the functions of mind that perceive and recognize and attend to experience were happening.

So attention is one of those functions that's happening in every single moment. The mind is attending to something whether or not we are mindful of it. And I think we can see that through recognizing when mindfulness is not there. The return of mindfulness is like, "Yep, well, I had that experience at one point." I found myself driving somewhere and knew I needed to turn and then lost mindfulness completely, and found myself about two streets further than my turn, stopped at a red light, waking up into mindfulness, having had zero recollection of the last two blocks. I could remember what my

thoughts were. I knew what I'd been thinking about, but zero recollection. It's like, "Wow, thank you, attention, for stopping at that red light. I did not know that red light was there." So something was paying attention. Mindfulness was not there.

This factor of attention is amenable to our choice, our conscious control, and this is very much how we practice here. We shape our practice through choosing, at times, our object, our anchor object. We attend to the experience, and then we allow mindfulness to kind of ride with that experience. So there's a choice that we can make to attend to experience.

But if we don't choose that, there's a kind of more receptive quality to awareness, to mindfulness, that we can recognize at times when we're not choosing what to pay attention to. And there are whole practices based on this form of receptive awareness—just noticing that you're aware and what is obvious, not choosing to direct the attention.

So those are two different approaches to using attention in meditation. We can use attention to direct the mind and then allow mindfulness to come to that. Or we can step back, and then it's kind of like following where the attention goes, because attention is just a conditioned phenomenon. It will attend to something based on our history, our conditions.

It'll attend to something based on just the simplicity of our sense bases. You might notice sometime when you're walking and paying attention to the walking path, noticing the movement, that maybe a bird flies by. And instantly, without your even doing it, you are looking at the bird. That's the shift of attention in dependence on conditions, because movement is something that will draw our attention. It's not a failure. It's natural for this to happen.

And so sometimes we can recognize that. In these instructions that we're offering, we haven't quite gotten to what happens when the attention shifts. But this happens in meditation. This is a lot of what we explore. We are attending to the breath or the body, aware with that, and suddenly a sound happens. Without our choosing it, attention goes to the sound. And we're instructed to recognize hearing, to note and recognize that hearing is happening—to acknowledge that that is where the attention shifted. Not to have a contentious relationship with it, but to just recognize the shift of attention. And then with this practice, we say, "Okay, yep, that is happening, and can I incline? Can I prefer to be with the breath? Can I prefer to be with my primary object?" So then we use our capacity to direct the attention back to the breath.

But this process of the attention shifting—it doesn't mean that you failed in any way. It's just conditioned. You're seeing attention at work. You're seeing the conditioned nature of attention happening there when you see that the attention has shifted from the breath to something else.

And so this quality of receptivity—we can settle back and be curious about what is being received. What is the attention connecting to? That's a receptive quality. There's the side of directing the attention, and then receiving what the attention is already paying attention to.

To me, this phrase *abides observing* can bring these two together. We may be aiming our attention, curious, directing the attention to the breath, for instance. But then rather than continuing to look and find and ask "What is that?"—that's one way we can explore—there's this other way: "Okay, there's the breath. And what is the breath like? What is obvious about the breath? How is the breath being received?"

We can think of the receptivity of our mindfulness through an analogy like a radio receiver. The radio is available to receive all of the radio waves, and we have this tuning device so we can tune to a specific channel. When we've tuned to that channel, we can kind of sit back and just take in what that channel has to offer—classical music, perhaps. The receiver is just receiving there. It's like there's a narrowing of the bandwidth, but then it's just received with that narrowed bandwidth.

Quite similarly with aiming the attention: aim the attention to the breath, but then step back and see how the breath is showing up. Narrow the attention to the field of hearing and then receive—how is hearing showing up? Narrow the attention to the field of the body—what's obvious in the body? You don't have to always be looking.

So this blend of aim and receive. Aim and receive. What would that mean with the breath right now? A sense of relaxation with the breath, and abide observing the breath—relaxed receiving of the breath.

The next phrase begins to bring in wisdom, the perspective of satipaṭṭhāna. I think of these first two, *abides observing*, as kind of supports for sati, supports for mindfulness. This phrase: "One abides observing the body as a body. One abides observing feelings as feelings. One abides observing mind states as mind states."

One abides observing phenomena as phenomena. Phenomena in and of itself. Body in and of itself. Breath in and of itself.

In this phrase, the repetition of "body"—observes the body *as* a body—encourages an impartial perspective on the body, a less attached perspective. Just as a body. Body is what we explore; body sensations. "As a body" is *how* we explore it.

So what is the actual experience of body? In our normal everyday lives, we often feel like there's this outline of body—yes, there's my foot and my hand and my shoulder. But what is the actual experience? Foot, hand, shoulder—those are actually concepts.

Put your attention in your hand for a moment. What's the actual experience of hand? Tingling? Pulsing? Vibration? Heat? Stiffness?

This is the body as a body. The actual sensation level of the body. How our body communicates with us through these sensations. What is the actual experience of the body?

And what's the actual experience of the breath? Again, that receptivity of receiving can help us to feel the actual experience. Feel the rising pressure and expansion. Feel the collapse of the lungs. Maybe some tingling in the nostrils or throat. What is the actual experience? This is the body as a body.

We get to know body as human experience. It begins to take the "me," the sense of "I am," out of the experience. Just recognizing the body doing what body does. Sensing. Feeling. This encourages a kind of non-interfering awareness of experience. This is really where the instruction lives: notice experience as experience. Be interested in what it is like to be stepping. What it is like to be reaching. Not the motivation behind doing it, but just that experience. Noticing experience as experience.

This brings in another word that's very resonant for me—one I think is implied in this phrase, this wisdom perspective of non-interfering attention to just know the body as a body. And that's *allowing*. The perspective or attitude in the mind that allows us to see the body as a body is by allowing the body to be the body. Not needing it to be any different. Just allowing.

There's a flavor in this. Even though it's phrased as wisdom—know the body as a body—the experience of this feels very intimate. Very heartfelt. Very kind. The experience of this instruction, "know the body as a body," has love in it. Even though it's not explicit, the experience of exploring in this way brings that flavor.

The quality of allowing experience to be as it is *is* love. Just imagine if you have a friend sitting with you, and you're having your worst day, and your friend says, "I'm here with you. You be you right now. I'm just going to be here with you, and it's okay—you can be as messy as you like."

Most of us would feel that as love, as care. And that's what we can do for ourselves. We can let ourselves be messy and hold it.

It takes a little bit of a bigger container, in a way. We're not always going to feel like we can allow experience. We're going to be reactive to what's arising. This unpleasant experience is happening, yes, and there's aversion to that unpleasant experience. And that aversion can be also held. So maybe we can't allow the unpleasant experience, but can we allow the aversion? Can we allow the not allowing?

There's always room to expand the container and allow whatever feels like it can't be allowed. Like, yep, that too. That can be allowed. That can be allowed.

I'm not going to get through the entire phrase tonight, but I will end with the word *ardent*, because this one too brings in an important quality, and Brian spoke to it the other night. He even used this word. *Atapi* is the word in the Pali, and it's often translated as ardent. But some other words that resonate with this are engaged, wholehearted, sincere, heartfelt, interest, connection to experience. This is a kind of wholehearted engagement that encourages a continuity, a gentle persistence, a gentle commitment to practice, balanced and sustained effort.

This ardency has to be paired with "abides." Relaxation and ardency, this sense of engagement, relaxation and alertness—these are not opposites. They can coexist quite nicely. But it's a little different sometimes. When we're really engaged, there's tension that creeps in habitually. It's our natural habit to pick things up and be tight around them. So there's some learning around this process: what does it mean to be engaged, to practice with a continuity and commitment to moment-to-moment awareness, and not be tight? How to be relaxed with that?

The light touch of effort is really the key here. I invite you right now to notice your breath, however you're noticing it. Just this moment. And that moment when I mentioned that, could you feel it? That is enough effort. So that breath. And then the next moment. Okay, and how about now? Can you feel the next part of the breath? Just enough effort to meet this. To meet half a breath. That's enough. And then you do it again. Light, light, light touch, over and over again.

Now, we pick up the idea of "over and over again" and get tight around that, but that's just an idea. The amount of actual effort that's needed in a moment is really light. If you're holding onto a helium balloon with a string, you need a little bit of remembering to keep the pressure between the fingers to hold that string. But it's not a lot of pres-

sure. You don't need to clench your fist around that string to keep track of the helium balloon. You just have to remember that light connection. That's enough. Just remember.

And you'll forget. It's okay. You'll forget. You don't have to beat yourself up when you forget—not *if* you forget, because you will. And then when you remember—and you will remember too, that's the great thing about mindfulness, you will remember—when you remember, right there, mindfulness is receiving something already. What is that?

And then reconnecting with your primary object. Light touch, over and over again.

This is useful in walking meditation too. Where he was talking this morning about each step—one thing I found useful in walking practice at times when my mind was really scattered: I would find something on the ground, like half a step out or two steps out. "Oh, that leaf. Can I be mindful till I get there? Yep. Okay. How about that patch on the ground? Can I get there?" Not trying to do the whole path at once, because that created too much tension in my mind. Just enough, just enough effort to take this step, to get to that little patch. Okay, then I can let go and do it again. Just that light touch of effort, over and over again.

That has been so important in my practice. Just remembering the light touch, and noticing when I was too tight, letting go. Sometimes I would ask the question: How little effort do I need in order to be mindful? Because especially those of you who've been here for a long time, you may be in that camp where you've got enough momentum to really just ride the wave of momentum. Let go of the effort, and begin to recognize when the mindfulness gets a little wobbly. Then connect again with that light touch of effort.

Sometimes that question—how little effort do I need to be mindful?—I could back off so far, so much further than I thought.

So I'll repeat the whole phrase now. And just for yourself, whatever is apparent for you—the sound of my voice, body sensation—one abides observing experience as experience, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desire and discontent for the world.

Thank you for your practice.

CHAPTER 24

Supports for Continuity

Andrea Fella · 58 min

> *In this talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a detailed exploration of what supports the continuity of mindfulness—the very essence of satipaṭṭhāna practice. She begins by emphasizing that moment-to-moment mindfulness is itself a form of concentration, and that this continuity reveals the three characteristics: impermanence, dukkha, and not-self nature of experience.*
>
> *Andrea introduces the evocative analogy of a child's scooter to illustrate the light touch of effort needed in practice—gentle taps rather than forceful pushing, allowing momentum to build naturally. She then offers a profound investigation into the comings and goings of mindfulness itself. Rather than simply trying harder when awareness is lost, she encourages practitioners to get curious about where mindfulness goes and how it returns. The moment mindfulness returns unprompted is revealed as a precious opportunity—evidence of not-self, a taste of effortless awareness, and a chance to learn what being mindful actually feels like.*
>
> *The talk includes practical guidance on identifying patterns of where we lose mindfulness—whether in particular locations, activities, body sensations, or habitual mental states like anger or self-hatred. Andrea shares personal examples of how curiosity about these edges of awareness led to deeper understanding and expanded continuity. She concludes by noting that even as practice deepens, new transitions may temporarily increase mind-wandering, inviting practitioners to meet these moments with patience and investigation rather than judgment.*

As we've been talking about satipatthana, the establishing of mindfulness, a big part of what it means to establish mindfulness is for the mindfulness to gain some momentum. There is moment-to-moment mindfulness, and this is supported by cultivating a continuity of mindfulness.

Many of my teachers have said, and Sayadaw U Tejaniya in particular says, you practice from the moment you get up to the moment you go to bed. Practicing, establishing mindfulness with everything that we do. In the sitting, in the walking, of course, but also in what Greg used this term for this morning—the in-between, the in-betweenings. All of those moments between formal sitting and walking. As we get interested in and explore the possibility of the mindfulness carrying through those times as well, this really deepens the power of our mindfulness.

Now of course we're not going to be able to be mindful all day long, but it is a worthy aspiration, and worthy to practice with what can support this continuity of mindfulness. Continuity of mindfulness is the establishment of mindfulness. But also I understand that when mindfulness is happening moment to moment, this is a form of concentration. Ryan spoke about momentary, moment-to-moment concentration. And so really we could say that the definition of concentration is mindfulness arising in each moment, and the mind not pulled out into distraction, not pulled out into losing mindfulness, essentially.

Sometimes we cultivate that moment-to-moment mindfulness on a single object, like the breath, where we're bringing a focus of attention to one object. It becomes the more one-pointed concentration. But still, really, the definition of concentration there is the continuity of mindfulness. The thing that makes that concentration is the continuity of mindfulness.

And then there's this flavor of it that's stable on one object. There's this other flavor of it that is the stability of the awareness—an awareness that is not disturbed by whatever arises, an awareness that can meet whatever's arising without getting pulled into it, wanting to push it away, or getting confused about it. This kind of moment-to-moment concentration really begins to reveal how our minds work.

We see the impermanent nature of experience. We see the dukkha nature of experience at times. We experience the suffering of what our minds do. This, by the way, is not a mistake. When we are mindful, we see how those habits and patterns of mind operate. When we can know them—as I said in my first talk, when I saw anger as anger, just really seeing it, I felt the suffering of it. That was a little bit of a shock, to actually recognize, oh, this hurts here.

The mindfulness, cultivated moment to moment, begins to help us see the nature of our experience as impermanent, as unreliable for a place to land for lasting happiness—its dukkha nature—and its not-self nature, its conditioned nature, that things are all process, just a tumbling on of process. The seeing of that has the effect of helping the mind to let go of the ways that we cling.

The ways that we cling are typically because we attribute permanence to things, we attribute reliability to things, we attribute a sense of "I can control things," a sense of self to things. Things are mine, things are me, who I am. Those misperceptions create or participate in why we suffer. When we can see the nature of our experience through this moment-to-moment concentration, the mind begins to let go of those patterns and

habits. We don't have to do the letting go. The letting go comes with the understanding. And so the power of our practice is really revealed to us with the continuity of mindfulness.

That's what I'd like to explore this evening: some supports for continuity, the moment-to-moment kind of continuity. My teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, has said if we really understood the value of the practice, we would not stop practicing. So appreciating or remembering, at times even perhaps reflecting on the value of practice, can be a support for our engagement with practice. And really that's what continuity is—this engagement.

You all know the value of practice. None of you, I think, would have signed up for a retreat of this length if you did not have some sense of the value of being here for this long. And we forget. Sometimes, especially on a long retreat—it's funny. Here we are doing this thing that we've thought about for so long. We've planned and set aside our time, and it takes a lot. It takes a lot to get here. And then we get here, and over the weeks—maybe more for those of you who've been here for seven weeks already, but maybe also starting now for some of you who've been here for a week, just over a week—it may start to feel like, well, this is just what we do. We get up, we go to the hall, we sit, we walk, we eat, we sit, we walk.

It becomes like going to work. We do our job. And we forget to remember how helpful it is.

So if you find yourself almost treating the practice like a job, take a few moments—maybe at the beginning of the day or at the end of the day—to remember how the practice has served you. Connect with the aspiration and intention that brought you here. If you find at times there's a waning of energy towards the practice, remembering how it has supported you can be very helpful.

The Dalai Lama has pointed to this kind of reflection and encourages it not over short periods of time. How have you benefited from the practice—not necessarily today or yesterday, but over the arc of your practice? Look at your life.

When I think about my mind before I started practicing, I'm so glad I met the practice. My life is completely, completely transformed. And I can forget the value at times. But when I remember that, it's like, yes. I remember those moments where I saw something and thought, wow, this works. This is helpful. Or even just noticing over time the weakening of habits and patterns. Sometimes we don't see something vanish in a moment, but we notice over time: I'm not reacting to those things as much as I used to. And we know that it is connected to our engagement with the practice.

So if you find your mind going, "Why am I doing this?"—see if you can remember that value, what you've actually experienced as value. I'm quite sure that all of you wouldn't be here without knowing something from your own direct experience of the value of practice. This can support the mind's willingness to engage. It's a form of confidence or faith in the practice.

In terms of exploring continuity of mindfulness, we often think about making effort, reminding ourselves, connecting again and again with the practice. This is one of the key ways that we engage—that light touch of effort to remember, to be connected. Just enough, as we talked about earlier in the retreat, just enough to meet this moment, and then do it again and again.

There's an analogy I find evocative for this light touch of practice, the light touch of effort. Often, in terms of engaging with effort, we come into a sitting or go out for a walking and we think, "Okay, I'm going to be mindful for the whole thing." We try to pick up all the effort to do the forty-five-minute sitting in the first few moments. "I'm going to do this." But it doesn't work that way. It really is just these small moments—moment to moment to moment.

So the analogy is this: children have these little scooters they ride on, not the motorized ones, but the ones that are just a little platform. I think they're called razor scooters. They're just a little platform and you put one foot on it, holding onto the handles. To get going, you put your foot down and you tap—tap the ground. After a while, finding your balance on those two wheels requires that gentle tapping. If you put your foot down and tried to push really hard to get fast momentum going, it would be a pretty wobbly ride. But the gentle tap, tap, tap—you can find your balance and get a little momentum.

A light tap. Touch, touch, touch. And then you start getting momentum and can ride for a little while. You bring your foot up and don't have to tap for a bit. Then you start feeling it get a little wobbly, and you know you need to put your foot down again to tap and get a little momentum. Maybe that time you just need one tap and then ride again because there's still some momentum—it's just a little wobbly.

This is very similar to how the light touch of effort works in our practice. We don't try to pick up the whole sitting at the beginning. Just enough for an in-breath. Just enough for an out-breath. Just enough for a step or two. Just enough to meet this. Just this moment. And then do it again. And do it again. A light touch. A light tapping.

The idea of "I have to do this for 45 minutes"—that's just an idea. The actual effort involved is very light. So you might notice if the mind picks up the thought "I have to keep doing this, keep doing this." It's just an idea. It's true we have to keep doing it, but the feeling of that idea and our relationship to it doesn't necessarily have to connect with the actual light touch of just this moment. Just this moment. Just this moment. Just that tap, tap, tap.

And then we start to feel the momentum of mindfulness. We start to get familiar with that quality, and we learn that perhaps we can connect with a light touch for half a breath and then find ourselves riding that for two or three breaths without needing to reconnect or prompt remembering. We begin to get the feeling of the momentum of mindfulness.

When does it become useful to connect again, to re-engage, to meet with a little intention—that intention to remember the mindfulness? A light touch of effort is so helpful, along with recognizing that momentum. We begin to get familiar with the experience of mindfulness, with what it means to be mindful. There's a feeling of being mindful.

And when there is that momentum—just as with the scooter, when there's good speed going, if you put your foot down, you're actually going to get in the way. Similarly, when there's that sense of momentum and we start checking, "Am I connected? Am I aware?"—that's actually interrupting the natural momentum of mindfulness. That's what Joseph meant when he said you don't have to try to turn the light on when it's already on. You get familiar with that sense of what it's like to be mindful.

This familiarity with what it's like to be mindful—for me this has been one of the key ways that the momentum of mindfulness has developed. I've been interested in engaging with this momentum, or the continuity of mindfulness, by getting curious about the experience of mindfulness when it's there—what it's like when it's there—and the goings, when it's not there.

Mindfulness is a quality of mind, a conditioned arising that is sometimes arising in the mind and sometimes not arising in the mind. We could call it a mental formation, a mental activity. Like concentration is a mental activity. Ease or peace or anger or confusion—all of these are mental activities. Mindfulness is one of them, one of these mental activities. And like confusion or anger or peace or ease, mindfulness is sometimes present and sometimes not present.

Getting curious about the comings and goings of mindfulness is really a kind of investigation. This investigation or curiosity about the disappearance of mindfulness and its reappearance has been a way in my own practice that mindfulness has expanded into new areas—more continuity resulting from this kind of exploration.

As opposed to thinking, when I notice that mindfulness goes, "I need to just try harder," what I did instead was get curious. What happens when mindfulness goes? Where's it going? How is it going? What's going on there? An interest to learn about those areas where there are these fallings-off of mindfulness. A curiosity to explore that. This has been a very powerful part of my practice and has greatly expanded the continuity of mindfulness.

So I want to talk about this in some depth. How do we explore the comings and goings of mindfulness, like we might explore the comings and goings of any mind state?

I've had people say to me sometimes that it feels like mindfulness is either there or it's not there. They can see when it comes back, but they can't see when it goes away. And it is definitely easier to see when mindfulness returns. But it is also possible, as I was describing with the scooter, to get familiar with the quality of being present, that sense of the momentum of mindfulness. We start to get a sense of when it's getting a little weak, beginning to drift.

I'll start with the exploration of recognizing mindfulness returning, because that is probably the easiest place to begin to get familiar with the experience of mindfulness—what it's like when mindfulness returns. When mindfulness returns, often we have what we call, "Oh, my mind wandered."

And, you know, when we wake up, we might say we're waking up, and in that moment, often our relationship to what's happening is, "I wasn't mindful." There's frequently a relationship to that of self-denigration: "I'm not doing it right, I can't do it right."

But in that moment—when you notice that you weren't mindful—what's actually happening is that you are aware in the moment. You are mindful in the moment that mindfulness is returning. That's what has occurred. You've become aware that mindfulness has returned. But then what we tend to do with it is overlay the idea that, "Oh, I'm supposed to be able to keep the mindfulness continuous, and I wasn't doing that, so I failed somehow."

So that moment when we notice that we're back—that moment is a great moment. There are several things that are great about it. First of all, mindfulness is back, so we've got the possibility of cultivating mindfulness again. It's also a moment of mindfulness that you didn't have to do. It was free. You made no effort for that one.

If we can be curious about the moment of mindfulness returning... At one point on a retreat here, that curiosity arose: can I see the moment of mindfulness returning? Now, this isn't something I actually recommend trying to see, because it's much more that it's seen—that mindfulness, you know, we can know that. But there can be a curiosity about it: can I know that without judging it? Can I just know the arising of mindfulness? And what is it arising with?

Because usually it's arising with something potentially connected to what the mind was doing moments before. It's arising with a thought, or it's arising with an emotion, or it's arising with a sound—it's arising with some experience. So what is the experience? Mindfulness returns and there's some experience that mindfulness is knowing in that moment. But very quickly we think, "Oh, I'm supposed to be with the breath," or whatever, "and I wasn't mindful a moment before, so that's a problem." And so we miss that moment. We miss that experience of mindfulness returning.

In that moment when mindfulness returns, when we're not judging it, there's an interesting kind of distinction or recognition that's possible. When mindfulness returns, there is the awareness in this moment of what it's returning with, and there's also a lingering memory of what was happening before. Consciousness, feeling, perception—all continuing while we're not mindful. And so when mindfulness returns, we can know something about what was happening before.

There's often a little bit of a sense of a quality of difference there in that moment when mindfulness returns. Not always, but sometimes there is a sense of, "Oh, this is what it's like to be mindful." And there's a lingering memory of what it was like a moment before, or a few moments before, when the mind was caught or tied up or not clearly knowing in the present moment.

So there's a learning, a kind of learning of the distinction. What does it feel like for that mindfulness to return? What is that experience of mindfulness returning? Getting familiar with that.

There were some periods of time where I got so interested in this—what's it like for mindfulness to return?—that I kind of just let the mind wander, almost. It didn't matter how many times the mind wandered in the sitting. If it wandered two hundred times in the sitting, that was two hundred opportunities for me to see what it was like when mindfulness returned. Getting familiar with that. Getting familiar with that moment.

Usually we cultivate mindfulness by prompting mindfulness. When mindfulness is present, we can remember to tap. We can remember to continue to practice with being mindful. And that's called prompted mindfulness. But this moment of mindfulness arising—it's conditioned, it is arising in dependence on conditions, but it's not anything that we are doing. It is arising without our participation. That is called unprompted mindfulness.

Another way we can cultivate mindfulness is by beginning to recognize the arising of unprompted mindfulness. Through the recognition of that arising moment, we are getting familiar with the experience of being mindful.

And as with any wholesome quality, when we notice it with mindfulness, it creates the conditions for that wholesome quality to arise more frequently. When we notice and bring attention to unwholesome qualities—anger, aversion, delusion—when we notice those, it creates the conditions for them to appear less often in the mind.

So this recognition of the experience of mindfulness returning seems to create the conditions for us to notice that happening more often. This is true here on retreat and also in daily life. If we're curious about noticing the moment of mindfulness returning, this is a great practice for the in-between times too.

We can cultivate a continuity. The prompting of mindfulness in the in-between times—we can prompt and encourage mindfulness using noting. A light touch of noting can help us stay prompting the mindfulness moment to moment. Stepping, stepping, reaching, touching, seeing, hearing. But it will get lost. Mindfulness will go away at times. And so the moments when mindfulness returns in the in-between times can be a great exploration. What is it? Mindfulness is arising. It's arising now. What is it arising with?

When you notice mindfulness returning, first of all, celebrate. Mindfulness is back. Notice the effortless quality of that. It gives a sense of what it means to be mindful without working very hard—that moment. It's a pointer to very easeful mindfulness, that moment of mindfulness returning, if we're not judging ourselves around it. It's also direct evidence for the not-self nature of our minds. Because who did that? Who made mindfulness come back? It happened. It was conditions, process, not self.

So notice that you're aware, mindful in the moment, and notice what is obvious in that moment. Then, once you're back, you can start prompting the mindfulness again in whatever way is useful for you—connecting with your anchor, the breath, body, hearing. Those of you who have been here longer, perhaps already with open awareness, just noticing: mindfulness returns. And then in the return of mindfulness there can be an engagement, a reconnection, the prompting of mindfulness again.

Then there's the curiosity about where mindfulness goes—the goings of mindfulness, the times our minds begin to wander. I find curiosity to be a great support for continuity of mindfulness and for this investigation. So rather than using the prompting of mindfulness, at times I will just get really curious about what the mind is doing. When is it starting to get disconnected from experience?

Often we notice certain patterns. One thing I'll suggest is just be curious about where and how you tend to lose mindfulness. You're here for long enough to really get familiar with some of these patterns. Maybe you notice you lose mindfulness when you go into your room, or when you go for a walk on the loop, or when you go to your yogi job. You might begin to notice some patterns of where mindfulness gets lost.

So noticing where you lose mindfulness, getting curious about how the mind tends to get lost, you can then begin to get curious about what happens there. Now you could say, "Okay, I get lost in my yogi job, or I get lost when I go into my room. Let me just note my way into the room"—almost brute force, just keeping the mind there. That's a way of using prompting to help us in those places where mindfulness tends to get lost, with a light touch just continuing.

For me, at least, I found it to be more fruitful in terms of learning, rather than doing that more forceful prompting of mindfulness in those zones where my mindfulness gets lost, to explore what's actually happening. Here's an example. I noticed for a while that my mindfulness got lost when I went into the restroom.

And I noticed my mindfulness would often return when I was washing my hands, finding myself gazing at myself in the mirror. That would be when I would wake up—gazing at myself in the mirror—and realize I had not noticed all of the activity in the restroom. I didn't notice that. And I didn't notice the intention to look in the mirror.

So I just began to get curious. What happens there? What is it? What goes on? As I was heading to the restroom, I'd think, "Let's see, what goes on? What is it the mind does there that it gets lost?"

In that case, I noticed that at one point I was very present with most of what was happening in the restroom. I was washing my hands, very aware of washing my hands. And then I noticed I was looking up. I caught the looking up a little bit. There was a moment of just habit engaging—the habit of looking at myself in the mirror. I didn't see that intention. I didn't see that impulse to look up. I was just automatically looking up. It was like, "Wow, this is just a habit to look at myself in the mirror."

So that curiosity of "What happens here?"—it wasn't like some deep need to be seen or anything like that. It was just a habit. But I could see in that moment the habit arising.

This kind of exploration—taking an inventory of where your mind tends to get lost, then having some curiosity about what happens there—can be very fruitful.

We might also lose mindfulness in particular experiences, like painful body sensations. I would notice at times that a couple of different things happened when I had pain in my body. At one point I noticed that when there was pain, the mind started singing. At other times I'd notice it would just go into spacing out. It would go into some non-mindful state. I would wake up kind of singing or in this spaced-out place.

What I found interesting was this: when I noticed I was getting lost when there was pain in the body and got curious about that, I realized that when the mind was singing its song or lost in spaciness, it was not bothered by the pain. There had been a lot of aversion to the pain, and in this place where the mind went out of mindfulness, it was almost like a little lesson. When I woke up in the singing or in the spacing out, I could see that the mind was not hooked by the pain anymore. It was not disturbed by the pain in that space.

So this was a strategy. My mind had learned how to decouple from being reactive to pain, but not in a way that was keeping me aware. That was interesting to me. It was a little learning: the mind knows how not to be hooked by the pain. Can I learn from that?

I played with that. Can I not let the mind be magnetized to the pain, but not get lost? What might that mean? Again, playing with the learning around when mindfulness gets lost. What's going on there? In this case, it was a strategy my mind had developed to deal with pain. Rather than letting it do that particular strategy, I learned from it and was then able to stay present with the pain without being disturbed by it.

We also might lose awareness in very particular identified habits of mind. For me, self-hatred was a big one. We all have our own.

It might be boredom. It might be confusion. It might be depression. These are patterns of mind where we tend to identify and get pulled into them, going down the rabbit hole.

For these patterns, what I find interesting is that it's more about working with the waking up. The exploration becomes about the return of mindfulness. At some point with these very strong, powerful habits of mind—like self-hatred for me—if the mind was caught in that rabbit hole, it didn't often find its way out by itself. I would wake up deep in the rabbit hole of self-hatred. Likewise with depression. The mind would have been lost in the depression, and I'd find myself waking up with the depression.

So that moment of mindfulness returning—it's returning with whatever state is present. Sometimes the mind is just returning from a very light kind of wander, but sometimes it will wander into these deep old habits and patterns. When that's where the mindfulness is getting lost, then I find the moment of waking up and noticing: *Oh, here's what it's like to be aware with this pattern. This is the experience of self-hatred, aware with that.*

The practice of exploring the moment of mindfulness returning can support this capacity to recognize when mindfulness returns into a deep pattern or habit of mind. What I found around anger and self-hatred was that waking up with it—just acknowledging, "Okay, yep, there it is. This is what it's like to be angry. It hurts. This is self-hatred. This is what it feels like"—that attunement on the waking up allowed the mindfulness to begin waking up with that state earlier in the process.

I might have described this before: it would wake up into full-blown anger, but over time, that attunement developed. It's like we set a kind of intention, a curiosity: *Can I know when mindfulness gets caught by this?* When we wake up into that state, in that moment of waking up, the mindfulness gets more attuned to that quality, more curious about it. And so it starts to wake up earlier and earlier in the process of that pattern, to the point where you might start to see the very beginnings of it.

This did happen for me with anger—beginning to see just the movement towards it before it was actually constructed. Seeing the mind, which felt like a freight train: "Yeah, let me jump on that thought and think more thoughts to get angry." But seeing that, the mind let it go.

So again, the curiosity around where mindfulness gets lost and what the mind can learn from it. Not to double down and just try to stay mindful through everything, but to be curious. Maybe this talk really could be a talk on curiosity—it's such a powerful support.

Just a couple more reflections, as I'm running out of time. I'd say one of the key ways mindfulness slips out is when there's a shift of attention and there hasn't been a clear recognition that the attention has shifted. We're sitting, paying attention to the breath. This has happened to me when I was really working with an anchor object, with the agenda to stay with the breath. With that agenda, it's like, "Yep, this is what I'm doing, this is what I'm doing." And then something happens—a sound occurs and the attention goes to the sound. It's not like we have to try to make it go; it goes to the sound. But sometimes, if we have that agenda to stay with the breath, we might not notice that shift. There's a sound, and then the mind just goes into its habitual thing around the sound. It thinks about the sound. I remember hearing the sound of a car going down Pleasant Street, and then I was driving down Pleasant Street in my mind. The mind just went down Pleasant Street, down to Barry. I didn't see that hearing had happened, didn't notice that shift of attention.

As mindfulness gets stronger, we can really notice that shift—that quality of the shift of attention. I'd say this is one of the key ways we slip into thinking. The attention shifts to some object, some experience, we don't clearly notice that shift, and then the mind starts thinking about it.

And the last reflection I'll share is this: as the practice deepens, as there's more continuity of mindfulness, quite paradoxically it might seem, as there's a little more continuity and stability in the mind, sometimes there are transition points in our practice.

It's like we're attending to experience in a particular way, and there's a kind of familiarity. At one point on the three-month retreat, I was finding it very easy to just sit down and stay with the breath. I would just sit down, and it would be right there—the breath would be so clear. It was almost effortless; I didn't have to work very hard. This was well into the course. And then one day I sat down, and it was like the mind was just wandering.

When there's a shift as the practice is deepening, this was a time where suddenly I started losing awareness more often. At that point I had known enough to kind of just be curious. It's like, "Okay, what's going on? I know it's not like I've been going out dancing and singing and seeking entertainment. That's not why the mind is wandering. There's something going on here."

So again, the curiosity. And what I discovered is that the sensations of the breath that I was so attuned to—those were not happening anymore. The mindfulness had dropped to a subtler, really subtle level. I would notice the sensations of the breath, and then they would just be gone. And that's when the mind would wander.

There's a kind of sense of, "Okay, there's a settling here, a deeper settling that's happening." It does happen that as the mind settles, there are times when the mind starts wandering more. And when that happens for me, I get curious. Because often something new is happening, something new unfolding—a settling of the mind to a new level perhaps, an unfamiliar experience, a quieter mind. There are things that maybe we're not so familiar with seeing. And when we're not as familiar with meeting those experiences, those can be times when the mind wanders.

So again, some patience and some curiosity: "Well, what's actually happening here as the mind is starting to wander? What's actually happening?"

I really want to encourage this curiosity around noticing mindfulness—the experience of mindfulness itself and the places where we lose mindfulness. Not to judge them; it's all conditioned. All the places where we lose mindfulness are conditioned. So any exploration, any curiosity about it, is going to be revealing the conditioning of our minds.

The exploration with curiosity also—like for instance in those explorations around mindfulness slipping as the practice deepens—there were times when I would just notice, like I would sit down and think, "Okay, I'm with the breath, I'm with the breath," and it's gone. It's like, "Okay, let's just see what happens as it goes." Rather than trying to stay with the breath, it's like, "It's slipping. How is it slipping?"

That practice, that willingness to be curious about where the slipperiness is, what that edge is—it has created the conditions for mindfulness to begin to see way more than I would have ever thought it could. Mindfulness can meet anything. Any idea you have about spacey mind being inherently a state that's non-mindful—it's just a state that's habitually non-mindful. We can be aware within that state. So some curiosity, some exploring the edges of mindfulness.

I might have said this the other day: if we're holding to what we already know, if we're looking for experience or trying to stay with what we know, we don't see what we don't know. And so this is kind of an exploration of willingness. Like, "Okay, mindfulness and wisdom are interested in something. And I don't know what that is. So let's see. Can I stay with them? Can I follow where mindfulness and wisdom are going?"

This has been a very powerful practice for me in terms of strengthening the continuity of mindfulness.

CHAPTER 25

Mettā Practice: Difficult Person and All Beings

Andrea Fella · 58 min

In this guided meditation and dharma talk, Andrea Fella explores the challenging yet transformative practice of extending mettā (loving-kindness) to difficult people and ultimately to all beings. She illuminates how working through the traditional progression of mettā recipients—from benefactor to easy being, oneself, dear friend, neutral person, and difficult person—reveals our hidden resistances and places of clinging. Using vivid metaphors of a mettā magnet attracting its opposite and a washing machine bringing dirt into consciousness, she explains that encountering aversion or resentment during practice is not a mistake but an opportunity for profound insight.

Fella shares her personal experience of discovering a wish for someone's misery within her own heart, describing how this humbling recognition opened her to deeper compassion for herself and all beings struggling with similar tendencies. She offers practical tools for working with difficult people: envisioning them at a distance, imagining them as children, or using the original Pāli phrasing (avero homi, abhyāpajjo homi, anīgho homi) which emphasizes freedom from danger and distress rather than directly wishing happiness.

The guided practice leads participants from their easiest mettā connection through offering phrases to a difficult person, then expands beautifully into all beings by gathering the various recipients together in community. This inclusive approach culminates in becoming both sender and receiver of mettā, recognizing oneself as one among all beings worthy of loving-kindness.

This afternoon we'll continue exploring the metta practice, and today we'll explore offering metta to a difficult person and all beings.

These instructions on the metta practice offer us a way to find representatives of various relationships we have to beings in the world: those who support us, the benefactor, the easy being, ourselves, a dear friend, a neutral person, a difficult person, and then out to all beings.

Part of the reason for this is to begin to explore, to begin to recognize the ways in which the wish for metta runs up against those relationships. We might have the overall idea that yes, I do want everybody to be happy. But then when we think of a specific

person, we think, well, maybe not that person. And so this begins to show us whether there's any delusion in our wish for well-being for all beings. It points out where the rub is. And that's not a mistake.

Guy Armstrong—I learned the metta practice from Guy Armstrong during a month-long retreat; he and Carol Wilson were my teachers for that retreat—he said that the metta practice is like taking a metta magnet and running it over your heart. What a magnet does is attract its opposite. And so as you run that metta magnet over your heart, it's going to pull out anything that's not metta to be seen.

I also like the washing machine analogy. If we think of our minds like a washing machine and the clothes like the thoughts and ideas and opinions in our minds, the soap is like the metta, and the water is like our consciousness. We put the clothes in the water and the soap in the washing machine, and we add some energy, some agitation. The chemical function of the soap as it gets pushed through the clothes is that it attaches, it binds to the dirt and pulls it into the water. The soap, like the metta, attaches to things that are not so helpful in our hearts and brings them into consciousness where they can be seen. In the washing machine, the water is drained away and fresh water comes back in. This is the function of how metta works.

We may think when we're offering or wishing metta to beings that we're supposed to feel metta—supposed to feel good or feel that sense of connection and care. And we may, at times, feel that. But part of the function of the metta practice is to help us recognize when we don't feel that. As we notice that, we can say, "Thank you, metta, for showing me the resistance to the metta."

This gets particularly highlighted as we bring a difficult person into our practice. We see various relationships along the way. With the easy being or the benefactor, that's usually the easiest, the least complicated relationship to metta—the easiest place for metta to flow. But at the same time, there can be things that are a little in the way. I've heard people say sometimes that this person doesn't need my metta, or I'm not worthy to give metta to this person. There's something in the way there.

For ourselves, we have complicated relationships with ourselves, and so there may be some real struggle there. For me, this was one of the hardest places, actually. It was probably the most difficult being I had. I had to come at it from different directions to find my way to really recognizing that wish, that yes, I actually do wish to be happy and healthy and at ease.

These relationships are highlighted in this metta practice as we offer the phrases, say the wishes—simple phrases like may you be happy, healthy, safe, at ease. It points out the places where we have some clinging or resistance. With a dear friend, it may be that yes, I do wish this friend happiness, but they did that thing, and that was not... And so it pulls to mind the things we have issues with in the relationship. Can we open our hearts to them, even including that difficult thing?

With the neutral person, often the relationship is one of almost just disconnection. It can be, though, for some people, that the neutral person is actually one of the easiest beings to send metta to because it's so uncomplicated.

And then the difficult person—the difficult person being someone we have difficulty with, someone with whom there's some challenge in the relationship. This kind of person can often be quite difficult to wish well. Thoughts of the difficult person can bring up aversion, anger, even hatred, resentment, or even cruelty. I want them to suffer. They did all these things to me; I want them to suffer. Again, it can be so humbling to see this.

It was so humbling for me to see that I actually wanted somebody to be miserable. And in the seeing of that—there was mindfulness present when I saw it—it kind of broke my heart. There was compassion for myself and compassion for the world. It was like, "Wow! No wonder there's war." That was the recognition: this mind, which I think of as belonging to a basically good person, was holding that wish for someone to be miserable. It was so humbling and yet so opening of the heart. No wonder there's so much struggle in the world. May this practice help free us all from these struggles and suffering.

So it opened me to a deeper connection with all beings through seeing how my own heart held this wish for cruelty. Again, it's not a mistake when these things are seen. In the metta practice we explore a really wide awareness and wide arms for holding whatever comes up—seeing if it's possible to just continue with the phrases, understanding that this thing is being seen, it's coming out in the wash. Can it come out in the wash and be released? We can think of the metta practice as functioning in that way.

In sending metta phrases to a difficult being—"may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe, may you be at ease"—my understanding of the wish is not that they be happy doing unskillful things, but that they find true happiness. It's not about condoning actions they've done. It's not about saying, "Yes, I'll have this person in my life." We can explore that wish for them to actually find a kind of happiness that's not dependent on greed, aversion, and delusion, without thinking they have to be part of our lives.

Sometimes in this exploration with a difficult person I've had the thought, "Yeah, may you be truly happy—that way you won't cause so much misery." Thinking it'll be better for me if they find true happiness. But this wish is actually a wish for them, for their own sake. So there's perhaps a near enemy here to watch for: wishing the difficult person would be happy for other people's sake, rather than including the wish for them to be happy for their own sake.

In choosing a difficult person—many of you may have done the metta practice before and have some thoughts about who you might choose—it's helpful to pick a specific person. I think touching into the actual relational aspects tickles something in us about the specifics of a relationship that can point out specific kinds of clinging. So it can be helpful to explore with a particular person for a while, as opposed to thinking of a general category of people you have difficulty with. Pick somebody for whom this is perhaps not the most difficult person. But if you're up for it, maybe try somebody more challenging. If you've done this quite a lot, you could play with an edge a little bit.

Some tools to use while offering metta to the difficult person: You can envision them at a distance, someplace far away, as opposed to right up close to you. You could envision them in a place or circumstance where they can't possibly harm you. You might envision them as a child, perhaps, when there was more innocence in their being. Recognizing again the conditionality—beings do the things they do, are the way they are, based on conditions. If we had lived the life that person had lived, how would we be? How would we be responding to the world?

Another thing that can be helpful with a difficult person: I have found that the metta phrases as stated in English—"may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe, may you live with ease"—sometimes create a little more of a rub when directly wishing happiness for somebody with whom I have so much difficulty. The metta phrases in Pali, the ones in the *Metta Sutta* chant—that's a great chant, I love it because it gives you all the metta phrases—use different phrasing. *Ahaṃ avero homi, abyāpajjo homi, anīgho homi*—all of those begin with the "a" in Pali, which is a negation. Essentially the wish is: may you be free from danger, may you be free from mental distress, may you be free from physical distress. The negative phrasing is actually what the Pali uses for those first three phrases—the wishing for not having misery in your life, not having physical ailments.

So the language might be easier: "May you be free from struggle, may you be free from physical distress, mental distress, may you be free from danger." Those are actually how the Pali phrases the metta wishes. I find it easier to use that negative phrasing for a difficult person. You could play with that, see if it's more supportive for you in offering metta to a difficult person.

So let's practice together. We'll start with wherever it's easiest for you—either the easy being, or yourself, or perhaps a neutral person.

Just whatever being has been easiest for you to connect with the metta in some way. And then we will go right to the difficult person.

This is actually the way I learned the progression of the categories—that as I progressed through the categories each day, I'd start with where it was easiest and then move to the category that I was working with.

If you find it very difficult to be with a particular category—this is a general instruction in the metta practice—if you're working with a category that feels challenging and it feels like the mind is getting really caught, doesn't feel like you can hold it in that space of "oh, this is just coming out in the wash," then the first exploration within the metta practice would be to simply drop that person and go back to where you know it's easier, to a being for whom it is easier for you to connect with metta.

Or perhaps you might explore bringing in some support. Sometimes it can be easier to feel like you can offer metta to a difficult person if you feel like your benefactor is standing next to you, offering metta to the difficult person with you. So there are other ways to support yourself in offering metta to a difficult person, but you can also just drop it and shift to an easier metta person. Then try going back—slip in a phrase or two for that difficult being, then maybe return to the easier being, then slip in another phrase for the difficult being, then go back to the easier being again.

You can be playful with the metta. There aren't really rules around it. We offer it in this structured way, but you can find the phrases that are meaningful for you. You can linger as long as you want with one being. You can play with having your benefactor support you in offering metta to other beings. So you can be playful with it.

We'll start with an easier being and then move to the difficult being. Then I'll open it into a guided meditation partway through, expanding to all beings.

Finding a posture that feels comfortable. Relaxed. Maybe a place or a way where your heart, your heart area, can feel open. Maybe explore the sense of the breath through the heart as a kind of soft breeze, or a softening in that area of the heart.

Just notice how your heart feels in this moment. Just the sense of that area around the heart. And maybe begin with dropping in a wish for yourself. May the heart relax. Not trying to do it, but just seeing—how does the heart feel? How do body and mind respond to that wish? May the heart soften and relax.

Just taking in how your heart is in this moment. No judgment, just connecting with awareness of the quality of the heart in this moment. And if it supports you, you are welcome to put your hand on your heart. Sometimes that can bring a sense of connection to that area.

Bringing to mind the person or being for whom it's easiest for you to connect with these wishes. Perhaps remembering something you appreciate about that being, something that feels connecting or caring.

If it's useful for you, if you have access to an image of that being, that can be a support for the metta. Sometimes it's easier to just connect with a name.

Begin with whatever phrases you have found are supportive for you, offering the wishes of well-being, ease, happiness, safety to this person, to this being.

It can be helpful to take your time with the phrases. When I was doing the metta practice for a month, I really slowed it down. With each phrase, with each wish—may you be happy—I stopped and kind of took in the meaning of that phrase. How does it feel to make that wish? What's the experience? How does that phrase land in the heart, in the being?

Each phrase may have a slightly different flavor of landing, so be available to receive how those phrases affect your heart, affect your body, affect your mind.

Continue to wish this being metta in your own phrases, in your own time.

Now I'd like to invite you to bring a difficult being to mind. And even as you explore bringing that being to mind, notice your heart. No judgment. See if you can explore holding this being with you in some fashion in your heart.

You could explore whether there are any qualities that you appreciate about this being at all.

Begin offering the wishes, the phrases of well-being to this being. Remembering that it's not about condoning any actions but about wishing them true happiness. That phrase can sometimes be useful: May you know true happiness. Or perhaps the negative phrasing: May you be free from struggle.

Again, with each phrase, take some time. Almost like you're dropping the phrase into your heart, like you would drop a pebble into a pond. See how the phrase, when holding that being, resonates in your heart. What are the ripples?

It's okay if there are ripples of aversion or resistance or resentment. Let those ripples ripple out.

Can they be held with a wide heart? For their sake, may they be happy, healthy, safe, at ease.

Continue exploring with the phrases that work for you and the timing that works for you in this exploration of metta for this being. If it gets too challenging, you're welcome to go back and practice some metta for yourself, for a benefactor, a dear friend. And if it's more easeful for you to drop the metta for a while and just practice vipassana—a kind of metta vipassana, holding that difficulty, metta for yourself with that difficulty, with mindfulness. I think a form of mindfulness really is a metta practice for ourselves when difficulty is arising. So continue to explore metta for this person as it works for you for the next few minutes.

Letting go now of the difficult person, we'll explore expanding metta to more beings, ultimately to all beings. One way in that has worked for me has been to start by bringing my benefactor to mind, envisioning us together, standing together, and making the wish together: May we be happy. May we be safe, healthy, and live with ease.

So rather than just holding one being and wishing them well, hold both of you together. May we be well.

And then envision your dear friend joining the two of you, joining in the metta wishes. May we all be well. Happy and peaceful. Free of danger.

And then invite your neutral person to join you. The four of you standing together, sitting together, walking together. With the wish: May we all be at ease.

And then invite the difficult person to join you. May we all be free from danger, be happy, healthy, live with ease. All five of you standing together, being together, wishing all of you well.

I had a teacher suggest that from here you can basically open it up and invite anybody who wants to join you to join you. I was surprised at some of the people who showed up. Just let people come who want to join this wishing of well-being for this gathering of beings. Let anybody who wants to show up, show up. And continue the wishes: May we all be happy, healthy, safe, at ease.

This is an opportunity for anybody who's been knocking at the door. *What about me? Can I be part of metta too?* Anybody who wants to show up. Friends, distant family, people you haven't seen in ages. The postal worker you remember. The cashier at the grocery store. Let the space be big so as many people can join as want to join.

And then perhaps think of that gathering as a kind of metta engine for well-wishing for many beings. Allow the metta to expand out beyond the gathering, a sense of letting the quality of metta radiate as wide as it wants to go. And express or explore the wish: May all beings be safe, at ease, happy and healthy. Like that metta wave radiating out, just like the rays of the sun that land on everyone. Everyone who wants to stand in that can receive it.

May all beings be happy, healthy, safe, at ease.

And remember that you are one of all beings—both sending it out and receiving it yourself.

For the last few minutes of the sitting, explore the possibility of being the recipient of metta. Beings are wishing metta for you. Can you receive that?

Thank you for your metta practice. It is quite a rare thing, I think, to be in a gathering like this, and for so many weeks to be part of a community that is cultivating these beautiful qualities. It's not an easy thing to do. And it is so beautiful. Thank you for your practice.

CHAPTER 26

Five Aggregates Review and Exploring the Sense of Self

Andrea Fella · 1h01

In this comprehensive dharma talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a detailed exploration of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā) and their relationship to our constructed sense of self. Building on earlier retreat teachings, she examines how the Buddha described these aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations (saṅkhārā), and consciousness—both as nouns (what we experience) and as verbs (active processes that fabricate our experience moment to moment).

Fella draws on the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (the Discourse on the Characteristic of Not-Self) to illuminate how we mistakenly attribute permanence, control, and ownership to experiences that are inherently impermanent, unreliable, and ungovernable. She presents the Buddha's teaching on twenty types of identity view—the various ways we identify with each aggregate as "I am this," "this is mine," "I am in this," or "this is in me"—and offers a simplified framework using three reflections: "this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself."

Through personal examples, including her own struggles with identifying as "a miserable person" and observing anger's conditioning effects, Fella demonstrates how these teachings apply to everyday experience. She emphasizes that studying the sense of self through mindful curiosity—rather than trying to eliminate it—allows wisdom to naturally reveal its constructed, impermanent nature. The talk concludes with an encouragement to honor our various senses of self as strategies that have helped us navigate life, while remaining curious about whether such identifications continue to serve us or create unnecessary suffering.

Last week Tueri began an exploration of the five aggregates and seeing those processes begin to reveal the not-self nature of our experience. Then Greg mentioned the aggregates in the morning, and Brian talked about intention. These topics all weave together. I thought I'd do another flyby of the aggregates, looking at how the Buddha spoke about them. One of the main teachings with respect to the aggregates is how we tend to construct a sense of self around them.

They're called the aggregates of clinging. We tend to cling to and identify with these aggregates, and that is what we experience as a sense of self. The Buddha called this I-making and my-making.

In exploration of the sense of self, we discover that the sense of self is an arising. When we say experience is not self, we don't mean that the sense of self is nothing, because the sense of self is an experience that's put together through clinging to these aggregates. It is a powerful process. Much like some other mental formations are processes that shape our experience, that shape our choices, that shape how we relate to the world, so too is a sense of self something that really shapes our experience. And yet we can see it. We can see it as a process and begin to understand it. Through the seeing of it, we start to see that it is not what we think it is.

We often tend to attribute a sense of stability to a sense of self. Before I started practicing, I was pretty miserable, and I thought of myself as miserable. I was occasionally happy, but when I was happy, something like this would happen in my mind: "Well, I'm happy now, but I know what I really am is miserable." So I was imputing a sense of a carrying on of that miserableness, even when it wasn't there. I was identifying that as who I was.

We often impute this sense of stability to a sense of self. But when we start actually looking at the experience, that arising of happiness—with miserableness not arising—was evidence that I wasn't actually a miserable person. Miserableness was just something that arose sometimes. This is the way Tueri talked about her anger and the recognition that anger is just something that comes up now and then. It's not who I am.

As we begin to be curious about the sense of self, curious about what the experience actually is when it feels like there's a sense of self here, an investigation and curiosity arise around it. We begin to see that the sense of self arises. And in seeing that it arises, we see that it wasn't there a few moments before. We begin to understand something about the not-self nature of the sense of self.

We may see at times the sense of self, recognizing it, seeing it, feeling it, and then it vanishes—maybe replaced by another sense of self. Just the seeing of the mutating experiences that we call self begins to point out that they are impermanent, not stable. The very observation of what we call self, of the experience of self, begins to point out the not-self nature of it.

In this talk, I'll review the five aggregates and then discuss what it might mean to study the self, to be curious about observing the self.

There's a famous quote by the Zen master Dogen. Some of you may know it: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. And to forget the self is to be awakened by all things."

This studying the self—I would say studying the sense of self—means we get curious about it, we explore what it is, what it feels like, what the experience is. Through that exploration we begin to see that it's not what we think it is, and we begin to understand the not-self nature of experience.

The Buddha talked about this process of selfing through the lens of the teaching on the five aggregates. I'll review a little of what Tueri offered last week, perhaps in some different language.

That word "aggregates"—I think Tueri mentioned this—is not a very usual word. We don't use it much in the English language to refer to anything about our personal lives. If you're a geologist, you might talk about aggregate rock, but it's not a common word for us. My understanding is that the term *khandha* that the Buddha used means something like group or heap or bundle. It was a common word. People might say they were carrying a khandha of sticks, or point to a heap of rocks. It was an ordinary word, one that was used a lot, and I think it was used because people could relate to it.

While "aggregate" sounds technical and hard to wrap our minds around—a weird word for us—it's actually a pretty good word for what is being talked about.

perception, mental formations, and consciousness—the five aggregates. And each one of these has a whole collection of experiences connected with it.

So form, the body, has all of the experiences of the physical realm associated with it. It's a heap, a collection of physical sensations. The word "aggregate" means something like that collection. If we think of what an aggregate rock is, it's actually a rock made of rocks—so it's a collection. But the word "aggregate" is also a verb that means something like to collect, to gather.

And in the suttas, the Buddha actually referred to these five khandhas both as what we could call nouns—as experiences, the *what* of our experience—and as processes. He described them both as nouns and verbs.

The noun side of the form aggregate is just the physical experience: body sensations, the pulsing, tingling, vibration, coolness, heat—just the bare elemental body sensations. This is an aspect of the form element. Even within the eye, the eye itself is form, and the sights, the contact with sights—I understand also like the light waves and what contacts the eye—that's also form. What we experience there is basically form and color in the realm of the eye. In the ear door, there's pitch and tone. The sound waves hit our ear, and the rapidity of the vibration and how strong the vibration is creates the sense of pitch and tone. That's all form.

The Buddha also talked about these aggregates as processes. In one sutta, he described them as verbs. I won't go through all five of them here, but I'll give you a flavor of one. Somebody was asking the Buddha, "Why is it called feeling?" And the Buddha responded, "It feels. That's why it's called feeling. What does it feel? It feels pleasant. It feels unpleasant. It feels neither pleasant nor unpleasant."

This definition incorporates both sides of the aggregates—as being both the process that experiences things and what is experienced. So feeling is both the process that feels and what is felt: pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. The Buddha goes through this for all of the aggregates, defining them in terms of their process nature.

And so I think of the aggregates in some ways as what we experience—the actual content when we notice with mindfulness what is being experienced—but also the processes of body and mind. The aggregates are like the processes that tumble on, creating our experience moment to moment.

The teaching of the aggregates includes all the aspects of what we experience in the present moment. I understand the aggregates as being the conditioned happenings of our experience—pretty much everything that happens. All conditioned arisings are part of the aggregates. And we can look at all those conditioned arisings, which the Buddha divided up in a particular way: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.

There are other teachings, other ways that he divided up this realm of our conditioned experience. One is the six sense bases, which I think we're all familiar with: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body—and then the mind. The six sense bases teaching talks about the experiences at those sense bases and their objects. Again, all the conditioned arisings there.

I like that there are these two flavors of describing the realm of our experience. The six sense bases divides up our experience with a kind of weight on the sense impression realm—we've got five of those and one mind door. That's one way to study experience, noticing all the aspects of body and of mind, but with an emphasis on body in a way.

With the aggregates, the emphasis is shifted. There's one aspect related to body—the form aggregate, related to all five sense bases and their objects. And then the other four aggregates—feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—are all related to processes of mind. So this is an exploration of how our minds do their thing in a very detailed way: processes of mind that come together to create our experience.

So, just a review. I've been talking about form a little bit—form being the experience of our physical realm, including all of the sense bases and their experiences.

Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—these experiences at their most rudimentary level. We talked a lot about the elemental nature of our bodily experience. That's in the form aggregate.

Now, our minds tend to put together experience and understand it using the other aggregates. For instance, as I look out here, I see people and I see zafus and walls and lights and chairs. I know that what's actually happening is form and color hitting the eye. That's the bare experience of the form aggregate—just shape and color. But it happens so fast that our minds pick up and understand and put things together so that I see people, zafus, chairs. But that part of the processing is more in the realm of perception. So the form aggregate is just this bare aspect of our physical experience.

Then feeling—we've talked about quite a bit—that experience of pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is a mental experience. We can recognize this mental quality because we can see, through observing feeling tone and watching it change, that the feeling tone is not in the sense impression itself. The feeling tone depends on conditions. It depends on what we've learned in our past. It depends on conditions happening right now. There's a conditioned nature to feeling tone. Whether we experience something as pleasant or unpleasant, it's not in the object itself—it's in our body and mind's experience of it.

An example to make this more concrete: this was perhaps the first time I really saw the conditioned nature of feeling tone so clearly. I think it was my first three-month retreat here. We were having a very simple meal in the evening—bean dip and an apple. That was my dinner. So I took a bite of the bean dip and noticed the taste, the bitterness of the beans and the oiliness of the flavor spreading over the tongue. I don't remember much about pleasant or unpleasant with respect to the bean dip. But when I took a bite of the apple, I was just overwhelmed with pleasantness. It was like the best apple ever. It was so good. I think it was probably September—they had just picked apples off the tree. It was a really fresh, crisp apple, very juicy. I was just taken by the pleasantness of it. And I was interested in the feeling tone; that was just what was being noticed.

As I kept eating, I noticed some interesting things. The pleasantness of the apple was more intense after the bean dip. After a couple bites of apple, the pleasantness diminished. If I just had apple, apple, apple, apple, the pleasantness was not as intense. The second bite was not nearly as overwhelming as the first. But then I had some bean dip,

and the next bite of apple was like, "Wow, that's so good." So I began to see that the pleasantness was conditioned—in this case, the intensity of pleasantness was conditioned.

There are other times when I've noticed something unpleasant that, in a different context, became pleasant, though I can't give you a specific example right now. But I've seen that happen too. Perhaps thinking about temperature provides an illustration. Fifty degrees—right now, fifty degrees feels pretty cold and might feel unpleasant if you walk outside without a sweatshirt. But after a few ten-degree days, if you walk out and it's fifty degrees, it might feel quite pleasant.

Again, the conditions creating that difference. And so the pleasant-unpleasant feeling is dependent on conditions. It is constructed by the mind putting things together. This can be seen. We can be curious about this, noticing how feeling tone changes.

Then perception is the process of recognition. As I said, it's like looking out here and seeing chairs and zabutons and people and walls and lights—that's all the process of perception. Our mind takes in sense impressions and looks for the nearest match. You've seen lots of chairs before. You go into a room, you've never seen that particular chair, but you've seen lots of chairs before, so you know that thing is probably a chair. This is a kind of pattern-matching function. This is the process of perception—that process where the mind goes in and finds the nearest match.

It doesn't always work. It doesn't always make a perfect match. And we can see that sometimes too. One time I walked into a room in very dim light and looked across the room at this odd shape, kind of a big odd shape. The first perception my mind put on it was: a deformed being. I saw that perception arise in my mind and said, "No, no, no—not a deformed being." Then something else came up, and it took three or four perceptions before the mind recognized that it was a vase of flowers. Part of the condition there was the dimness, so it wasn't immediately clear. The process of perception is not perfect. It's just this process of recognizing, doing the best it can to recognize the experience.

We can see perception like I just described. It can be very interesting to notice when something's not quite recognized—we can see our mind trying things on like that. Or we might recognize perception through another door. One of the easiest ways for me to recognize perception is with the ear door. Hearing a sound in meditation, there's the sound itself—the vibration, the pitch, the tone—but then there's a label that our minds put on it. "Bird" or "lawnmower." That might appear as a word in our mind, or it might

appear as an image. I think we talked about this a little last week. That kind of identification often comes through language or imagery. It can also come through felt sense. But that identification is the process of perception.

Then consciousness is just this bare meeting of experience, just the knowing aspect of experience. Consciousness is understood to be six kinds: sense consciousness, one with each sense base. So there's seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, smelling consciousness, taste consciousness, touch consciousness, and mind consciousness. It's just this bare recognition. Sense impression hits the eye and there's eye consciousness. A really simple aspect of experience. Just the knowing.

Volitional formations is not usually the last one in the list, but I wanted to spend a little more time with it, so I've put it last. Mental formations is the volitional aspect of experience. This is a lot of what we see on retreat—what our minds are doing, the doings of our mind. This is the whole host of mental activities that happen related to intention, related to volition. Not necessarily a conscious volition or a conscious choice, like something we're actively choosing in the present moment to do. But these activities of mind have a kind of momentum.

Like anger, for instance. I think we know this. We know this sense of these mind states or mental formations having an activity nature to them. When we're angry, we see how it tends to shape our thoughts, our actions. They have a shaping quality, these mental formations. So this includes our emotions, our thoughts, mind states. It includes the range of experience from the reactive emotions to the wholesome mind states.

One of the teachings around volitional formations that I find very interesting is this process nature of the volitional formations that the Buddha describes—the verb nature of the mental formations. I'm going to read this section. This is Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation of the section of the sutta that describes mental formations, volitional formations, in terms of a verb, an activity, of what it does.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu uses the term "fabrication" to translate volitional formations, and I like the way this comes out in the whole of this passage:

Why are they called fabrications?

And the Buddha responds: *Because they fabricate fabricated things. That's why they're called fabrications. What do they fabricate as fabricated things? For the sake of form, they fabricate form as a fabricated thing. For the sake of feeling, they fabricate feeling as a fabricated thing. For the sake of perception, they fabricate perception as a fabricated thing.*

For the sake of fabrication, they fabricate fabrications as a fabricated thing. For the sake of consciousness, they fabricate consciousness as a fabricated thing. They fabricate fabricated things, thus they are called fabrications.

This is actually very profound. What he's saying is that the mental formations—anger, for instance—when anger arises, it's shaping all the rest of our experience. It's shaping all the aggregates. The fabrications arise in dependence on prior fabrications, and then they shape in turn the entirety of our experience.

Take anger as an example. When anger arises, we often feel its effect on the body—pressure and heat. It may actually physically distort the face, make it kind of harsh. We can often tell when somebody is angry by the look on their face. People aren't thinking, "Let me distort my face." Anger is doing the job. Anger is shaping the body there, fabricating the form.

Anger also tends to shape unpleasant feeling. When anger is arising, things tend to be unpleasant. There is occasionally some pleasant in there. As I noticed while observing anger very closely on one retreat, the first hit of the moment when anger arose—the very first split second—there was this sense in the body like, *whew*. There was this feeling of, "I know, I understand, I can do, I have power, I have control." There was this split second of real pleasantness. It quickly turned to unpleasant heat, pressure, tension, the whole host of mental thoughts and activities that are often unpleasant connected with anger. But the first split second of it was pleasant. I was like, wow, maybe that's the hook. Maybe that's why I go for anger, for that feeling.

Anger tends to shape how we perceive things. We tend to perceive through the lens of anger. One time doing walking meditation, I was noticing anger, just generally noticing that anger was present. I've watched a lot of anger on my retreats, in my life. I've spent a lot of time looking at anger. I was walking back and forth, and on one of my passes I turned around at the end of my path—it was downstairs in the basement—and after I turned around, I saw somebody else's shoes at the end of my path. The perception was like, "What are those doing here? This is not what's supposed to be happening." Looking at the experience, the whole anger was shaping the perception of those shoes as being in my path. If I had been in another state of mind, it might have been, "Oh wow, look at those shoes! They're so cool. Where did they come from? They just appeared." But no, there was anger, so the mind was shaping the perception.

Our consciousness is also directed by the filter of anger—any mental formation, really. I'm just using anger as an example here. It's like selective attention. I've noticed that when the mind is in a very aversive state and I walk into a room, I notice things I

don't like. Consciousness will highlight the things I don't like. In another state of mind, I might walk into that same room and consciousness might highlight something else entirely.

And anger tends to construct more anger, shapes more of the mental formation of anger.

The sense of self is a volitional formation—like anger, like joy. And it can be felt and seen and observed. We can be curious about that experience. The sense of self as a mental formation tends to construct things in its image, we could say, just as anger tends to construct things in its image. Whatever sense of self is arising is constructing our aggregates from that perspective. And this can be seen. We can begin to be curious about when we notice a sense of self, how is it shaping our experience? This will be some of what I talk about.

The five aggregates are always going on. They're always happening, just tumbling on whether we're mindful or not. Consciousness, feeling, perception—these things are meeting experience and recognizing experience and carrying us through. The body is carrying us through our lives. Mental formations are shaping our choices and our actions, whether we are mindful or not.

Mindfulness I understand also as a volitional formation. Its job or its activity is to arise with the aggregates and meet them, to know them. Sometimes it kind of knows all of the aggregates at the same time. If these five fingers are my five aggregates, mindfulness arising can sometimes know the whole experience. Sometimes mindfulness might more hook onto form or feelings; it might be more interested in exploring one or the other of these aggregates.

In terms of the exploration of the sense of self related to the aggregates, there are several teachings here, and we'll see how many of them I get to. One of them is in the discourse called the Anatta Lakkhana Sutta, the discourse on the characteristic of not-self. The Buddha begins by asking his followers about what these aggregates are with respect to the sense of self.

Here's an example. The first thing he points to is the control aspect—that we tend to impute a sense of self as having control. He says to his followers: "Form is not self. If form were self"—so this is kind of a postulation—"if it were self, then form would not lead itself to affliction. And it would be possible to say of form, 'May my form be thus, may my form not be thus.' But because form is not self, form leads to affliction. It is not possible to say, 'Let my form be thus, let my form not be thus.'"

"Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were self, consciousness would not lend itself to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.' But because consciousness is not self, consciousness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to say, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.'"

So this is pointing to the basic sense—he says, "if form were self." He's speaking to people perhaps who take the sense of self to be that sense of control. And this is a major way we tend to attribute a sense of self: when it feels like we're in control of something. "I'm in control of it." So he points to the fact that these five aspects of experience are not under our control, that the reason for that is because they are not self.

I think often we get caught in struggle around this very aspect of experience. We sit down to meditate, we say we're going to be with the breath or stay with the body, and the mind wanders and we feel like we've failed because we've not been able to control our mindfulness. Here we can stick mindfulness into this sentence: Mindfulness is not self. If mindfulness were self, mindfulness would not lend itself to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of mindfulness, "Let my mindfulness be this, let my mindfulness not be this."

But because mindfulness is not self, mindfulness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to say, "Let my mindfulness be this." We've all suffered over this, haven't we? And the Buddha simply points out that it's not a personal failing. If you can't say, "May my mindfulness be thus," it's the nature of the experience itself.

There's so much evidence for not-self in all aspects of our experience, yet it feels like such a remote thing sometimes, just talking about not-self. What is not-self? It feels so obvious that there's a self. But that's because we're not looking carefully at our experience and seeing what we take to be self—that sense of "I have control" or whatever. Then when we don't have control, we feel like we did something wrong. Instead of that interpretation, the Buddha is saying, no, it's not that you did anything wrong; it's because it's not-self.

So we can see experience when that uncontrollability is happening, when we observe things arising that are just arising. This is evidence for not-self. When we see we can't control that we have a stomachache after eating some food, it's not a personal failing—the body lends itself to affliction. It is not self. We can't simply say, "May the stomachache be gone." We live with the experience.

Now, there is some measure of control that we have, and I think that's why we get caught. When we're hungry, we can eat and the hunger goes away. When we want light to read by, we can turn on a lamp. There is some measure of control, and I think we misinterpret that as having absolute control—not understanding that when we don't have control, it is simply the nature of experience.

The Buddha goes on in the sutta, the Anattalakkhana Sutta, to point out with each of the aggregates that all of them are impermanent. All conditioned experience, if we look closely, is impermanent. It comes and goes. It's not stable. And because it's impermanent, it is unreliable. It is not a reliable place for lasting happiness.

That's another mistake we make when grasping onto things. When we cling to something, partly our mind has said, "This thing is going to do it for me. I'm going to find happiness by holding onto it." Then that thing goes away, and we feel the suffering of having pinned our hopes on it for our happiness.

This unreliability, the dukkha nature of experience—dukkha can be translated as "unreliable," sometimes as "suffering," and that is indeed the experience sometimes. But what's being pointed to here is not necessarily that experience is always felt as suffering, but that experience is always unreliable. We can't land on experience as something that can be depended upon.

Through this exploration—looking at experience as unreliable and impermanent—the Buddha asks his followers: Does it make sense to call something that is uncontrollable, unreliable, and impermanent a self? He's gone through every aspect of our bodies and minds, all experience that we know, and pointed out that it is all uncontrollable, impermanent, and unreliable. So does it make sense to call any of it self? This is what he asked his followers, and they said no, it doesn't.

I think he was speaking to people for whom blissful, permanent, and controllable was their definition of what self was. He was examining how they defined the sense of self and pointing out that what they took to be self was not self.

We may not think of self as blissful, permanent, or reliable. What do you think of as self? I have my own senses of self—what I think self is. Permanence does weigh in there sometimes. I don't know about blissful. But I think what this part of the teaching is pointing to is to begin to get curious about what it is that we call self. How do we attribute a sense of self? What is it that we're calling self? Get to know what it is that you're calling a sense of self. There are times when the sense of self arises very strongly, and we can get curious about that. What is that experience?

The Buddha had different ways to explore what the sense of self is. With respect to the aggregates, he pointed out that we tend to have four ways of identifying or clinging to a sense of self with each of them—essentially, twenty different flavors of identity view.

I'm not going to go through all of these twenty permutations, but I want to give you a sense of the flavors, just moving through this teaching quickly.

With respect to each of the aggregates, the Buddha says we tend to identify in the first way: "I am the aggregate." I am body. I am feeling. I am perception. I am mental formation. I am consciousness. That sense of "I am the body" is familiar to me.

Let me name some of the flavors I've personally experienced. That sense of "I am the body." Or "I am the emotion." "I am miserable" — that was one I was quite familiar with, imputing that this is who I am, that this is me. It might also be related to roles and social identities, which are perceptions and mental formations — the sense of "I am a parent" or "a student" or "a sibling." That kind of identification is really an identification with the perception of a role.

The second pattern is: the aggregate is mine. Things belong to me. The body is mine — that one I recognize. Yes, the body is mine. It's mine. Emotions and feelings are mine — that's another very familiar feeling, that sense of ownership, of appropriation. Form is mine in terms of things in the world, that sense of ownership. Ideas are mine — oh, I've suffered so much over ideas being mine. At one point I remember feeling ownership of a word. People were using that word and they were not giving me credit for it. So much suffering from just that possessiveness, that ownership.

The third pattern is: I am inside of the aggregate. This one I've perhaps experienced as feeling like I'm inside the body — maybe that homunculus kind of feeling Greg was pointing to the other day. A little homunculus inside the body, that's me in there, looking out from there. I haven't experienced all these permutations, but just giving you the flavor. Perhaps occasionally in some meditative states, having the sense of the expansiveness of the meditative state, feeling like "I am in consciousness." A feeling of being inside the experience sometimes. So even in those expansive states, there can be a sense of being *in* it.

The fourth pattern is: the aggregate is inside of me. This one is also fairly familiar — the emotions are in me, consciousness is in me.

So this is a pretty complex framework, and it can be useful to reflect on it occasionally. But I'm not going to encourage you to try to remember this or analyze your experience in these terms so much. There's a simpler teaching I've found really useful that takes this whole twenty-part structure and collapses it down into three simple sentences that support an exploration around the sense of self.

This relates to a phrase the Buddha uses around examining our experience. He said that with respect to each aggregate, we should understand: "This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

Taking just those three sentences — not even thinking about the aggregates so much — we can work with them directly. The sense of ownership, "this is not mine" — if we turn it around and consider the sense of self there, that's the ownership self, the appropriation self. That one's pretty obvious. I think that one can be quite clear.

And especially if something gets taken away from us. We walk in and see that our cup has moved, or somebody moved our zafu off of our cushion. There's that sense of appropriation, that sense of "mine." So we can feel that. We can feel, what is that quality of that "mine"? To me, it kind of feels like a gathering in, like I'm trying to hold all my possessions in or something. That feeling of "mine."

"This I am not"—that reflection, turned around to what the sense of self might be there: "I am this." That, to me, points to that control nature. If you think about the "I am" in a sentence, the "I" at the beginning of a sentence is the agent of the sentence, the subject of the sentence. I am the subject of the sentence. And the subject of the sentence is often the one with agency. So I am the doer. I am the thinker. I am the one who chooses, the one who decides, the one who acts. This one also can be pretty clear at times. We can feel the sense of that control, that feeling of being in control.

That one, to me, feels like a puff. I'm here. I do things. I know things. There are turkeys at Spirit Rock, and the male turkeys in the breeding season—they see a female and they go... *puffs up*. That's what it feels like. That's that "I am, I do, I'm here, I'm going to, I've got agency." So that feeling. Again, be curious about it. You don't have to make an issue about it, but be interested in it.

Then the last one—this one to me is actually one of the more interesting ones to begin to get familiar with, because as we start to really see all of these experiences as processes unfolding, we see the sense of "I am," that doer, that agent, the one who does things. We start to see that actually it's not me doing it; it's the mental formations doing it. We see the arising of an intention and an action that follows. We're sitting for a while. We feel some pressure in our bladder. We notice an intention to get up to relieve

that pressure. We stand up, we go. Sometimes we can see that whole thing happening just out of the process nature of our minds. We feel the experience. There's an understanding of what it means. There's a decision that's made. It's not me doing it. We can see all of this arising just as conditions unfolding and see that I didn't make that decision—it happened. It was the mental formations making the decision. Mental formations leading onward.

As we see that, as we start to see that we're not the one who's doing things, sometimes this last level—"this is not myself"—I think of this as the self as the object of the sentence: "This is me." In my practice, on one retreat, I was really starting to see through this lens of the aggregates, seeing I'm not doing any of these. It is just tumbling on. I could see I did not have control over the consciousness of the experience. Consciousness was happening. The mental formations were happening. All of it was just happening. But it felt like it was happening to me. It was not me doing it.

I was not the agent. But there was a sense of being the one impinged upon—helplessly being impinged upon. That sense of self is also a very interesting one to have pointed out, because I think it's a subtler one, a subtler kind.

I tried so hard to see through that. I can't see through that—me, the agent, the doer, trying to see through it. I went and reported this to my teacher and he laughed. "You just notice that it feels like me." Of course that's what he said.

The last piece I'll offer is this: there are so many different experiences of a sense of self. We can start to see that there are just hundreds of them. There's not one sense of self. We have many different senses of self that arise and pass away. We can start to see them as arising and passing away.

I think many of these senses of self that we have—and Tuari pointed to this in her talk—are often strategies we've learned to help us navigate the impermanent, unreliable nature of the world. So it's almost like we honor them. Thank you for helping me get here. And now let's see if we can be curious about them. Perhaps these strategies are not necessary anymore. Perhaps some strategies are still useful, understanding them as strategies rather than as who I am.

We can honor our senses of self by opening to them with mindfulness and wisdom, familiarizing ourselves with how they act, how they affect our bodies, how they affect our minds. These mental formations, the sense of self—just observing it like you would observe any mental formation. How does it affect the body? How does it affect the mind? What kinds of thoughts does it make happen in our minds? How does it make us act?

Sometimes senses of self can be helpful. A sense of self for me around investigation was really helpful for many years. And then at some point I began to see the suffering of holding on to that identity. So it was useful for a long time. And then at some point I began to notice the suffering of clinging to it—the suffering of clinging to being a good practitioner.

But mostly I want to encourage again, like my last talk, curiosity. Perhaps all my talks are about curiosity. Honoring our experience. Letting wisdom help us to see the nature of our experience. And wisdom does the letting go. We don't have to let go of our senses of self. We need to understand them. This is the encouragement of the Buddha: understand our suffering, understand our aggregates, understand our senses of self. The understanding will lead to freedom.

CHAPTER 27

Recognizing Delusion

Andrea Fella · 1h00

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella examines delusion (moha), the most fundamental of the three unwholesome roots alongside greed and aversion. She presents three progressively subtler levels of delusion: simple disconnection from experience (lack of mindfulness), seeing through the filter of personal and social conditioning, and the deepest level—the universal human distortions (vipallāsa) that we all share.

The talk focuses extensively on the four distortions described in the suttas: taking what is impermanent to be permanent, what is unreliable (as a source of happiness) to be reliable, what is not-self to be self, and what is unattractive to be attractive. Andrea explains how these distortions operate at the levels of perception, thought, and view, each becoming progressively more rigid. She offers vivid examples, including how our visual system creates apparent continuity from discrete moments (like a sparkler appearing as a circle of fire), and how concepts and slow change mask impermanence.

Practical investigation methods are offered throughout: noticing when something feels solid and questioning that solidity, exploring the gratification of sense pleasure and observing what happens when it ends, and examining the sense of self when it feels strong. Andrea emphasizes that non-delusion isn't something we create through effort—it's understanding that arises naturally when we meet experience with curiosity. She concludes with a touching account of watching the mind's habitual reaching for clinging with tenderness, knowing it as delusion while allowing the pattern to exhaust itself.

This morning, Terry read and responded to a question around delusion, and I'd been thinking about giving a talk on delusion anyway, but that kind of prodded the pump a little bit. So that's the topic this evening—and in particular, that very question: How do we recognize delusion?

Delusion is part of this three-part set. We often talk about greed, aversion, and delusion. These are understood to be the roots of our unwholesome mind states and actions. They're at the core, at the base of all the unwholesome, unskillful things that happen, and they are suffering. The definition in the suttas of freedom, of nibbana, of awakening, is the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. So it's really worth getting to know these three very well.

If we think about what the Buddha taught as the first noble truth—there is suffering, the truth of suffering—that truth of suffering is meant to be understood. We can say that this comes down to the instruction to understand greed, aversion, and delusion, not by thinking about it, but by understanding how they function in our minds, in our hearts. We do that by witnessing them. The very witnessing of them creates the conditions for wisdom to support a release from these patterns and habits.

You've all seen this—how the shift of seeing a pattern, for instance around fear or anxiety or confusion or clinging, and then just seeing it, being able to hold it with mindfulness and wisdom, being able to observe it—there can be a shift. When we can see these patterns and habits with mindfulness and wisdom, they're no longer functioning as greed, aversion, and delusion. They're functioning as objects of our meditation. They're functioning as experiences that can help to wake us up.

Greed and aversion are relatively easy to recognize. There are some subtler flavors of those, but you've all been talking about this in your meetings, and I think we do find it relatively easy to recognize. Greed, that pulling towards something, that wanting, that leaning towards something. Or aversion, the pulling away from something. We can see the thoughts in our mind around it: "I want that," "I want to get rid of that." And the visceral sense of it as well. The question this morning also spoke to that—it's not that difficult to recognize greed and aversion.

But by its very nature, delusion is harder to see. So how do we see delusion? What is its nature? How do we get familiar with it?

In this talk, I really hope to offer some information that will help you recognize delusion—first of all, to learn what delusion is and how it functions, and then also to actually start seeing it happening, to start seeing when it is working in our minds.

Delusion can arise conditioned by greed and aversion. The perspective that greed and aversion put into our minds is a perspective that we're seeing through a filter, through a particular flavor. I think I talked about that with respect to aversion—how it shaped my mind, how I tended to see things from an aversive perspective. The perspective that greed and aversion can put in the mind creates the conditions where we're seeing things from a skewed perspective. We're not taking in all aspects; we're missing aspects of experience because we have a narrower or particular perspective that we're looking through. This missing of aspects of experience because we're looking from a particular perspective—this is one way delusion functions.

So delusion can be conditioned by greed and aversion. But fundamentally, delusion is more basic than greed and aversion. Ultimately, greed and aversion arise because of delusion. I'll talk about how that works as we go. But if delusion didn't exist, greed and aversion would not arise. So it is really the core issue, we could say.

We can think about delusion as having different levels to it. I've explored three different layers of delusion, moving from the more obvious kind to subtler and subtler forms. I'll name these now and then briefly go through the first two. I'm going to spend most time on the third one.

The first kind of delusion is basically a disconnection from experience, a not-knowing. The second kind is where there isn't a disconnection from experience, where there is awareness, but we are seeing experience through a particular perspective. As I just mentioned, greed and aversion can do that. We see things through a particular perspective and miss aspects of experience because of it.

This second layer of delusion is flavored by our own personal conditioning—the way we've been raised, the views and ideas and opinions we hold that have come into our experience and shaped how we meet the world. Our social conditioning, personal conditioning, familial conditioning—all of that creates a layer of views, a layer of ideas and beliefs that filter how we look at the world. That's what I'd call the second level or layer of delusion.

The deepest level of delusion is a level of misunderstanding, misperceiving that we all share. We could call it human delusions. The Buddha spoke to some specific ways that we as humans tend to misperceive, misunderstand, not recognize experience as it actually is. Tuari mentioned these this morning—the four distortions of experience. Sometimes the translation for the word there, *vipalasa*, is rendered as "inversion," that we see things upside down. We're seeing things exactly backwards. So that's the deepest level, the deepest layer of delusion.

Just a little bit about the first two, and then I want to spend more time on the distortions.

The first one—being disconnected, not aware of what's happening—this is basically lack of mindfulness. We're lost in thought, lost in a mind state, not conscious, not present in the present moment. This is a form of delusion. We've been talking about getting familiar with this a lot in terms of recognizing the moment when mindfulness returns. That moment when mindfulness returns, we can have a flavor of the difference between what it's like to be aware now and just the moment before. There's a lingering memory often in that space when mindfulness returns of what the mind was like when

it was not mindful. It's that thing Tuari was pointing to in the poem. Light, not light. Light, not light. The difference between when the mind is aware and awake and when it is caught or lost in thought. This is pointing to seeing—we can get a flavor in the mind of what it's like when it's just in that cloud of not knowing. So we can begin to get familiar with that side of the experience through that simple exploration of recognizing when mindfulness returns.

Another flavor of this disconnecting comes up with doubt. When doubt is in the mind, there's often a wavering, a sense of: What do I do? What should my choices be? We may feel paralyzed, we may feel like we're stuck there. And it is often a place where we are not aware. We're caught in the belief or the view of doubt. "I have to figure this out. I need to figure out which way to go, what practice to do, how to do it." The doubt itself, when we're believing it or when we're caught in it, that's a form of delusion. But when we can see it, when we can know, "Oh, this is doubt happening in the mind," there's no longer delusion there because we know—there's clarity, we know there's doubt. Doubt is not functioning like doubt when it is seen with mindfulness and wisdom, when it is clearly recognized. This is the experience a human being has when doubt is happening, this wavering feeling.

That's a little bit about that first kind of delusion. I think you've all seen this, but maybe not really quite recognized that you can see the delusion there. You can recognize, "Oh, that being caught is delusion." The waking up is coming out of that delusion.

The second level—this kind of delusion based on our personal conditioning, our social conditioning or familial conditioning—we could say this is the views or beliefs or agendas that are associated with our own personal lives, our own history of conditioning. This doesn't have to be delusion, but very often we are so immersed in that perspective of our conditionings that we don't recognize that we're seeing things from that perspective and perhaps missing experience. Not seeing. We're so immersed in that perspective or view that we take it to just be how things are supposed to be.

We may start to feel or see into this kind of delusion when those views are challenged. Just a simple example: I think we all have some flavor of what do you do when you meet somebody for the first time. How close do you stand to them? How much eye contact do you make? Do you touch them or not? All of that is deeply conditioned, and it's not as if somebody sat you down and said, "Here's what you do when you meet somebody for the first time." You absorb it through the conditioning. You absorb it.

But then, you know, if you go to another culture or another place and people behave differently, you might feel the discomfort of that. That view is being challenged, that perspective. It's not really a view that we think about in terms of beliefs—it's just more like "this is how people behave in this situation." And it may be challenged if you go to another culture or see people behaving in a different way.

When we're immersed in a perspective like that, it's hard to see information to the contrary. This is what's called confirmation bias in psychological terms: when we have a particular perspective, our minds tend to take in information that agrees with that perspective and actively ignore information that does not agree with it. This is a lot of why we're in so much suffering these days.

The Buddha's version of this kind of understanding, which I mentioned the other day: whatever we frequently ponder becomes the inclination of the mind. And that frequent pondering may not be something we're actively trying to do. We're not actively thinking, "I want to think about this, I want to think about this"—we're just immersed in a perspective. And so that's how we see the world. That's how we take in the world.

So views happen. What's important is to recognize that we have views, and to begin to be curious about what views we are holding. We need to recognize that they're views as opposed to truth.

A way to explore this that I've found really useful: when I'm particularly caught in a pattern or habit of mind that feels deeply connected to my personal conditioning, when I can really be with that pattern—feel into it, hold it, open to it—self-hatred, for instance, or anger—really open to it, then I drop in the question: "What's being believed?" And I don't try to find the answer. It's like dropping a pebble into a pond and just seeing what the ripples are for that question. What's being believed?

Often there's an interesting thing we might notice. If a belief is apparent there, we might be curious about how strong the belief is. Are we really on board for that one—like 100%, "I believe that"? Or is it actually, "Gosh, I don't even consciously believe that"? Maybe we know that doesn't make any sense, but somewhere at a deeper level—maybe our two-year-old self inside—believes it. Understanding or recognizing that level of belief can be a useful exploration in this area of delusion: just beginning to recognize views are views as opposed to truth, just curiosity about what is. When we can see "this is a view, this is a view that's being held," there's a little crack there to be able to not believe it necessarily as truth.

And then there's this deeper level of delusion that I'll spend more time on: the human delusion, the patterns of delusion that we all share. In some ways our social delusions have commonalities—the underlying ways in which that conditioning unfolds are similar in us—but we all have our own flavors of those, and that's a lot of what we get to see, those flavors in our own minds. I had this aversive flavor, this self-hatred flavor, this analytical flavor, this arrogant flavor—all these flavors of my personal conditioning. Seeing with mindfulness really helps to weaken those patterns.

As those patterns weaken, we start to see much more the fundamental levels of delusion. I would say this is the most insidious kind of delusion. It's so hard to see. With viewed delusion, it's hard to see because we're often in a little pocket of people who share our views. With this human delusion, we all share it—it's really hard to step out of it and see how we're misperceiving, how we're misunderstanding things.

These distortions, these vipallāsa, are inversions, sometimes called an "upside-down making" of experience. They cloud our accurate perception of what is happening. They lead us to recognize, perceive, experience incorrectly. The four basic distortions, which Ṭhānissaro mentioned this morning: we tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent; we tend to take what is unreliable as a lasting source of happiness to be reliable; we tend to take what is not-self to be self; and we tend to take what is unattractive to be attractive.

This last one—taking what is unattractive to be attractive—is primarily around our perspective on our bodies, and I think it's included here because that is such a sticky area for us. To me it feels very much like a corollary or natural offshoot of the first two: we take things to be desirable, attractive, because we're taking them to be permanent and reliable.

These first three—taking what is impermanent to be permanent, what is unreliable as reliable, what is not-self as self—these are the ones I'm really going to explore. You might have recognized that they are essentially the flip side of what we often talk about as the understandings that happen with direct seeing. The vipassanā insights are around understanding the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. These are the understandings that free the mind—the seeing that frees, as Ṭhānissaro was mentioning, the title of Robert Beatty's book.

The seeing of experience as impermanent, unreliable, not-self—this will free the mind from clinging, because it is the misunderstanding that things are permanent, reliable, and self that leads to that clinging. As Ṭhānissaro also said this morning, whenever there is suffering—

these distortions are at play. Anytime there's a sense of struggle or stress or suffering, at some level we are taking things to be either permanent, reliable, or self.

So a little exploration around recognizing these aspects—recognizing how we misperceive things in this way.

One of my teachers spoke about these kinds of distortions. That first kind of delusion I talked about, not being present, is not necessarily what's happening here. We can be present and knowing experience and still have the perspective that things are permanent, reliable, and self. My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya has said, "Delusion doesn't mask the experience or the object. Delusion masks the true nature of the object." So we see experience, we may be aware that we're meeting experience in the present moment, but we're seeing it through this distorted lens.

This first one—taking what is impermanent to be permanent. We've talked about this in various ways. Actually, we've talked about all three of these in various ways, so I'm going to just remind you with each one of some of the ways to begin to see this.

We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent for a couple of main reasons. Impermanence is masked by some different things that happen. One of the things that happens is that sometimes change is occurring so quickly that we don't see it as change. The example around this that my teacher in Burma, Sayadaw U Pandita, used is the example of a fire stick. He said if you have a fire stick—a sparkler, like we used as kids—you could wave it around in a circle, and it would appear that there was a circle of fire in the air. Moving fast enough, the way our perceptual mechanisms work, the image lingers. It makes the appearance of that fire—it's like the tip of the red lingers in our perception. There's a perceptual kind of holding, in a way. So this is partly the nature of our perceptual apparatus that creates this kind of misunderstanding around impermanence, that we tend to see what is impermanent as permanent.

At one point I was at an exhibit at the Exploratorium in San Francisco. I walked in and saw these bars hanging from the ceiling—maybe four feet long and about two feet apart—and there were flashing lights on the bars. I looked up and thought, "I wonder what that exhibit's about. Maybe I'll get to see that later." I was with my nephew, so we wandered through the exhibit, and after a while we sat down to have a drink and take a break. We were not too far from this exhibit with the bars, hanging pretty high up in the air from the ceiling.

He was kind of looking up at them and said, "Oh, it's a school bus." I looked up at the bars with their flashing lights and said, "What?" He said, "Oh, it's butterflies now." I looked up—more flashing lights. "What are you talking about?"

After some time, I had to look at it in a specific way. His eyes had apparently relaxed or something and been able to see it. But when my eyes kind of relaxed in a certain way, I could—actually, one of the first ones I saw was the school bus. Across that set of bars, probably about forty feet long, enough bars to fill forty feet, it turned into a screen. Like I was seeing a screen projected up there. And across that screen was driving a school bus.

The first time, when he said it was a school bus, I looked up and saw flashing yellow and red and black lights. But when I looked up this time, I saw the school bus. The detail on it—it's just bars with flashing lights. That's what was up there. That was the reality of it. But it was detailed enough that I could read the name of the school district on the side of the school bus. I could read the name of the school district.

That's the persistence of our minds that will create that continuity. I knew it was just flashing lights. It was impermanent flashing lights. And yet I could see the school bus. It was quite a powerful experience—this seeing of how our visual field creates that sense of permanence from little bits of information.

So this kind of delusion is hard to see through, but we start to recognize through meeting our experience that things we take to be solid are actually little bits and pieces of information, or sparks of sensation. We can sometimes see this as we settle in with a continuity of mindfulness. We can start to see the way our mind is creating that stability.

Another way we may not recognize impermanence is because the change is so slow. I was talking about change being fast before, but sometimes change is slow. The stability of our bodies, for instance—it is actually changing pretty fast when we look at the actual experience. But looking in the mirror day after day, it doesn't seem to change that much. We impute a sense of stability when change is slower.

And yet we can begin to be curious about this. We can recognize, "Yes, I don't look the same as I looked five years ago." It's like that axe handle that Tueri mentioned the other day—the slow wearing away of the handle of an axe. Day by day we don't see that change. But at some point we notice that the axe handle fits our hand like a glove. It's very smooth, and we know that some has worn away even as we didn't see it wearing away.

So sometimes, through reflection, we recognize there has been change that happened. We didn't see it as it was happening, but it was changing. This reflection can help us to have a more accurate perception of experience.

Another thing that masks change is concept. We've talked about this to some extent. The ideas that we overlay onto experience—when we're seeing experience from the perspective of the concept, we tend to miss the changing nature of experience. Our minds stabilize concepts. The mind can hold on to a concept and keep that concept going without recognizing that the actual experience is changing.

I think one of us did an example around the hand. Look at your hand and know it's a hand. You might not notice the sensation level too much if you're orienting to the concept of hand. But now, let go of the idea of hand and just feel the hand. Close your eyes and just feel it. That may create a different perspective on meeting that experience—the sensation level, the vibration, the pulsing, the tingling, very dynamic sensations. Concepts tend to obscure impermanence also.

We need concepts. Concepts are useful. But we need to recognize them as concepts. Again, this is the seeing. If we can know we're relating to something through a concept, then we have a better chance at not taking the concept to be the actual experience. Concepts are created in our minds. They're not the actual experience.

When we know we're relating to experience through a concept—and concepts often come with views, with ideas and beliefs and opinions—that pairing of concepts and views can be a really potent place for suffering and misunderstanding. When we can see a concept as a concept, there's a better chance that we might recognize that views coming along with that concept need to be held lightly.

In terms of exploring this aspect of delusion, investigating or bringing curiosity to it—we tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. So what is it that we're taking to be solid? For one period of time I had this kind of investigation. Certain things felt really solid, and I got curious about that. When something feels solid or really stable, what is that experience? Is it actually solid? Is it actually stable? This can be a curious exploration around that particular aspect of delusion.

Knowing that all experience is impermanent, when we're taking something to be solid or stable, what is that? Not trying to see it as breaking into bits, but what is the experience of that solidity? When I've explored that, I couldn't really find it. It did begin to break into parts—not because I was trying to make it break into parts, but because I was curious about what I was taking to be solid. How did the mind think this was solid? What is that experience of solidity?

Then there's the exploration around taking what is unreliable as a reliable place for happiness. I think this takes shape a lot around sense pleasure, or pleasure in general. When there is pleasure, we want it. We want to hold on to it.

And I think some of this sense that sense pleasure is reliable—it's kind of amazing sometimes. I was exploring this at one point because I was seeing that while I was having a piece of chocolate, my mind just thought, "Yes, this is really good." And somehow I thought that this was—I mean, even though I knew it was going to end, in that moment, the mind believed this was it. This is how happiness is found.

And so this is what our minds have done over and over again—sense pleasure is as good as it gets. And so while we may not think that it's going to last forever, we think we should be able to string them together, create a string of sense pleasures and just have a never-ending sense pleasure.

The Buddha had a teaching around sense pleasure and being curious about this, because it is that misunderstanding—I mean, it's kind of a corollary to impermanence. We think things are reliable as a place for happiness because we're taking them to be permanent. And so the Buddha encouraged us. He said, "Yes, you're going to experience pleasure. You're going to experience gratification when there's sense pleasure. So just notice. Be curious about how long does that gratification last?" And then I think the next encouragement is: and what happens when the gratification ends?

So that teaching or that exploration around sense pleasure is not to push away sense pleasure. We don't have to say sense pleasure is bad, but just look at our misunderstanding around it. What we see when we watch this process is that when we feel the happiness, the gratification of getting something that we want, and then when it ends—as it does—the next moment is looking for something else to want. Often. Not always. If we're seeing this very clearly, then it might just fall away and we might actually feel a sense of release and ease. But the habitual pattern around gratification, the one that tends to drive this misunderstanding or misperception of what is unreliable as reliable, is that when the gratification goes away, our minds immediately start: "Well, when was the last time I felt good? Well, when I had something that I wanted. So what do I want to want?" We start looking for something to want. We start looking for the next hit of sense pleasure.

So this teaching on exploring the gratification—I love this teaching because the Buddha is saying, "Start where you are. Yes, notice the gratification, but notice how long it lasts. Notice how far it extends." And then see what happens with that exploration. That will begin to help the mind see that it's not that reliable. We jump from one sense pleasure to the next, and we're missing that the whole process of jumping from one sense pleasure to the next is kind of missing the point that there is this unreliability. We miss the unreliability of it because we think we can get the next moment of sense pleasure.

So greed and aversion, I think, do arise out of this misunderstanding. We can understand that greed itself is that kind of pull towards something pleasant. That pull. That feeling of, "Yeah, I want that." Just that pull. The delusion embedded in greed is that having that is going to make me happy. Having that is going to make me okay. That delusion is embedded in the greed. Without that delusion, the greed is not going to arise. We think we need something—like, I need something pleasant to be happy.

Or on the flip side, aversion—the pushing away, that's the aversion, the wanting to separate, the nature of aversion to want to separate us from some experiences. So that's the aversion itself. The belief or the delusion embedded in aversion is that separation will make me be okay. It'll make me feel safe. I'll be fine if I'm separated from that thing. That's the delusion connected to aversion.

So again, in terms of curiosity and exploring this one, some of what I've talked about—the gratification, exploring the gratification—can be a doorway into understanding this side of delusion. Another kind of reflection or question: What are we relying on? What is it that we are relying on? And is it actually reliable?

We rely on a lot of things in the world for finding happiness—money, partners, having a particular car, whatever it might be. So what is it that we're relying on? That kind of question can be illuminating.

And then this last distortion: seeing what is not self as self, or taking what is not self to be self. We've talked about this quite a bit over the last weeks, but just as some reminders, taking what is not self to be self is a kind of misattribution of a sense of self to a process.

What's actually happening is just these five aggregates tumbling on—our sense bases and consciousness of each object. Joseph has a famous saying: there's only six things that ever happen. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and things going on in the mind. That's it. That's all that's happening. And yet we attribute a lot of things to those basic happenings. We attribute a sense of self in there, to this process.

There are natural laws that govern the processes unfolding in our bodies and minds—not a sense of self controlling or directing the experience. So we can investigate this. I talked about this last week, I think—the curiosity about when the sense of self feels strong. Again, to understand, we don't have to try to see not-self in self. The understanding happens as the sense of self is seen thoroughly. So curiosity about what it is that we are calling "me"—when it's strong, it can be much easier to see when we have that sense of self.

I pointed to this question or reflection on looking at the sense of self from this three-part perspective: feeling like mine, who I am, or me. Just recognizing the different flavors of the sense of self. That sense of "mine" is pretty obvious. The sense of "I am" the doer—the one who plans, who chooses, who acts, who's the agent—that's the next level. And then a feeling like it's happening to me: seeing that I'm not doing it, but it's happening to me.

We can see that what we are taking to be self is simply a tumbling on of process, these aggregates tumbling on. At times we can see that very clearly, and it's very freeing to see it. But at first we kind of just have to recognize that we are misattributing. We don't have to try to stop doing that selfing, but see it. Understand: this is a sense of self that's happening. We can see that as a process also—the sense of self is a process that's happening. Believing that sense of self is the delusion. When it's seen—"oh, this is the sense of self that's arising right now"—just as I said about doubt, "oh, this is doubt that's arising right now"—that's not delusion. We can see these processes at work.

These three distortions operate at different levels. There's the basic level—the most superficial—and Tuareg mentioned this this morning as well, but just to review: there are distortions of perception, which is the least sticky level. The example often given in the texts is around misperceiving or misrecognizing a rope coiled in a corner in a dim room as a snake. There's a distortion of perception—we see something and we misperceive it, we recognize it incorrectly. That kind of misperception can happen, but that kind of misperception is corrected by just looking a little more closely. We turn a light on and we see it's a rope in the corner.

The next level is the distortion of thought. We start thinking about that experience, and it gets a little more solid in our minds. That is thought. So in that instance: "that is a snake." It's attributing, in a way, a reality to our perception. It's a little more firm there. We think it is a snake.

Then there's the distortion of view—that's the third level of distortion. That's where our patterns of thought become rigid, and we take something to be... it's more than just we think it's a snake. It's like we think it's a snake and we can't be convinced otherwise. An example in this realm would be: we see the coiled form in the corner and think it's a snake.

And we go out of the place, come back, get somebody and say, "There's a snake in there. Somebody's got to get rid of the snake. Somebody take the snake out of there." The distortion of view would look something like this: you go in there and the person says, "That's not a snake, that's a rope." And you say, "Well, I know there was a snake in here. That's a different thing. There was a snake in here." That's the distortion of view.

So these three work in a kind of cycle. The distortion of perception builds to the distortion of thought, which builds to the distortion of view. And with the distortion of view, our further perceptions are then conditioned by that distortion. They reinforce each other. I had a great story to tell you about this, but I don't have time. Sorry about that.

This information about delusion can help you begin to recognize—even just remembering that when we're taking things to be permanent, reliable, or self, there's delusion going on. Get curious about that. How is it working? What's going on?

We can also use suffering as a pointer. Whenever there's suffering, there's some kind of delusion at work. One of the great explorations when we're experiencing suffering may not be to ask, "Is this suffering around impermanence?" That can get way too busy. But a simple question when we're suffering—"What's being believed?"—can begin to reveal the sense of "I need this to stay here," or something like that. The belief can point to what the deeper level of clinging is around. So when there's suffering, that exploration around what's being believed can help to find or point to the kind of delusion that's happening.

Non-delusion is not something we do. It's an understanding. It's insight. When we see through delusion, this is insight. We can't make it happen. But we can create the conditions for the understanding to arise by meeting our experience and being curious about the actual nature of our experience.

And insights themselves are also conditioned and impermanent. I've seen this so many times now—I've stopped getting frustrated by it—that we see through something, and for a little while, seeing through some kind of clinging, some kind of pattern... At one point I remember just being so happy. It was like somebody was in my ear whispering, "Clinging causes suffering. You don't need to cling." And the mind was just letting go of everything. I was so happy. I thought I'd figured it out. And it seemed so obvious—it seemed so obvious that clinging would create suffering. Why would I ever do that ever again? It was just so clear. And I think it was about an hour later, it was no longer so clear.

The understanding there, the seeing—it can't be unseen. We know at that point, we know that clinging causes suffering at a deeper level maybe than we had experienced before. When we have these insights, there's a deeper kind of understanding. And yet the delusion comes back. The delusion like, "Yeah, there's got to be something out there I can hold on to that'll make me happy. If not a piece of chocolate, then at least a concentration state—that'll make me happy."

So the mind goes back to that pattern of clinging. And knowing, having seen the clinging not be there, we can know in that watching, seeing the mind reaching out for something, we can know that's delusion at work, very clearly. Having seen through it with wisdom, it becomes much more obvious that it is delusion at work. And then at some point, several years later, seeing the mind just do this reaching out—

I was like, it was so tender almost. It was like, oh, yeah. Go right ahead. Try to find something. It was just this is what the mind was doing. And I could see that it was the habit. I could see it was just the pattern the mind was caught in. And there was so much capacity to just know it and see that it was delusion. It's like, okay, you try. I'll be here with you. Go right ahead. Try to find something that you can cling to and be happy about. Just try.

And it would find something and it would create something for a split second. And there would be a little bit of happiness. And then the whole pattern would fall apart. It just lets go. And it's so much more restful when it's not clinging. Oh, but there must be something. And I would just go right ahead. Seeing delusion at work. Because there was so much of that understanding there, it was okay to watch the pattern and know it was delusion. And just see the momentum, just the momentum of this pattern over and over again.

So having seen delusion, seen through it, when it comes back, it's not a mistake either. That's not like you did something wrong. It's because delusion is so deeply conditioned. It's human. It's human. One or two times of seeing through something is not going to undo years and eons of human evolution along these lines—to take what's impermanent to be permanent, to take what's unreliable to be reliable, to take what's not self to be self. These are so deeply conditioned.

So some tenderness there, some sense of, yeah, okay, this mind, it's going to do this stuff. And it can be seen. And so much freedom can happen. And the Buddha promises the ending of suffering with the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion—the seeing of impermanence, unreliable, not self.

Let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 28

Transcendent Dependent Arising

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this profound dharma talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella illuminates the teaching of transcendent dependent arising (lokuttara paṭiccasamuppāda), which describes the conditions that support the mind's movement toward liberation. While dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) typically describes how ignorance leads to suffering, this complementary teaching reveals how suffering itself can become the starting point for freedom when met with the Buddha's teachings rather than confusion.

Andrea traces the chain of conditions: suffering gives rise to faith, which supports delight, then rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, and knowledge and vision of things as they are. This clear seeing leads to disenchantment (nibbidā) and dispassion (virāga), culminating in release. She emphasizes that this unfolds naturally—like rain flowing down mountains to the ocean—though our habitual patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion can interrupt the process.

Particularly valuable is Andrea's exploration of disenchantment and dispassion. She describes the sometimes painful process of becoming disenchanted with our usual strategies for happiness, including experiences of fear, burden, homesickness, and even not wanting to practice. These are not mistakes but relationships to the truth of impermanence that point to deeper layers of clinging. Dispassion, she explains, is the gradual fading (virāga literally means 'fading of dye') of attachment, ultimately resulting in the non-arising of craving. The dispassionate heart, far from being cold, is spacious enough for deep compassion and the brahmavihāras to flourish naturally.

We spend a lot of time on practice, looking at dukkha. We talk a lot about exploring it in our meetings, working with it, and we all have been seeing these processes at work—the processes of body and mind that tumble forward towards suffering.

Marjolein gave a talk a couple of weeks ago on dependent co-arising, that teaching that describes the conditions leading to suffering, leading to dukkha. And we get to see this in our practice. It's very freeing to see that these are processes at work, as opposed to just being carried forward by them.

This teaching of dependent co-arising can really be thought of as an elaboration of the second noble truth—the truth of the arising of dukkha. Craving is the arising of dukkha. I think about this teaching in the moment-to-moment way that Marjolein de-

scribed it. That whole chain, that process of suffering, is set off by the original condition at the head of the chain: ignorance. The conditions in the process tumble forward towards suffering. For instance, in that chain it says that feeling conditions the arising of craving. But feeling does not always condition the arising of craving. It's not what we can call a decisive support condition for the arising of craving. But ignorance is.

When feeling tone—when the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—is met with mindfulness and wisdom, it doesn't have to lead onward to craving. In fact, it's seen, and it can just be pleasant. It can just be unpleasant. We see this in our practice, and we feel the freedom of that. We feel the freedom of it not tumbling onwards.

But this chain of dependent co-arising speaks to when ignorance is present. In a moment when ignorance is present and feeling is present, feeling will lead to craving. So that's perhaps the decisive condition that leads us on to suffering. When ignorance is arising in a moment, I think of it as if the entire chain of all those pieces is picked up at once. Feeling leads to craving, to clinging, to becoming, to birth, to aging and death, to suffering. It's all picked up at once.

But then the seeing of that ignorance with mindfulness and wisdom in a moment can shift that whole cycle. Feeling doesn't lead to craving. Craving doesn't lead to clinging, to becoming, to birth. We sometimes talk about it as a cutting of that cycle at that point, and I think it really is the seeing through of ignorance—seeing through those misperceptions of taking things to be permanent, reliable, self.

The teaching that describes the arising of suffering in its most general form is a teaching on conditionality. Conditionality works not only towards leading us toward suffering; there are also conditions at work that lead us away from suffering. And that's the practice. The same lawful processes that carry us towards suffering can carry us towards release from suffering.

The most general statement of conditionality in the Buddhist teachings goes something like this: When this is, that is. When this arises, that arises. When this ceases, that ceases. When this isn't, that isn't. This speaks to both sides of the process—the habitual, deeply conditioned process by which we believe that craving and aversion are going to somehow make us happy, that tumbling forward of those misunderstandings. And it also speaks to the conditions that we cultivate to understand suffering, to allow the cultivation and development of wisdom, which will release the suffering.

The suttas speak to conditions that support the movement towards freedom. Some of those conditions are the absence of arising—of craving, for instance, or ignorance. There's a teaching that says if craving doesn't arise, clinging doesn't arise. If clinging doesn't arise, becoming doesn't arise. If becoming doesn't arise, identification, birth into identity, doesn't arise, and suffering doesn't arise.

The falling away of clinging, the seeing through of ignorance—that shift where feeling no longer turns into craving—those processes just don't arise. When this isn't, that isn't. When this ceases, that ceases. It's an understanding that when things let go, a whole chain of conditions falls apart.

But how do we let go? How do we do that? That's the practice. The conditions we are cultivating here are described in a teaching called Transcendent Dependent Origination, which describes a set of conditions that support the mind towards the understandings that allow release, that allow the mind to see through ignorance. The chain of the arising of suffering falls apart when we see through that ignorance, when craving doesn't arise.

So freedom has supporting conditions. After the Buddha became awakened, there's a description in the suttas that says he reflected: How did that happen? He had this reflective process, asking: What was the condition that led the mind to be able to let go? That led to that release? That led to the seeing through of ignorance?

What was that? And he walked back through a number of things. Well, maybe it was that. It was the release that allowed that freedom. And what allowed that release was the mind being very dispassionate. He walked back through the chain of events that allowed for that freedom, that release to happen. He walked all the way back and arrived at suffering. And that's where he said, that's where it starts. The chain leading to the end of suffering starts with suffering.

Now typically we meet suffering with confusion, with ignorance. And that tumbles us into the pattern of dependent arising that Marjolein described. When ignorance is arising, it tumbles us forward into that process of the arising of craving, clinging, becoming, birth, suffering. And then suffering again. It becomes a cycle when suffering is again met with ignorance. It just perpetuates the cycle.

And yet the Buddha saw in that walking back that something different had happened. When suffering arose, there was some kind of faith that there was a possibility of another way. And that's where suffering, instead of going back to the arising of

more suffering, took a different turn. There's a teaching in the suttas where the Buddha says something like, "I tell you that suffering either leads to ignorance or it leads to search."

The Buddha was unusual, I would say. He figured it out by himself. He was a rare mind that could see, and there was some piece in his system where, with that suffering, he thought, there's got to be another way. There's got to be another way to see this. And his mind could figure it out. The rest of us need the teachings of the Buddha to get there.

And so this suffering leading to ignorance or leading to search—all of us have that sense in our lives of, there's got to be another way. And we have been lucky enough to find the teachings of the Buddha. These teachings offer a path that says it's possible. It's possible to find freedom from this suffering. Now it's not easy, but it's possible.

This is where suffering, when it's met with the inspiration to find another way than just going in our habitual patterns, and we hear of a teaching—these conditions take us onto the path of practice. This is the arising of faith, essentially. When we hear that teaching and it inspires something in us to say, yes, this—I don't know maybe how it works, but this sounds worth pursuing. This sounds worthy of effort. And so this is where this chain of transcendent dependent arising begins. It begins with suffering being met with a teaching that says it's possible to be free from suffering.

These same lawful processes, just the conditioned nature of experience—we've used this quote several times: whatever one frequently ponders becomes the inclination of the mind. Several of us have mentioned this. And when we frequently ponder—that is, it doesn't have to be thinking about, but when we frequently engage in aversion and greed and delusion—that's what gets cultivated. That's what tumbles forward. But we can also cultivate faith. We can cultivate delight and joy. And these cultivations create the conditions for more of those to happen and lead us in the direction of freedom.

So this teaching of transcendent dependent arising—I'm just going to read right now the links that lead from suffering to freedom. And this is actually really profound. Suffering. This whole chain describes supportive conditions for liberation. Suffering is a supportive condition for liberation. It's not a mistake. We need to meet it in a new way. When we experience suffering with mindfulness and wisdom, it's not leading to more suffering. It's leading to freedom.

So these links of the transcendent dependent arising: the condition of suffering supports the arising of faith. The condition of faith supports the arising of delight. The condition of delight supports the arising of rapture. The condition of rapture supports the

arising of tranquility. The condition of tranquility supports the arising of happiness. The condition of happiness supports the arising of concentration. The condition of concentration supports the arising of knowledge and vision of things as they are, which supports the arising of disenchantment, which supports the arising of dispassion, which supports the arising of release, which supports the arising of the understanding that freedom has been reached.

The sutta in which this teaching is given offers an analogy about this lawful process towards freedom. It gives the image of rain falling on a mountain, running down gullies and rivulets, finding its way to streams, then to rivers, and finally down to the ocean. It's natural law—the law of gravity, essentially—that water will flow downward and ultimately reach the ocean.

Now, just thinking about this analogy, we know that some of that water gets absorbed into the land and perhaps returns to the atmosphere before falling again. Not every drop reaches the ocean every time. This speaks to something about how the practice actually works.

This process is understood as being natural—the lawful unfolding of conditions. It's a natural consequence: when faith arises, there's another sutta that says there's no need for an act of will. When faith arises, it's a natural consequence that delight will arise. And you may have experienced this yourself—the confidence in the practice, the sense of "yes, this is possible," and the delight that comes with that recognition. There's no need for an act of will when delight arises; joy arises naturally. So it's described as an unfolding of natural conditions, a natural consequence for these to follow one another.

That doesn't mean we don't have to do any work. It's a natural consequence, and yet the habits of greed, aversion, and delusion are so strong that they will come in and interrupt—they'll throw a wrench in the works. So we do have to apply ourselves.

This path unfolds naturally, and there's a way in which feedback loops operate along it. Each pair of links is understood to feed back immediately to each other. For instance, faith supports the arising of delight, and with that arising of delight, the sense of trust deepens. Immediately there's a kind of nourishment—when the next quality arises, it supports and strengthens the previous quality. And there are multiple feedback loops in this process.

Just think about how practice works. The first time we truly experience understanding things as they are—just seeing clearly that the mind is clinging to something and letting go of that, seeing it's trying to hold onto something that cannot be held, seeing the

impermanent nature of something and releasing it—the experience of that letting go is like a little mini cycle through this entire chain. There's been a release of holding. And that release, that seeing of impermanent nature, that seeing things as they are allows for freedom. The whole process then supports and nourishes our commitment to the path. It strengthens our faith. Delight and joy arise with that release. Happiness arises, and perhaps even a deepening of concentration. All of these qualities are strengthened through the process of practice.

We don't have to think about these things for this to be happening. That's one of the beauties here—because it is a natural unfolding, we step onto the path with faith and apply the teachings, and things will unfold. It will strengthen. You are all testament to that, having sat here for four and a half, five weeks, or even eleven, twelve weeks. You've seen this happen.

So in my understanding, with all these different feedback loops, it's not really what we'd call a chain. It's not that this thing happens, then this thing happens, then this thing happens. It's not that we have a little bit of faith and then delight, rapture, tranquility, and happiness simply cascade to the end. It's more like a spiral. We see something, and that strengthens our faith and deepens our commitment to the practice. We engage more.

We have more confidence. It's more of a spiral, I think.

So the first part of this chain really describes the conditions that open us to the understanding of things as they are. The middle point of the chain is that knowledge and vision of things as they are—that's seeing into the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. That's the midpoint. The conditions preceding that are faith, delight, rapture, tranquility, happiness, and concentration.

Suffering supports faith when the teaching is heard. There's a sense perhaps we have all experienced that. You would not be here if you did not have faith. The delight in finding the path arises with that sense of, "Oh, this is possible." So there's delight. We engage. That engagement brings a sense—potentially we begin to practice. The hindrances fall away. We begin to see some results and benefits. We feel the bliss of seclusion with the hindrances falling away. That's that joy, that rapture—one flavor of that joy and rapture. And then the mind settles even further to tranquility and happiness.

Happiness is said to be the supporting condition for concentration. I want to stop here and think about that a moment, because that was not what I thought would be the supportive condition for concentration. I thought a lot of hard effort was how concen-

tration came about. This teaching points directly to settledness, ease, happiness. Not our usual kind of happiness, not our happiness of getting things that we want, but the happiness of a mind that is settled without the hindrances. That kind of happiness—it's a rare thing. And that settling of the mind, that is the movement towards concentration. The mind begins to collect.

So we've talked about all of these pieces. I'm not going to spend a lot of time with this part of the chain. This is really the tools that support, the tools and the qualities of mind that support our capacity to see clearly.

With that stabilized mind we start to see our experience, we see these processes. Actually, this mind of concentration, we could say, is applied to seeing the process of dependent origination that leads to suffering. We start to see the processes of body and mind, that feeling leads to craving. We see that. In a way I think of these two types of dependent origination as kind of happening together.

So this transcendent dependent origination, the cultivation of all of these qualities that we've been cultivating—what is it that we see? What is it that we do with those qualities? We look at the arising of suffering. We look at that process. We see it more clearly. We begin to see the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience.

As we begin to recognize the impermanent nature of experience, the unreliable nature of experience, the not-self nature of experience, basically we're starting to see through our misperceptions—those misperceptions I talked about in the delusion talk last week: taking things to be permanent, reliable, and self. We see through this exploration that our concentrated mind can recognize what I thought was permanent is not permanent. It's not reliable. It's not self. We see that we've been confused. We start to see through those misperceptions, those misunderstandings. We see that we've been kind of enchanted by those misperceptions. And the seeing through them—we become disenchanted.

This is the next link. I'm going to spend some time with this one and the next one, a little more elaboration on these two: disenchantment and dispassion.

Disenchantment comes when we start to see really clearly that our usual ways of engaging in the world, of finding happiness, just aren't the way to happiness. We start to see that those patterns of greed, that sense of "I'm going to get what I want, I'll find happiness there," that process I described this morning—the way we tend to go for those hits through craving, we go for what we want—we start to see that that getting, that having something, is not a reliable kind of happiness. We experience that.

We know that for ourselves. And so we start to see through these patterns.

Wanting and aversion are so powerful—such powerful forces in our minds. I mentioned this morning that wanting does not have to be followed through on, and that wanting can go away without being followed through on. But wanting is not going to tell you that. When the mind is caught by wanting, it's going to think it has to get what it wants. That's its delusion. Aversion is not going to tell you that you can wait until this goes away, that you'll feel better when aversion goes away. Aversion thinks it needs to do the separation. This is the delusion. This is the misunderstanding.

So we see that we've been enchanted by craving, believing its story, believing, "Yes, I have to get that thing." Enchanted by aversion, believing, "Yes, I have to get rid of that thing." The disenchantment comes when we see through these patterns and understand that they've been deluding us. We've been enchanted by them, and now we can see through them.

Bhikkhu Bodhi describes disenchantment this way. The Pali term for disenchantment is *nibbida*. Bhikkhu Bodhi is the modern-day translator of the Pali Canon—we owe him a great deal for his work. He describes the experience of disenchantment like this: "Nibbida signifies, in short, the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which supervenes when the illusion of their permanence, pleasure, and selfhood has been shattered by the light of correct knowledge and vision of things as they are."

Well, that sounds pretty good. But my experience in the process of disenchantment is that becoming disenchanted is pretty painful. That may be the end stage of disenchantment, when the mind has seen through everything. But the process of seeing through these illusions—there are so many relationships that we have to impermanent, unreliable, not-self. There are emotional flavors, emotional relationships related to seeing the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. Very deep levels of our being do not like these truths. We do not like seeing that things are impermanent.

I mean, at times it's lovely. Sometimes we do have these experiences where things are just coming and going and it's easeful and delightful. This can happen kind of earlier on in the path of practice, where we're just seeing things coming and going with ease. But at some point we start to see the deeper level of impermanence, the deeper level of this instability of experience. At some very basic level, we want stability. We want solidity. We want to know that everything is going to be okay, that we can land somewhere.

And so through this process of becoming disenchanted, we go through many relationships—almost emotional relationships—to seeing these truths. I think of these relationships as being connected to the deeper ways that we are clinging. It happens sometimes when we are seeing things changing very rapidly, experiencing the rapidly chan-

ging nature of experience, that it feels really uncomfortable. More than uncomfortable—sometimes it can feel fearful. We can feel dread and terror, even. It can be very strong because we don't like that feeling of instability.

But that fear coming up in the seeing of impermanence is kind of like deeper levels of clinging that are still there—the deeper levels of our being wanting stability, wanting it not to be so that everything changes so rapidly. I'm going to describe several different flavors of relationships to these truths that can happen. All of them—none of them—are a mistake. The path towards freedom lies through noticing those relationships, recognizing that they are pointing to the clinging around not wanting those truths to be so. Not wanting it to be impermanent. Not wanting it to be unreliable. Fear can arise from not wanting it to be unreliable.

And so the practice is to know the fear. You don't have to push yourself to try to stay with the unreliability. Know the fear.

Nibbida is sometimes translated as disgust or revulsion. And I have experienced it in that way. It's not a disgust or revulsion that has aversion in it. It's more like—the description of this is more like a dog who's really hungry and comes upon a bone, and that bone has been sitting out in the sun forever.

It's bleached. There's no value to that bone at all, no nourishment in it. But the dog, so hungry, picks up the bone and starts chewing on it, and realizes: there's nothing here for me. So it just drops it. Nope, nothing here for me. That feeling—there's nothing here for me, nothing worth clinging to, nothing worth picking up—that's also the sense of nibbidā. It can have a little bit of that quality of just, yeah, no. No.

Another flavor can be a sense of being impinged upon in relationship to this rapidly changing experience, seeing how quickly things are happening. Seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, speaking. Things going on in the mind. It's just nonstop. It doesn't stop. Will it cease? No, it doesn't cease. It just feels like such a burden. It feels so burdensome, heavy, weighty. Just... ah.

That needs to be seen. That "ah" is a relationship.

Sometimes the flavor of starting to see through the truths of taking things to be permanent, reliable, controllable, self, is a kind of homesickness. We see our strategies don't work anymore. We see our strategies are not going to make us happy. But we really wish they would. It's like we can't go home. We can't go back to that. And there can be a feeling of being a little bit lost, a longing for that stability, for thinking things were permanent even though we know that they aren't. It's kind of like, "I wish I could think that." There's that feeling of homesickness or longing.

Sometimes the flavor at this area of practice, when we're really starting to see through these truths, can paradoxically—in the flavor of that nonstop impingement—after a while, it stops feeling so burdensome and just starts feeling really boring. It's just like, yeah, yeah, I get it. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, stuff going on in the mind. Yep, yep, okay, yep. I get it, yep, wow. And so there can start to be disinterest. I'm just done. I've seen it. I don't need to see anymore. Just take me home, I'm done.

That's a relationship to this.

Sometimes this is called the "rolling up the mat" stage. I've experienced this as a not wanting to practice. Just, yeah, I'm done. I don't want to practice anymore. When I first stumbled into this, I was disturbed by it. I was disturbed by the idea of not wanting to practice having come up in my mind. I either thought it was true and I had to stop practicing—like I had to believe it—or I was being betrayed by my mind. My mind is betraying me! I want to practice. How can I get rid of this not wanting to practice?

I was practicing in Burma with some of this kind of thing going on, and I went to one of my interviews. The person ahead of me was—I knew she was clearly ahead of me on the path.

She was ahead of me in the reporting cycle, but she was also clearly, from what she was describing—I was very interested in hearing her reports because I could tell she was much further along the path than I was.

At one point she described, "I noticed not wanting to practice arose. And I noted it. I noticed it."

And I thought, *You can do that?* You can report to the Burmese teacher that not wanting to practice arose and just note it? It popped that bubble of feeling like it was a problem that this arose. Oh yeah, this is another arising. It's just another arising.

Some of you have described this in our meetings—not wanting to practice. Yeah, it's just something that arises. What a relief to know that all you have to do is say, "Yep, that's what's going on. Not wanting to practice." Carry on practicing, knowing not wanting to practice. Neither expressing nor repressing not wanting to practice. Just know it.

So many relationships in this place. And it can be a challenging kind of feeling, a bumpy place in practice, this disenchantment phase. But it's workable. Just keep going. Notice these relationships.

As the mind moves through disenchantment, it begins to touch into dispassion. The mind begins to deeply understand that holding on to something that is impermanent, unreliable, is going to cause suffering—and it just doesn't want to do it anymore. So the old patterns of craving, clinging, attachment begin to fade out.

The Pali word for dispassion is *virāga*. It literally means "to fade away"—like the fading of a dye. *Rāga* means color. It's often used to translate lust or greed, as Brian mentioned the other day. But it also refers to that colorful dye, and *virāga* is the fading of the dye. The fading out of these passions, of these patterns or habits of clinging.

To me, *virāga*—the fading—suggests a gradual process, which is hopeful because my practice has been very gradual. Think about what happens with the fading of a dye. If a cloth is dyed a bright color, you might wash it. Each washing, a little bit of the soap carries some of the dye out. You let it sit out in the sun, and the sun bleaches some of the color out. It's just a very gradual process. Slowly, over a very long time, the color fades out. The term itself suggests this gradual fading of attachments.

I think we see levels of this. Many of you have talked about seeing a letting go of some piece of a habit or pattern and feeling a lot of release and ease with that bigger piece falling away. For myself, I've seen big chunks of the angry identity fall away—so much ease when that level of attachment fades. Am I no longer having so much churn around relationships and particular ways people saw me? And yet then that becomes the new normal. We're no longer caught by all those habits and patterns. And then we start to see the deeper levels, the deeper layers of where we're still clinging.

This is the gradual nature of our path—a slow deepening to see through more and more layers of craving and clinging, a gradual movement towards the deepest kind of letting go.

Virāga itself is used in a definition of freedom: "This is peaceful. This is the sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna."

So here, the ending of craving, dispassion, nibbana—all equated, all functioning as synonyms. This dispassion, this deepest letting go, is that freedom. And freedom is not about getting anything. It is the letting go of these attachments. This is the peaceful. This is the sublime. The stilling of formations. The relinquishing of all attachments. The ending of craving.

Freedom isn't about getting anything. This is part of the paradox of this chain of transcendent dependent origination, because we do cultivate conditions that lead towards freedom, but it's not about acquiring them. The purpose of cultivating those qualities is

in the service of letting go, not in the service of acquiring. That's a little bit of a paradox—that there is this cultivation of conditions, but ultimately freedom is about letting go, even letting go of the path, letting go of what has carried us to freedom.

The simile of the raft speaks to this as well. We cross the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion by building a raft. We put it together based on things that we find nearby. There's a construction there, a putting together of wholesome qualities that help us navigate that flood. And we navigate the flood. While we're navigating that flood, we can't jettison the raft. We do need to stay on the raft. But when we get to the other side, the Buddha says it's not helpful to say, "Gee, this raft has been useful to me, I think I'll carry it around on my head." Not useful. You set the raft adrift. You just let it go.

So the raft is needed to carry you to the other side. But the other side was not created by the raft.

There was a question: all conditioned things are impermanent, so why is full awakening not impermanent as well? It has its own conditions, such as seeing and understanding.

The conditions of seeing and understanding allow us to cross the flood. In this analogy of the raft, the conditions to cross the flood are to put the raft together. That allows us to navigate the flood. Once the flood has been navigated, once we've crossed to the other side, the raft is no longer necessary. And the other side of the river was not dependent on the creation of that raft. It was there already. That's the nature of it. It's there. It just wasn't reached.

So freedom isn't about acquisitions. The absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion—this is nibbana. The non-arising of greed, aversion, and delusion. This non-arising piece speaks to my sense of dispassion as well. When something is not arising, there's nothing being picked up. When something is not arising, the mind isn't reaching out for anything. It's not an action. It's not arising.

So dispassion—it's that gradual fading of the dye, but at a certain point the dispassion becomes the non-arising of craving, the non-arising of that ignorance.

Maybe we can get a taste of this, a taste of what this might be like, this non-arising of attachment. We've all actually experienced things like this. Think back to childhood, think back to when you were four or five years old and what your favorite toy was at that point. What was your favorite toy? You probably carried it with you everywhere, got upset if somebody took it away from you.

So as we grew up, as we aged, perhaps there was a gradual letting go of that beloved toy. There would be times when we simply forgot about it. We went off and played with our friends, then came back to it later and enjoyed it a little, but then we'd leave it again. And then at some point, we just forgot about it entirely. It ended up in a corner somewhere, and our parents picked it up and took it to Goodwill. We didn't even notice it was gone. Maybe we thought about it once and wondered where it went, but there wasn't much attachment to it anymore.

That's disenchantment. That's the process of disenchantment, the process of losing interest. Slowly we come to see something as not so enjoyable, and we lose interest. We think about it and there's just this sense of "nah, that's not interesting anymore." There's that quality of disinterest, and that's an aspect of disenchantment.

Dispassion, I think of differently—it's like being an adult now, and until I mentioned this toy, when was the last time you thought about it? As an adult, interest and disinterest around that childhood toy aren't even relevant anymore. They don't arise. There's simply the absence of longing, the absence of craving, the absence of interest in this thing.

So the practice opens us to this place where the mind just stops picking up what will lead to suffering. It stops being interested in that. It just doesn't go there.

I'll just say this to close: the word "dispassion" might sound a little cold. I think that's just the way we relate to it as a word. But the heart that is not clinging, the heart that is not picking up what leads to suffering—there's so much room in that heart for compassion. The dispassionate heart is also compassionate. It's not a cold place to be. It's a place absent of greed, aversion, and delusion. Those things actually bring coldness, bring constriction to the heart.

The dispassionate heart isn't flat. I think the dispassionate heart actually feels more deeply. The heart that is not constricted with greed, aversion, and delusion feels much more deeply. It feels the joy. It feels the sorrow. Those brahmavihāras that we're exploring, the open heart, the heart without clinging—it naturally has that connected quality. When it meets struggle and stress in the world, it experiences this quivering of the heart of compassion. When it meets joy and delight and happiness in the world, it resonates with that. And there's equanimity—not picking up of that pattern, not picking up of clinging to anything.

Thank you for being on this path. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 29

Layers

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella examines how our habits, patterns, and sense of self are structured like layers—using the Buddha's teaching on the five aggregates (khandhas) as a framework. She focuses particularly on the saṅkhāra aggregate (volitional formations), which the Buddha compared to a plantain tree: appearing solid but revealing no core when its layers are peeled away. This analogy illuminates how our personality and self-concept are constructed through layering, with nothing solid at the center.*
>
> *Fella challenges the common assumption that we must dig deep to find and fix our core issues. Instead, she advocates for meeting only the outermost layer of experience with gentle, continuous mindfulness—like Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's image of rubbing a bowl with a soft cloth. She introduces practical approaches: balanced effort (light as holding a helium balloon with thumbtack-covered hands), acceptance as the path through layers, and the mantra "this is nature" to recognize all mental states as natural processes of causes and conditions.*
>
> *Through personal examples of working with anger and self-hatred, Fella illustrates both the gradual cultivation path—like the Buddha's "rotting rope" analogy where mindfulness slowly wears away clinging—and sudden insights that can dissolve entire patterns. She offers a detailed account of exploring depression on retreat, demonstrating how patient attention to obvious experience naturally reveals underlying causes. The talk concludes with guidance on avoiding attachment to meditation experiences and trusting simple awareness of what is most obvious as the complete path to freedom.*

Much of what we see when we sit on retreat like this is the habits, the patterns of our mind, the momentum of years and years of our mind functioning in a certain way.

It seems to me, especially with this style of practice, this open awareness practice, that we really get to know our mind's patterns very intimately. Because we're not coming back to a primary object quite as much. Coming back to that primary object, we have the opportunity to bypass our habits and patterns somewhat. But just staying in the open awareness, we really get to see our minds. It's like mind 101.

Often we have a sense of our habits, our patterns, our beliefs, our emotions being layered—that there's kind of a layer upon layer of different moods, emotions, patterns. So we often have this idea or this structure in our minds of our experience being layered.

The Buddha also used this analogy of layers in one of his teachings, the teachings of the five aggregates. The term aggregate translates the Pali term *khandha*, which, while aggregate sounds like a very technical term, *khandha* is a very ordinary word. It basically means heap or bundle. What the five aggregates describe are five heaps of experience, five different ways to break our experience up, or five different categories or groups or heaps of experience.

These five are the body, consciousness, perception, feeling, and what are sometimes called volitional formations.

The body is pretty clear—the experience of the physical, in the physical realm. The other four aggregates refer to aspects of the mind. Steve has mentioned three of them several times: consciousness, perception, and feeling. These form the bare functioning of the mind. They're the core, bottom-level functioning of the way the mind experiences things. There's an object, and then the mind contacts that object. There's the bare knowing of that object, and that object is perceived, is recognized, and there's a feeling tone to it—whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is the bare taking in of experience, these three of the five aggregates.

The fifth aggregate is sort of the dumping ground for everything else in our experience. It includes our habits, our emotions, our patterns, our sense of self, as well as other states of mind. And this is where the Buddha's analogy using layers comes in.

He had an analogy for each of these five aggregates. They're great analogies, and I don't have time to go through all of them, but I'll tell you the analogy he gave for this volitional formation. *Saṅkhāra* is the name of the aggregate in Pali. He said that this aggregate, these mental formations, these volitional formations, are like a plantain tree, a banana tree.

What I understand the analogy to represent is that if you look at a plantain tree, it looks pretty solid. It's about that big around, at least the banana trees I've seen. They're pretty thick. They stand up. They're pretty sturdy-looking things. But if you start trying to find the center of the banana tree, what you do is peel away layers. Each leaf comes down and joins at the base of the plantain tree. You start peeling away the leaves, looking for the center of this banana tree. And when you have peeled away all the leaves, you've got a pile of leaves and nothing else.

There's no center. There's nothing there in the middle. The structure of the banana tree is created by this layering of leaves.

Much of our usual everyday experience of ourselves is found in this aggregate of the volitional formations—our emotions, our habits, our sense of self, the ways in which we normally experience our life, ourselves. Much of it is found in this aggregate.

So this analogy of layers is the one I'd like to explore this evening. I think this analogy is so interesting and so useful because, just as in the peeling away of all of the leaves from the plantain tree you find nothing in the middle, the structure of our personality, the structure of our sense of self, is created through this kind of layering effect. And there's nothing solid in the middle. You go through all the layers and there's nothing there—no solid core, no solid thing in the middle.

So often, as I said, we do have this sense of our experience having layers of sorts.

And we seem to think that what we need to do is get down to the core layer. If we just understood that core layer of our experience—the deeper fears, the deeper aversions, the deeper things underneath everything—then everything would be okay. So I think we often try to dive in to uncover the deeper layers of our experience.

But I found in my own experience of practice that that kind of digging is actually not as productive. What we really need to do in exploring all of these layers—whether it's a layer of habitual patterns of behavior or layers that create the sense of self—is actually just explore the outer layer. Just meet what is obvious in our experience.

There are several things I'd like to talk about with respect to exploring these outer layers of experience. Again, there's a quality of investigation that we need to bring to our experience. But what we often think of as investigation is digging—digging holes, pulling things apart, trying to uncover something deeper. But the way to investigate our experience is much lighter than that. Sayadaw U Pandita uses the analogy for investigation of rubbing a bowl with a soft cloth. Just that continual contact of the cloth with the bowl—that's investigation. It doesn't dig or penetrate or break. It does penetrate in a way, but it doesn't destroy the structure. It more just comes into contact with what is. It meets what is. And the curious part about that gentle rubbing is that it begins to reveal what is underneath.

Even though we often have a sense of what lies underneath—or we think we have a sense of how our patterns are layered on top of fears and vulnerabilities and insecurities—I think we all have explored our minds to some extent. In this particular culture, we tend to have an almost psychoanalytic approach to our lives. Many of us have this understanding of deeper layers to our experience. But I find in the practice it's not so

helpful to hold those assumptions. They are assumptions about what lies underneath. Or at least we should hold them very lightly, if possible, so that they are not operating as a filter through which we are exploring our experience. Often when we hold ideas, beliefs, and assumptions, our perception of our experience is altered by those beliefs. So it's most helpful in the practice, in that meeting of our experience, that direct contact with our outer layer, to have no assumptions about what is underneath. Just recognize and be with whatever is most obvious in your experience.

Another helpful way to explore this outer layer is through using a balanced effort. This balanced effort is very light. When we use the word effort, often it has a heavy sound. In our normal everyday use of the word, it's a marshalling of resources to apply our strength and energy to something. But in the practice, the effort is much lighter than that.

Just now in your experience, notice the sensations of your hands. Notice your seat on the chair or bench or cushion. How much effort did that take? It's very light. It almost takes no effort at all to simply direct the mind and contact experience. That is the kind of effort that is most helpful in this practice. It's very light, but it needs to be completely continuous in order to be penetrating—in order for the combination of that effort with the mindfulness to really meet the experience.

I came up with my own analogy about this effort. It's kind of like the effort you might make to hold a helium balloon if your hands were covered with thumbtacks. It's got to be really light. But it's got to be a continuous pressure. If you let up at all, the balloon will float away. If you push too hard, the balloon will pop. So it's that kind of effort.

It's not so much about marshalling our resources, thinking, "I'm really going to be mindful this whole sitting." It's more about recognizing how frequently we need to refresh our mindfulness. When our mind is drifting and dull, we may need to remind ourselves more often—every half second—using perhaps the noting as a tool to keep ourselves present, or using some kind of reminder to help us stay present. But as the mindfulness and the effort gain momentum, that more continuous reminding actually gets in the way, and then we can allow the effort to unfold more on its own. So we need to have some discernment about how to apply this effort. But in general, it's really helpful to think of it as being really light.

There were times in my practice—I tend to be one of those driver types—when I would be noticing my experience and recognizing that I was over-efforting. I would consciously let go, back off. How much can I let go of trying and still stay present? At some point the mind would wander. But I could let go a lot before that would happen.

So it's an interesting place to explore how much effort we really need. It's very light—much more about the lightness, but also about every moment remembering to keep reapplying that very light effort.

Another quality that's very helpful as we explore the layers of our experience is acceptance. Just acceptance. If we could just accept whatever is happening. That actually, to me, in my experience, has felt like the path through all of the layers of experience. It's in the acceptance of an experience that it really reveals itself and reveals its true nature, and it potentially also reveals the causes and conditions that had it come into being. So acceptance can reveal the underlying causes as we just stay with the experience.

Non-acceptance is a kind of glue. I think of it as a glue that holds all of those layers together and creates that sense of solidity. Non-acceptance can take several forms. It can take the form of resistance, the basic aversive energy. It can take the form of wanting or desire, that holding-on energy. Or it can take the form of the delusional energy of basically not wanting to know, not wanting to experience.

Working through deep habits and deep patterns—we've spent years accumulating these habits and patterns, and it can take a long time to really see through and completely understand how they are put together. So they may not disappear suddenly. This is really part of the gradual cultivation that Joseph talks about.

There's one analogy the Buddha gives about this path of practice, this gradual cultivation path of practice, that's one of my favorites. I call it the rotting rope analogy, and I'll give you an impressionistic version.

If there's a shipwreck and the ship is broken up into bits all along the shore—pieces of wood, pieces of rope, stuff just strewn everywhere—over the course of years, the sun, the sand, the wind begin to wear down all of these bits of debris scattered on the beach. I particularly like to think about the ropes lying there on the beach, and how as the rope is worn away by the sand, the sun, and the wind, it still looks like a rope. But it's losing its internal structure. And someday, at some point, one grain of sand, one breath of wind may finally let that whole thing come apart. But it's such a subtle release that it may not be very obvious. It's not a dramatic kind of falling apart. It's a very slow, gradual process.

The Buddha says that the rope is like the clinging in our mind, and the sun, the wind, the water are like mindfulness wearing down the clinging. Part of the reason this analogy is one of my favorites is because I seem to be shorter on the sudden awakening side of things and longer on the gradual cultivation side. A few of those sudden awakening experiences, but this gradual cultivation really resonates with me.

I've had some experiences that have so clearly shown me this is operating over time. One of the key habits and patterns in my experience is aversion, often manifesting as anger. I had a very strong anger at a particular person for years and worked with this pattern of anger over and over again for years and years. At some point I realized that my mindfulness was kind of weak in comparison to this pattern. When I tried to apply mindfulness to the anger at this particular person, the mind would just get sucked into the anger. I realized that bringing mindfulness to it wasn't so helpful, actually, because I would get lost in the anger.

So I came up with this little mantra for myself to put it aside. I shortened this mantra to "not now." What that meant to me was an acknowledgment of the anger: "I see you, anger. My mindfulness is not strong enough to meet you, but I will pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger." So it wasn't an aversive putting aside. It was a very gentle putting aside of the anger. This is the way I actually worked with this anger for several years. I didn't look at it directly. I noticed it when it came up—I clearly noticed it.

"Yes, there's that anger again. Okay, not now." And I would go to something neutral in my experience, putting my attention into my feet on the ground. It often seemed I was walking when I would get into one of these anger episodes.

Over the course of the years, I began to realize that the episodes of anger were getting further apart. I began to recognize, "It's been a few months since I've experienced that anger." And one day I realized it's been a very long time since I've experienced that anger. Even in the recollection in that moment of the person that I was angry with, I couldn't call up the anger. I was kind of amazed. I thought, "Wow, is it actually gone?" I didn't trust it. But it had disappeared. It has never come back. And it disappeared without my seeing it disappear—just through this being willing to meet the anger when I could, with what mindfulness I could, and not being aversive about it. This very gentle touching of this layer of anger proved to be very powerful.

Sometimes we can actually break through a layer in this kind of sudden awakening. We can have a sudden insight into the empty nature of a particular pattern, and then suddenly the whole thing just falls apart. I had an experience like this around self-hatred.

On one retreat, at one point I was in such despair around the self-hatred. I thought, "This is so deep." Again, I was seeing all the layers. I had seen how deep it went into my childhood and how many ways it was conditioned and put together into the structure of self-hatred. I thought, "I'm going to have to be fully enlightened in order for this to go away."

But on that retreat, at one point, just being willing to be there with it without that resistance, with complete acceptance of the self-hatred—at one moment there came the recognition of the pattern appearing as just an empty phenomenon. The pattern fell apart in that moment. And in that moment there was this little surge of complete bliss: "Never again, it's gone, it's gone forever." Then fortunately the mind was a little aware of that tendency and realized, "No, the causes and conditions have come together for me to see through it in this moment, but it doesn't mean it's gone forever."

In that particular case, that insight into the empty nature of that self-hatred cut pretty deeply into the pattern. The way I see it now in retrospect, looking at what is happening for me around this now, is that it cut the belief in the self-hatred. Those thoughts still appear—"You're no good"—they still come up, but there's no belief around them. There's not that formation of layers upon layers of self-hatred that arises because of a thought. These kinds of insights can be very penetrating and can really allow a sudden dropping of huge patterns that we've held for years.

So we don't know how long it will take to work through our habits, our patterns, these layers of experience. But there are some basic instructions for whatever we're paying attention to: observe what is obvious about what is actually happening with as much acceptance as possible. And if there is non-acceptance, notice that. We can often check into this non-acceptance through checking the attitude to our experience—a simple way of noticing what our relationship is to what is actually happening.

I'd like to go through an example of how this unfolded at one point in my practice, of how using this very gentle approach of just seeing what's there and looking at the resistance unfolded in a particular retreat for me. There's a lot of instruction—useful tips, I guess—in this example, which is why I'm going to use it. When I went back through it I realized there are a lot of good little tools that are helpful here.

This example took place on a long retreat I was doing in Burma at Sayadaw U Tejaniya's monastery. I was doing this practice that you are working with here. And I was noticing that my walking meditation was not so pleasant. I would be doing the walking meditation and I'd notice these contractions in the heart, these contractions in the throat. I began noticing that it was primarily happening every time I turned around to

start the next path. I just kept observing it, noticing all of this, noticing as much as I could about this unpleasantness I was experiencing. It wasn't physical unpleasantness; it was clearly some kind of emotional experience that was unpleasant.

Finally I realized, "Oh, I should check my attitude." After a while of doing this, I checked, and what I recognized was not wanting to practice. I didn't want to be meditating. I didn't want to be practicing.

Now this is a really useful attitude to recognize. When this attitude comes up, we often think we either have to believe it or we have to get rid of it. But we can just notice this as an arising experience—just not wanting to practice, arising in our experience right now.

When I finally realized that this was a possibility—a way of relating to this mood or mind state—it was hugely freeing. Just noticing: not wanting to practice, not wanting to practice. That's what's happening right now. So in this case, while doing this walking meditation, I simply began noticing "not wanting to practice." That became my object. That was what was really happening.

Days later, hours later—I can't remember exactly; this whole episode unfolds over some weeks—more walking meditation, more unpleasantness. Aches in the head, resistance. And in this particular time, I began noticing with that resistance that what seemed most helpful was not actually trying to be with the resistance, but rather allowing the resistance to be there and recognizing that it was one among thousands of things going on in the present moment. My lens of the present moment got quite big. There's the breeze on my cheek, and there's the sun, and there's the movement of the walking, and there's the resistance, and there's my feet on the ground, and there's seeing, and there's the resistance—so that I'm just touching into it occasionally.

I find this technique extremely helpful when something is either hard to be with, when we are pulled into something if we try to bring close attention to it, or when we've got this agenda of "I'm going to pay attention to this and figure it out"—which is a very common one for me. So it's more like just letting it be at a very light level and touching into it as the mind naturally touches into it. Really, a lot of what we're doing here is noticing what the mind is already doing, connecting with what the mind is already doing. And the mind is already noticing many things along with the resistance. So not trying to have an agenda about fixing the resistance seemed to be most helpful for me in this particular scenario.

Then again, some days or hours later, I began noticing while walking—the walking did not get pleasant for quite a while on this retreat—a low-grade depression that was happening. This was new. I hadn't really seen the depression before. I'd seen the physical aches and the resistance, but it took a while to actually contact this depression. Through this gentle being with the outermost layer, this gentle touching of the outermost layer, the depression began to reveal itself.

I noticed these physical sensations I described earlier—the contraction in the throat, the contraction in the heart. I noticed resistance; I didn't like the depression. I noticed that I thought it wasn't supposed to be there. As a good meditator, I should not be experiencing depression. I noticed that when the depression wasn't there, when there was happiness, there was this feeling: this is the way it's supposed to be. And there seemed to be a direct connection between the "supposed to be" of the happiness and the "not supposed to be" of the depression.

I noticed that depression could arise when the mind was calm and tranquil and peaceful. That seemed to be one of the places where it appeared. This kind of thing happens more often than you might recognize. When the mind gets settled and calm, equanimous, peaceful, we can be drifting in that peaceful state and not really connected to it. In that state, the mind is actually not so comfortable sometimes. It's much more used to drama. And in that space, it will find things to be averse to or find things to crave. It's not so happy just hanging out in that space.

So it's really interesting to pay attention closely when the mind gets into that peaceful state. Don't just ride it and hang out there—that kind of gives the habits room. The way I look at it is that when we get into that very peaceful state, the habitual tendencies we have are just waiting to find a moment of non-mindfulness to erupt. Not that it's bad for them to erupt, but notice when they do.

I observed this depression, and what seemed to be happening—this wasn't something I was doing so much as what seemed to be unfolding in my awareness—was that I was recognizing this depression when it was there through three basic frameworks: either the depression itself, or the resistance to the depression, or the absence of depression. Just noticing those three valences, I tracked them. When am I depressed? When is the resistance there? How did that change the feeling of the depression? And what is it like when the depression is gone? Sometimes there could be a very rapid oscillation between these different states.

Some time later, again in the walking, I began to notice or recognize that the resistance to the depression was a natural process of the mind. It too was simply created by causes and conditions. And that recognition actually showed me that I had considered the resistance to be a problem—that the resistance was something that needed to be gotten rid of in order for me to be properly mindful.

Recognizing the resistance itself as a natural process of the mind didn't change the experience of those three different valences—the depression, the resistance to the depression, and the non-depression—but it allowed the observation to flow much more freely. There was much less contraction or any kind of holding around the experience of those three states.

This points to a teaching that Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about. He actually points to a mantra of sorts to use at times, and that mantra is: "This is nature. This is nature." I use that a lot in my experience when I'm practicing in this style, as a reminder that whatever is happening in my experience is simply a natural process of causes and conditions. It's just as natural as a flower blooming, or as natural as a tree aging and rotting and falling in the forest. "This is nature"—a very helpful pointing for the mind. It can open the mind to that more balanced, equanimous space of just being with experience.

Some time later, doing walking meditation, I noticed that I was calm. And almost immediately a very strong vigilance arose to keep on the lookout for depression arising. I checked into the attitude around this vigilance because I wondered, is this skillful or not? I didn't see any particular unskillful attitude around it. But after even just a few minutes of this vigilance, the mind got tired. There was a kind of exhaustion that began to set in. So I got a sense that something was a little off here, because there was too much energy going into this vigilance.

Checking into that vigilance a little more carefully, I saw there was fear underlying it—a fear of the re-arising of the depression, a kind of wanting to track the calm really closely so that I could catch it just as it arose so it wouldn't get out of hand. There was that fear underneath. And just hanging out with the fear, I could simply hang out with the fear, and the depression did not arise. Just hanging out with what is most obvious.

In the sitting period immediately following this particular walking, I went back to my room and got into my meditation posture. I immediately noticed the sensations I had been feeling in the walking arise. There was the contraction in the heart, the squeezing in the throat. This was unusual because I had not been experiencing these sensations in the still posture, only in the walking. But the mind was pretty open and was able to just be with that experience of the contraction. No resistance whatsoever.

And I watched it get really big, that feeling of the contraction. It felt like it grew and grew. I let it get as big as it wanted to. And at some point it flipped and turned into metta.

It was a beautiful, open state of metta. And there was this thought that arose almost immediately: "This is stupid, this is sappy, this is corny." And I laughed. But I saw in that moment that the pattern of the depression had been through a resistance to the metta—a kind of sense of sappiness, that Hallmark greeting card feeling about metta. "No, this isn't me." There had been a resistance to opening that connection, that feeling of connection.

After that moment, the depression didn't come back again. Now, I'm not saying that I was in a state of expanded blissful metta. What I saw in that moment was that I've got a lot of work to do around this. But having seen the resistance to the metta, having seen the attitude toward the metta, it was no longer operating underneath, hidden away, and no longer had the power to create that feeling of depression.

Sometimes when a layer drops away, we can get complacent about a particular pattern, about paying attention to the habits and patterns. We can feel like, "Oh yeah, I figured that one out." Sayadaw U Pandita often talked about three layers of habit. There's the layer of habit that erupts into bodily action. There's the layer of habit that erupts into thought but may not trigger bodily action. And there's the underlying tendency toward a habit. One of the layers—the layer of habit erupting into bodily action—can fall away. But the underlying tendency is still there. The thoughts arising in the mind are still there. And if we get complacent around those layers, the pattern can reform itself.

So it's really helpful to keep track of this, especially when a pattern begins to unravel—to pay more close attention to the subtle thoughts. Like in my self-hatred example, the subtle thought of "you're no good" arising.

Even though there's not much belief associated with it, I try to take care to recognize that thought.

The solid sense of self can be created through a reinforcing cycle of habits—of identification with habits or belief in a habit. A solid identification around a pattern happens because of layers upon layers of these beliefs and reinforcing identifications.

For example, I used to think of myself as a miserable person. That miserableness, that belief in being a miserable person, made me perceive my experience as miserable and reinforced that miserable self. Even times when I was happy, I had such an identi-

fication with being miserable that I would recognize, "Well, yeah, I'm happy now, but I know I'm really a miserable person." This layering can create self-fulfilling prophecies. Our habits, our patterns, our beliefs affect how we perceive the world.

So if we start paying attention to the outer layers of our experience, these habits and patterns can start to dissolve. Bringing attention to the happiness without that belief of being a miserable person—or at least suspending the belief—we actually begin to see that we are not in the states we identify with a lot of the time. I began to discover I wasn't miserable a lot of the time. It began poking holes in that identification.

Really allowing ourselves to be with what is happening, letting go as much as possible of beliefs—or at least recognizing that the belief is there so that it's not operating unseen—as we keep exploring, we see layer upon layer dissolving. And like the plantain leaf, there's nothing in the middle. There's nothing in the center. Just simply a process of things being experienced and things being known.

This layer-like quality can also manifest in our meditation experiences. Beliefs can get built up around our meditative experiences that then, like my belief in my miserable self, begin to alter our perception of our meditative experience, and we view our experience through this framework.

Sometimes in our practice, especially in early times, we start to experience very interesting things in meditation. Our body might start to feel really big, or very heavy, or really short—just some very interesting perceptual experiences that happen in meditation. Sometimes they're accompanied with pleasantness, and they're often accompanying concentration. We start to think that these experiences mean concentration, and we think that in order to have concentration we must have those experiences.

But what seems to happen over time is that as we get familiar with these altered perceptual experiences in meditation, they are no longer quite so startling or unique or interesting. They begin to become less predominant. I don't know exactly what happens to them—whether they just don't appear or whether they're simply not attended to, like, "Oh yeah, there's that, and it's no big deal." So it doesn't become such a big thing in our experience. But if we have the belief that these experiences need to be there in order to be concentrated, it will disrupt our ability to get concentrated.

Trying to get back to what something was like is suffering. It's grasping after some idea of a pleasant experience, perhaps, or some belief of good meditation: "This is what good meditation was. Even if it wasn't pleasant, it was flowing and clear. That's what good meditation is." Assuming our meditation isn't working because we're not having one of these touchstone experiences is not so helpful.

I've found that every time I get stuck in one of these patterns, every time I get stuck in these beliefs about not really meditating properly or not being able to do this now, the way through is to just notice the most obvious thing in experience. Not trying to dig, not trying to get anywhere, not trying to do anything. Just notice what is actually happening. What is most obvious about what's actually happening.

Sometimes in meditation we land in a new space, one we haven't been in before. Our experience gets really strange, different. It feels like we can't be mindful anymore. It feels like the mind is just continually wandering. Now, the mind continually wandering—of course that means things are going backwards. Obviously it means things are going backwards. But maybe not. Sometimes the mind settles into new spaces where it's like the mind has settled into a more subtle level of experience and doesn't quite know how to be there. It doesn't quite know how to connect with it. And because of that, it gets lost. But it's not because we've suddenly lost our mindfulness or haven't been paying attention. It's because our experience has shifted or we've landed in a new space.

So again, just seeing—can we notice? It's like, "Well, the mind is wandering a lot. What's happening?"

Oh, I see that as I pay attention to the breath, the breath gets so subtle it almost disappears. And that's when the mind wanders. Just notice what's happening. Just what's happening. Beliefs, ideas—put them on the back burner. Assumptions are not usually very helpful in our meditation practice.

So just to stress again, really the theme for me of this talk is: meet what is most obvious in your experience, whatever it is. It doesn't matter what it is. It might be peace and calm. It might be boredom. It might be not wanting to practice. It might be self-hatred, frustration, disappointment, irritation. Just meeting whatever it is, is the path. That is our path. That is our next step.

And being in that place of being aware, mindful of our experience without that resistance, without the wanting, in that place of acceptance of our experience—essentially that's the wisdom side, meeting with the mindfulness. And those two together take us right to freedom.

Let's sit for a few moments.

CHAPTER 30

Practice in Daily Life

Andrea Fella · 35 min

> *In this practical talk, Andrea Fella addresses one of the most common challenges meditators face: how to sustain mindfulness practice when we leave the supportive environment of retreat and return to our busy daily lives. She acknowledges that the ideal of being mindful all the time, while beautiful, is extremely difficult to achieve without the supports of silence, stillness, and structured meditation periods.*
>
> *Fella offers two concrete approaches for establishing a daily life practice. The first involves choosing something neutral that happens regularly throughout the day—standing up, walking through doorways, or clicking send on emails—as a reference point for mindfulness. When we inevitably forget and remember later, that moment of remembering is not a failure but the actual beginning of practice. The second, more transformative approach involves working with emotional patterns and habits that cause suffering. Fella shares her own powerful story of working with out-of-control anger, describing how simply recognizing and naming the emotion created space around it, eventually allowing her to catch the momentum toward anger before it arose.*
>
> *The talk illuminates how mindfulness practice can reveal the subtle movements of mind, particularly the intentions that precede our actions. By catching these moments of intention, we gain access to choice—the ability to respond from wisdom and compassion rather than being driven by greed, aversion, and delusion. Fella emphasizes that two qualities are essential for this work: resolve, because we must keep recommitting each time we remember we've forgotten, and patience, because we are truly swimming upstream against the momentum of our conditioned habits.*

This afternoon, I'd like to talk about practice in daily life. This was a question that came up this morning—a little bit about how we take this back. How do we take this practice back into our daily lives?

When we're on retreat, everything supports our practice: the silence, the environment, the schedule. Sitting in meditation actually supports the remembering to be mindful, to come back, to be present. When we're sitting in meditation, we're usually sitting with our eyes closed, in stillness. And so when the mind wanders off into thought, into one of these worlds that we create in our minds, it's pretty obvious when

we wake up into the midst of that thought that we are not in that world, that we are attempting to meditate. This supports our ability to remember, to come back to the breath, to the body, to our direct experience.

When we go out into our daily lives, we lose all of these supports. So it becomes much more challenging to do this work in our daily lives. The ideal or the hope of just being mindful all the time is a beautiful goal, a beautiful ideal. And in reality, it's very, very difficult to accomplish.

I had a demonstration of this at one point. I was about twenty-three years old and I picked up the book *Miracle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nhat Hanh. I read this book and was very drawn to the teaching of mindfulness. I thought, "Wow, this is great." I was reading the book at night and thought, "This is great. I'll practice this all day long tomorrow." The next time I remembered it was when I picked up the book the next night. After a few days of that, I decided, "Well, obviously I can't do this," and I put the book aside. It was another fifteen years before I met mindfulness again.

The next time I met mindfulness, somebody had given me one of the books by Joko Beck. I think it was in one of those books—I'm not exactly sure; I've been trying to find out where I got this idea—but somewhere in a book I read that fifteen years later, it said, "Well, if you try to be mindful all day long, you're just setting yourself up for failure. So pick something, pick some things to be mindful of, pick some projects for your daily life."

James was suggesting this this morning in the question and answer, and I'd like to elaborate on this a bit, because this has been a huge part of my practice. In fact, in the early days of my meditation practice, I wasn't particularly interested in meditating at all, but I had some emotional patterns that were going on that I really was interested in understanding. I had the idea that perhaps mindfulness might help me with understanding those patterns. So I was very focused and had a lot of interest and motivation in exploring that particular pattern in my life.

In terms of picking projects for working with mindfulness, I like to suggest a couple of things for people. I teach this practice in daily life at the center in Redwood City where I primarily teach with Gil Fronsdal. I teach what I call a householder retreat where we get together on Sunday afternoon and I give some instructions about working in daily life. We have a daylong on Saturday at the end of the week, and we meet every morning and every evening during the week essentially to bracket our day with practice and support for working with this in daily life. It's an intensive week of learning how to engage with mindfulness throughout our day.

One of the main instructions I give for people is to pick something that happens regularly throughout your day that's kind of neutral. It might be standing up, it might be walking through doorways, turning on light switches. If you sit at a computer a lot, it might be clicking send on an email. Something that happens regularly throughout your day, which can serve as a reference point for knowing how much we're mindful.

When we're in sitting meditation, we have this reference point of the breath. We're paying attention to the breathing, and then the mind wanders off. When we come back, we wake up from thought and realize, "Oh, I haven't been paying attention to my breath." So there's that remembering. There's a kind of reference point that the breath provides to help us know how much we're lost in thought and how much we're present. That goes away in our daily lives as well. So choosing something that happens regularly throughout your day to serve as a kind of reference point is very supportive.

Now, if you do this practice—and I hope some of you will try it—what you'll probably find is that if you choose something, it'll be a long time before you remember it.

Like I said, we don't have the supports of our stillness, of the silence, to remind us about what we're trying to do.

So at some point you'll remember, oh, I had resolved that I was going to notice when I stood up. And maybe that happens when you're going to bed at night. Boy, I'm sure I must have been standing up all day long, and I didn't remember once.

That moment—which is the kind of moment when I, reading Thich Nhat Hanh's *Miracle of Mindfulness*, basically said, well, obviously I can't do this—that moment actually is not an indication that you have failed. That is the moment when the practice begins.

That moment of remembering, oh, I forgot to pay attention, or I didn't notice the thing I said I was going to pay attention to—that moment of remembering is a moment of mindfulness, and it's the moment that the practice begins. It's the moment when you have a little bit of an inroad into having the practice work, because you have remembered about it. You have remembered your chosen task.

So in that moment that you remember as you're going to bed at night, you can't actually go back and stand up all day long. But in that moment, just recognize what's happening right now. Check into your body. Is there tension? Is there ease? In a very light way, just what is obvious about what is happening right now?

Now, this lightness to the mindfulness is one of the keys in our daily life practice, because in our daily lives we have to engage in the content of what we're doing. On a retreat like this, we have the luxury of letting go of the content. Over and over again we

let go of the thoughts and just come back to the experience of the body, not engaging in the thoughts. In our daily lives, we do have to engage in the content of what's happening. And so just the light touch of what's obvious about what's happening right now—and then just go on with whatever you're doing. Getting ready for bed, brushing your teeth, whatever it is.

And in that moment when you've remembered, make the resolve that you're going to keep trying. That's one of the keys here. Resolve that you will try again. So in that moment of remembering: what's happening right now, and resolve to try again to pay attention to this thing that you want to pay attention to.

Over time, what I found happening when I tried this the first time—what I picked was switching between DOS and Windows on my computer—the first time I remembered was when I was going to bed at night. And then as the days went on, I began to notice I was remembering more through the day that I hadn't remembered. So I was beginning to notice more of the remembering, but it wasn't exactly landing on the thing. And that's okay. Actually, this is a whole part of the point of this exercise—it helps us to get more of these moments of noticing just through our day.

And at some point you might remember right after the thing happened. Then it's getting really close. Then you notice that it's actually beginning to be linked with the event. And at some point you will notice right as you are standing up or right as you're reaching for a door. At that point, that task you've chosen can start serving as a trigger for mindfulness for you. When you stand up, it'll kind of pull the mindfulness along with it.

So this exercise is mostly about just getting familiar with what it's like to be aware in our day. In that moment of remembering, there's a kind of coming back into the world again. There's a light—it's like a light goes on. Getting familiar with what that feels like, this task of waking up, or vowing, dedicating ourselves to waking up for something that happens regularly through our day, begins to give us a sense of what it feels like to just be aware, just be awake in our day.

And this tends to then start to kind of leak out of that particular activity. We get more of a sense of when we wake up all through our day—a moment of mindfulness. Those moments happen all the time through our day. But what we typically do with those moments is we think we're supposed to do something with them. We walk down the hill and we see the golf cart coming up, and we see that, we're aware of it, we know that we're seeing the golf cart, but we're not really aware of the fact that we're aware of it. We think we're supposed to do something about it, like move out of the way. And that is

a very good thing to do with it—that's what I mean by engaging with the content in our daily lives. But we can also recognize that we have woken up in that moment. We don't usually notice that quality of waking up.

What is that like? Just beginning to be familiar with that feeling is a huge part of this exercise I'm suggesting. That in and of itself is what I think of as the training wheels for daily life practice. The juice for daily life practice, for me, is in looking at patterns and habits.

Where we get caught, where we suffer.

And again, it's helpful to pick something—one particular pattern or habit, particularly one you might be interested in exploring, interested in understanding about yourself. That interest really supports our willingness to observe what happens for us around that pattern.

So patterns and habits are things like having a particular habit of procrastination that developed when you were a teenager. Or you might find a pattern going on with a particular coworker in the office. Now, most of us would not tend to call that a habit, but there may be a pattern that you're seeing developing. It's really helpful and interesting to pick some kind of pattern that happens regularly for you and that you are interested in exploring. If it doesn't happen regularly enough, your memory—your remembering to engage around it—is not as likely to get triggered. So picking something that happens kind of regularly.

Now I'm going to describe for you what happened for me when I worked with this. When I started my practice, as I said, I read this book and it said, pick something. Pick something that you're interested in. Pick a project. And as I mentioned, one of the projects I picked was switching between DOS and Windows. The other project I picked was the thing that got me into the practice in the first place: out of control anger. It was making me non-functional at times. I would just be in a rage. I'd kind of wake up in a rage at my computer, frozen, not able to do anything because I was in such a rage. This anger was getting in the way of my living my life normally, and I was very interested in understanding it, very interested in understanding what it was about.

In this book that I had read, it said it's helpful in paying attention to emotions if you simply notice the emotion rather than act on it. That didn't make much sense to me, but I was willing to give it a try and see what happened because I felt I'd pretty much hit bottom. I was not functioning very well.

So along with the switching between DOS and Windows, I resolved that I was going to remember, I was going to be mindful whenever I noticed that anger. The first time I remembered, it was a little different than the way it unfolded around the switching between DOS and Windows. Switching between DOS and Windows comes and goes so quickly. There's not much of an emotional charge around it, so it could be nighttime before I ever remembered. With the way anger was functioning for me—and I'm sure many of you are familiar with this kind of pattern—it had a cyclic, feeding quality so that the anger just kept getting worse and worse. I would work myself up into a rage.

So the first time I noticed, after I had made this resolve about the anger, was when I was in a full-blown rage. And I remembered, "Oh yeah," at some point during that time —it lasted for a while—"I said I was going to pay attention to this."

I didn't have a lot of instruction at that point. I was in the Peace Corps and I had read this one book. Basically what I did was recognize: I'm angry. Just recognize it in a very simple way. Yeah, I'm angry. I remember even thinking, "What am I supposed to do with this?" All I could do was recognize I'm angry.

That simple recognition is actually incredibly powerful. Incredibly powerful. I didn't have a lot of instructions on paying attention in the body. I don't think I even connected with the body for quite a while. But I recognized that anger was happening. It was kind of like that noting or naming—I don't know if you've talked about the noting—it was like just naming it. This is anger. This is anger. That noting itself puts a little space around the anger or around the difficulty, and essentially puts us into a place of observing it as opposed to being spun by it.

So I did this. I kept doing this. And over the course of months, I began recognizing that I remembered about this practice of paying attention earlier in the cycle of anger, so that I was no longer getting to the point of a full-blown rage. It was more like normal anger. And that to me was a huge indication that something's happening here.

With the mindfulness in the task of switching between DOS and Windows, I was seeing the mindfulness begin to approach the actual event. What was happening with the anger was that the mindfulness was kicking in, or I was waking up, earlier in the process of the anger. I was getting closer to the beginning, the arising of the anger. And in that seeing of just being with the anger—not in the full-blown rage—I could see, "Oh yeah, this is a little bit easier. I can be with this. This isn't quite so difficult."

It wasn't nearly as painful to be with that normal anger. And over months of just continuing this practice, I began to notice more of the beginnings of anger. It gave me such tremendous working room around my anger to do this exploration. It was quite helpful.

And then one day, I was in my kitchen, cutting an apple. As I was cutting the apple, I saw a memory of being with the person I was angry with—we were at a fruit stand. So I saw the connection between what I was doing and the memory. And I also saw that in that moment, I was not angry. But I also saw something like a freight train of momentum to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry. There was a desire, a momentum, to get angry.

But having spent the past several months really getting to know the suffering of anger, that hanging out with the anger essentially gave me very clear instruction: anger does burn me when I pick it up. It was a very clear demonstration of that teaching about picking up the hot coal. I saw that I thought somehow it was going to hurt the person I was angry with, but actually that notion popped pretty quickly because I was in the Peace Corps on a little island in the South Pacific and he was in California. I realized fairly quickly there wasn't much way that anger was going to cross the ocean and get to him. But it was burning me up. And every time I experienced that anger, I saw the suffering of it.

So in that moment when I saw that thought, when I saw that momentum, I didn't have to do anything, actually. It was like the mind itself said, "I don't think so. I'm not going to go there. I know this way lies suffering." And the mind just let go of that momentum towards anger. I stood there in my kitchen with the knife in my hand, waiting to get angry—because I hadn't had the experience of this person appearing in my thoughts without anger arising. And I didn't get angry. I was so blown away by that moment.

That essentially was the moment of verified faith for me, of seeing the benefit of this practice. I saw so clearly how this practice of mindfulness can reveal the subtle movements of mind—a thought leading to an impulse, and the mind just letting go of it. Now, I'm not saying I didn't get angry again. I worked with this anger for a long time. But I had a lot of confidence that this path was going to help. And so as the anger came up in the future, it was much easier to just be with it.

So picking some habit that you have some juice around understanding, and resolving to pay attention to it—even in the simple way of simply recognizing, "Oh yeah, this is frustration," or "Oh yeah, this is procrastination"—just that simple labeling is enough to make inroads into understanding this pattern. This is one of the most powerful ways we can explore our mindfulness in our daily lives: through looking at habits and patterns.

Sometimes I get the question of why do this? I hope there's been some clarity about why it's helpful. For me, at least in that example, the benefit around mindfulness was pretty clear—it gave me so much space around the anger.

Habits and patterns essentially run our lives. We operate on autopilot, it seems, much of the time. When we're not mindful and aware of what's happening for us, our habits and patterns are running the show. The ways that our conditioning has come together—those conditions are running the show if we are not aware of it. But through mindfulness, we have the opportunity to begin to break into those patterns and habits and see essentially moments of choice. Moments where, like I saw, there's the momentum of the mind towards anger. And I didn't actually have to make the choice—some wisdom in me made the choice not to go towards that suffering.

So essentially a lot of our practice—our daily life practice, our practice on the cushion—begins to open us up to making skillful choices in our lives. There's a lot of suffering out there in the world. There's suffering of racism, sexism. People lose their jobs. There's a lot of things to react to in the world. And reactivity is not such a helpful place to respond from.

In paying attention in our daily lives to our habits and patterns, we begin to see where we have choice. This exercise I mentioned about picking something that happens regularly through your day—at some point you'll remember it right as you're doing it. Just as you're standing up, you recognize you're standing up. If you keep engaging with this practice, at some point you will know you're going to stand before you stand. The awareness will kick in before you do it. And that's essentially the moment of noticing the intention to act.

An intention happens before every action of our bodies, every action of our speech, even every action of our minds. We can know we're going to move before we move. We can know we're going to speak before we speak. And we can know our minds are inclining towards a pattern before the pattern has appeared, as I mentioned in my example of the anger.

When we catch that moment of knowing we're going to do something before we do it, we can see the reason why we're going to do it. Often we can know the motivation. That motivation may be skillful or unskillful. It may be a motivation based in compassion, generosity, kindness. It may be a motivation based in greed, aversion, delusion. Beginning to see our motivations and making skillful choices is a huge part of this practice.

Sometimes I think people hear about Buddhist practice—this notion of just being with what is—and we think it means we're not supposed to try to change anything. What it actually means is that it's not so helpful to try to change things out of greed, aversion, or delusion. We may want to try to change something because we don't like it and we want to get rid of it. We may want to ignore something. We may want to just take ourselves out of a situation—"I can't deal with that, forget it, I'm just going to ignore it."

The practice brings us to a point where we can make skillful choices, choose to change something out of compassion, generosity, and kindness, as opposed to greed, aversion, and delusion. These practices I've mentioned begin to open us up to seeing our motivations, seeing why we do things. And it can be humbling—definitely humbling—when we see our motivations. Using, as James talked about, that compassion and letting go of judgment around unskillful motivations when we see them is so important. We don't always have control over our motivations.

So we observe. We notice. If you notice an unskillful motivation, can you let go? Maybe you can, maybe you can't. But following through with the awareness and noticing what happens after making these choices—this really is the training. We make choices. We notice what happens. We make mistakes. We're not going to be able to be perfect. And in fact, the only way we can learn is by making mistakes.

Joseph Goldstein, one of my teachers, often likes to say: we want insight into suffering without experiencing suffering. That's not going to happen. In my case with the anger, for instance, I felt the suffering of that anger really clearly because I was mindful of it. And then at some point the mind saw and let go because it saw where it was inclining. "Not going to go there. I know what lies in that direction."

I find that the sitting practice and these tools for daily life work together. We learn in our sitting practice how to open up to just what is happening. And in our daily lives, that's where we really meet our challenges. How we learn to engage in the sitting supports our ability to meet our difficulties in our day with some kind of balance of mind.

There are two qualities that are incredibly helpful as you engage in a daily life practice, and those two qualities are resolve and patience. Resolve, because if we simply think we're going to do this by just saying, "Oh, I'm going to try this," it's probably going to fall away. We need to resolve over and over and over again. Every time you remember, you've forgotten.

I'm going to try this again. Not as a beating yourself up, but just as a recognition: I've got to keep trying. This is hard. Doing this in daily life, the momentum of life is against us. We're swimming upstream, as the Buddha said. So we need to continue to make that resolve every time we remember that we've forgotten.

And patience—because it is so difficult, patience and kindness, compassion for how difficult it is. Recognizing that this takes time.

But I think if you try these practices, you will start to see, as I did, little incremental changes. A little more space around these habits. A little less being completely run by them.

CHAPTER 31

Energy and Effort

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this talk from a month-long retreat, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of vīriya (energy) and sammā vāyāma (right effort) as essential factors on the path to awakening. She clarifies that energy itself is a neutral mental quality that must be coupled with wisdom to be skillful, directed toward understanding dukkha and cultivating the path leading to its cessation.*
>
> *Fella examines the sources that give rise to spiritual energy: a sense of urgency around awakening (saṃvega), wholesome desire (chanda), confidence (saddhā), and investigation (dhammavicaya). She describes investigation not as intellectual analysis but as a gentle meeting of experience—like polishing a bowl with a soft cloth—which naturally arouses curiosity and energy. The talk thoroughly covers the four aspects of right effort: avoiding unwholesome states not yet arisen, abandoning those that have arisen, cultivating wholesome states, and sustaining them once present.*
>
> *Practically, Fella addresses the art of balancing effort, noting that over-efforting leads to restlessness while under-efforting leads to sloth. She offers the Buddha's teaching on crossing the flood—"without tarrying, without hurrying"—as guidance for moment-to-moment practice. The key insight is that we need only enough effort to stay present for half a breath, then gently remind ourselves again, rather than forcing sustained attention. This light, continuous approach actually generates energy rather than depleting it, as we align with truth rather than resisting it.*

I wanted to start tonight by introducing myself because I didn't have an opportunity to do that before. Having arrived late from Burma on Monday evening, my name is Andrea Fella, and I'll be talking this evening about energy and effort.

In the last few days we've been talking about meeting our experience, receiving experience, and moment to moment being with whatever presents itself. We've talked about meeting the hindrances and how our actual path is created as we meet them. The obstacles that we face moment to moment, if we meet them with mindfulness, become the path itself. Sally talked so beautifully about this—essentially, our spiritual journey, our spiritual path is created each moment as we meet whatever is arising. And as James said, everything is workable when we meet it with mindfulness.

So moment by moment, we meet our experience—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—whether it's blissful, easeful, and peaceful, or whether it's resistance, frustration, irritation, annoyance, or anger. We meet the experience with this kind, open awareness. And this is not easy. It takes courage. It takes effort. It takes energy, over and over again, to meet moment by moment what is happening in our experience.

The Pali word for energy is *viriya*. This is often translated simply as energy, sometimes as persistence, and sometimes as courage. This quality of energy to meet our experience has a dimension of courage, of willingness to meet whatever is presenting itself to us.

Energy itself, this quality of *viriya*, is a neutral quality in our mind. It can be directed either skillfully or unskillfully. We can have energy and direct it towards the cultivation of beautiful qualities of mind, such as mindfulness, concentration, and equanimity, or we can direct it towards desire, aggression, and ambition. This same quality of mind, this energy, is a kind of neutral factor, and it depends on what we are cultivating how skillful that energy becomes. So it doesn't really make much sense to talk about energy in the abstract. We have to look at it in terms of how the mind is directed.

We need to look at how energy is coupled with wisdom for our practice. The quality of energy that fuels our practice is an energy that is imbued with wisdom—the understanding of what is skillful and unskillful with respect to what leads to suffering and what leads us away from suffering. The quality of energy on our path of practice is energy directed towards understanding suffering, letting go of the cause of suffering, realizing the release from suffering, and cultivating the path leading to the ending of suffering. These are the Four Noble Truths and the actions associated with them that Howie spoke about the other night.

Energy appears in many of the lists that the Buddha talked about. Most of you are familiar with the fact that the Buddha was a great list maker, and these lists actually give us support and indication of what supports the various qualities within them. Energy, for instance, is in the list of the *paramis*, the ten perfections. In that list, it is preceded by wisdom, which really supports this understanding that wisdom needs to imbue energy in order for it to be effective for our spiritual path.

It's a crucial quality of mind, this energy. In one commentary on the list of the *paramis*, of energy it says: "It is entirely through the spiritual power of energy that the practice of all the requisites of enlightenment succeeds." This is a pretty strong statement. It really depends on energy—that we gather our energy and use it wisely—that we wake up, that we are able to meet our experience moment by moment.

I want to look a little at what supports energy, what supports its cultivation. One commentary says that the proximate cause of this spiritual energy is a sense of urgency around awakening—the sense that when we meet suffering, there must be a way out of or through this suffering. All of you have this quality or you wouldn't be here. You wouldn't have signed up to come for a month of silent meditation, sitting and walking. This quality is a sense that there is a possibility of another way to live our lives, another way to meet our experience. This sense of urgency brings in some energy.

The fact that you have all come here indicates that this energy is present for you. And to some extent, we need desire—we actually have to want to do this. If we didn't want to do this, we would never do it. This is not an easy journey. And this kind of desire is a wholesome kind of desire, a *chanda* that fuels our practice.

As we engage, as we hear the teachings, as we begin to practice them, we develop some confidence. And this confidence is also the ground out of which energy comes. When we have a sense that what we're trying to do is possible, an energy arises that moves us in that direction, that moves us towards the activation of engaging with the practices.

We can also simply have a kind of confidence in the teachings themselves, a sense of, "Well, I'm not sure exactly how this works, but I'm willing to try." That willingness also results in some energy—just a simple, "I'm willing to at least run the experiment here. This is what the Buddha said to try, and I'm willing to try it." So that sense of confidence, whether it's in our own understanding, our own actual experience, or in the teachings themselves, can produce the energy to engage in this journey of meeting experience moment to moment. Being willing to meet our resistance, our frustration without reactivity. Being willing just to be here moment by moment.

So the sense of spiritual urgency is a source for energy. This wanting, this actual sense of wanting to do this, is a source of energy. Confidence is a source of energy. Investigation, interest, curiosity—this is another source of energy. When we're interested in what we're looking at, again, a kind of natural energy arises to make that investigation.

This investigation that I'm referring to—we haven't explicitly talked much about it, but it's a gentle meeting of experience. It's not a thinking about, it's not an analyzing. Often the term "investigation" produces an idea that it means figuring out, analyzing, understanding in an intellectual way. But what investigation is in this context is really just meeting the experience, coming in contact with experience, moment by moment.

One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, describes this quality of investigation. And I find for myself, when I actually come in contact with experience and start investigating it, that a natural curiosity begins to arise. It's like, "What is this? What is this experience?" An experience of anger arises. What is this? Meeting that experience in a gentle way.

U Pandita described this investigation not as a digging, not as a probing, but as a gentle rubbing—like polishing a bowl or a glass with a soft cloth. Just meeting, just gently contacting the experience, staying in contact, not digging, not trying to figure out. Just meeting experience in a very gentle way. And as we stay in contact with experience in that way, we start to see its texture. We start to see how it changes as we observe it. We start to understand how it comes into being, how it falls apart. Whether it's hindrances that we're observing or states of concentration, we start to understand the nature of our experience through this gentle investigation. And that leads to a kind of interest and curiosity: "Wow, what is the nature of this? How does this unfold?" So this gentle investigation and contact of experience is another place that energy results from.

Some of you may be familiar with some of these other lists that the Buddha referred to, and you may recognize that I've been talking about some of the qualities in them. In the Five Faculties, the Buddha talks about confidence leading to energy, which then leads to mindfulness, which then leads to concentration, which then leads to wisdom. Now it's not always a linear progression, but he did indicate this link between confidence and energy. And likewise with investigation, interest, and curiosity—in the list of the Seven Factors of Awakening, beginning with mindfulness, leading to the continuity of mindfulness, leading to investigation, and that followed by energy. So these sources of energy that I'm referring to come from the Buddha. He pointed us to these qualities of confidence and investigation as being places to draw from, to support our energy for the practice.

One other source—a teaching that really directs us towards energy—is the teaching on right effort. This is the effort that we make to cultivate and sustain wholesome qualities of mind, and to let go of, avoid, or refrain from unwholesome states of mind. Effort and energy, these two qualities, are often confused and conflated. They're often talked about interchangeably. But there is a difference between them. And one very clear pointing in the suttas to the difference between them, and the connection between them, is this: the Buddha says that energy—the spiritual quality of energy that functions for us on the path—is that mental quality that results from engaging in the practice of right effort.

So there's a very close link between energy and effort. We engage in right effort, and this produces energy.

I'd like to spend a little bit of time looking at this, and first of all, pointing to this interesting factor that making right effort leads to this beautiful quality of energy. We often think—and it is true to some extent—that we need to have energy in order to make effort. We all have some amount of energy. You're all in the room, sitting here awake. There is a certain level of energy in your system that's allowing you to even listen to the talk. That's what we need to begin with. That's the level of energy we need to begin engaging in this practice of right effort. And as we engage in right effort, it produces energy.

We think that making effort uses energy, but in this practice, making effort actually creates energy. This is a really helpful thing to recognize and know—that even if you just have a little bit of energy, just a little bit, all you need to do is make a little bit of effort. And that little bit of effort will create a little bit of energy.

So I'm going to talk briefly about right effort. I think most of you have probably heard a number of talks about right effort, so I'm just going to review and overview this. Right effort is very connected to the understanding of wisdom. It's connected to the understanding of what is skillful and what is unskillful with respect to the creation of suffering and the abandoning of suffering. What is skillful with respect to letting go of suffering? What is skillful with respect to understanding suffering? What is unskillful with respect to the creation of suffering? What should we avoid?

The simplest definition I know of what is skillful and unskillful is that the skillful states of mind are those that support our movement away from suffering. States like happiness, generosity, kindness, compassion, mindfulness, tranquility, equanimity—these are skillful states of mind. The practice of right effort is to cultivate those states, to encourage them when they've arisen.

Unwholesome qualities or states of mind are those that are basically based in greed, aversion, and delusion. States like anger, hostility, frustration, irritation, annoyance, rage, avarice, lust, wanting—these are the qualities of mind that lead us to dukkha, that lead us into suffering.

We get a very strong taste of that over and over again in our practice. We actually learn firsthand, physically in our bodies, that these states of mind are suffering. And this is not a mistake. It's not a problem. It's actually part of the training, part of the path, that we begin to understand firsthand that the state of wanting is suffering.

We typically fool ourselves or delude ourselves. At some level, this wanting feels like it feels good, and we feel like we're heading in the direction of constructing the world the way we want it to be. And yet when we really touch into that state of wanting, of wanting things to be other than they are in this moment, we see that it just doesn't feel right. And this is an insight. This is not a mistake. It's truth.

So we begin to understand the wisdom. We begin to gain the wisdom, the truth of understanding that these states lead us into suffering. They are not the kind of qualities that are helpful to cultivate if we want to live a life free of suffering. They're the kind of states that we should let go of, abandon, if we want to live a life free of suffering. We begin to see this directly in our experience. We gain this wisdom, and then we can engage in this practice of right effort with the wisdom, the understanding that it's useful to let go of wanting. It's hard to let go of wanting when we don't see a good reason to let go of it.

So there are four kinds of right effort. There's the effort towards avoiding unwholesome states that are not present in the moment. There's the effort towards abandoning or letting go of unwholesome states that are present in the moment. There's the effort towards the arousal or encouragement of wholesome states that have not yet arisen, that are not present in the present moment. And there is the effort towards sustaining wholesome states that have arisen.

The first one—the effort towards avoiding unwholesome states that are not present in the present moment—is really about beginning to understand what are the causes and conditions that land us in suffering, and learning to avoid those states and those conditions.

Avoiding—we need to be careful to understand what this avoiding means. It can have a very subtle meaning.

For example, you might notice sometimes that when you're in the food line in the dining hall, comparison and judgment arise around other people—around how much food they're taking or how much food you're taking, how they're moving, how slowly or quickly they're moving. All kinds of judgments can arise when we're engaged with other people, particularly in the dining room.

At first glance, we might think, "Okay, I see that I get into this state of self-judgment or other-judgment or criticism when I'm in the food line. So perhaps I should avoid being in the food line when other people are there—I'll go down late. And that way, I won't have this criticism and judgment." That might be skillful, but it also might be mo-

tivated out of aversion to those states. We have to be really careful in engaging in this kind of effort towards avoiding conditions that lead us towards suffering, not to be avoiding out of aversion.

Another way to engage with this might simply be, in going into the food line, as you move in, knowing that it is a hot zone for you—a place where criticism tends to arise, where judgment tends to arise—see if you can add some interest to how this criticism comes into being. What is the nature of this criticism? Observe the whole process around the criticism arising, around the judgment arising. Or perhaps see if you can just be really mindful in the line, noting, noticing the seeing, noticing when the mind begins to leap off into judgment.

In the seeing of that process happening, we begin to understand the causes in a different way. It's not as simple as "standing in the food line is the cause of the criticism in the mind." There's a much more subtle cause in the moment, a more direct momentary cause—perhaps a belief, perhaps a self-view of how I should behave or others should behave. Beginning to see that is much more supportive of really beginning to dismantle and untangle our unwholesome states of mind than simply just not going down to the dining hall until everybody is already through the line.

So be interested in understanding the situations that land you in suffering. When you begin to see situations that over and over again trigger suffering for you, see if you can get interested in that. The interest leads to energy. It leads to the ability to engage in our practice, engage in just that meeting of what is happening.

The second kind of right effort is the effort to let go of unwholesome states that have arisen. This means that we basically notice when we're caught up in an unwholesome state of mind—caught up in anger, caught up in frustration, caught up in wanting. And the wording of right effort says to let go of it. Now, this letting go can have an active quality to it, but I think more often it is about when we can meet that quality, just be with the wanting. The letting go is more about letting be, as has been said in someone's talk—I don't remember who mentioned that. Letting it be. Just meeting that experience of wanting, meeting that experience of anger, aversion, and letting it be.

With mindfulness, meeting the experience and letting it be, it has a tendency to let go of itself. So we don't have to do the letting go. The letting go happens. Because we are connected with the experience without reactivity, without judgment, without aversion. We just meet the experience. Let it be. All experience is impermanent. If we just let it be, it will naturally fall apart, as all things will do.

Letting it be. When we can meet it with mindfulness—this is a large part of our practice, much of what our practice is about. Meeting our experience and just being with it. Letting it be. When it's an unwholesome state of mind, it will tend to fall apart as we just meet it with mindfulness.

There are times, however, when some states of frustration, annoyance, irritation, anger—some of these difficult states of mind, some of these hindrances, fear—sometimes they can be stronger than our ability to be mindful of them. The power of that habit of mind has been practiced so much and is so powerful that it just swamps any attempt to bring mindfulness to it. When that happens, we can take some action to turn our attention away from that thing.

We don't have to just think that we have to meet everything with mindfulness. We need to have some discernment about whether mindfulness can actually meet the experience. Can mindfulness meet this? If you find yourself in trying to meet something difficult with mindfulness, if you find yourself just continually back, lost in the thoughts, swamped and overwhelmed and sucked back into the pain and the difficulty, then it's time to practice some skillful means.

Not with aversion, but with a kind of compassion, a recognition: this is not the time to pay attention to this. The mindfulness is being overwhelmed. As a compassion for yourself, you can say, "Not now. This is not the time." And simply turn the attention to something else in experience—perhaps hearing, perhaps steps on the ground, just something neutral in your experience that supports your ability to stay connected and mindful. This is a skillful means when we are overwhelmed.

The third kind of right effort is the effort to arouse wholesome states that are not present in the moment. In order to cultivate wholesome states that are not present, there are two ways we can approach this. We can abstain from situations that get in the way of these wholesome qualities, and we can actively cultivate or put ourselves in situations that lead to those wholesome qualities.

This first approach—avoiding situations that block or get in the way of these wholesome qualities—is really what the precepts are about. We engage in abstaining from actions that will tend to land us in suffering. Simultaneously, each one of those precepts is paired with a wholesome quality that is cultivated as you abstain from that action.

For instance, abstaining from killing is paired with compassion. As you abstain from swatting mosquitoes or killing any moths or scorpions you might find in your room, as you gently put them out into the woods, you are simultaneously cultivating compassion. As you abstain from taking what is not given, you're cultivating honesty and contentment. This engagement with the precepts is one way of engaging with right effort.

We can also try to cultivate these positive qualities through an active practice that would tend to arouse a quality. For example, we can engage in the practice of giving, which supports the cultivation of generosity. Daily in our 4:15 sitting, we're engaging in the practice of metta. We're cultivating that quality through a formal practice. This is right effort. And all day long we are engaging in practices that support the cultivation of mindfulness. As my teacher Sayadaw U Pandita says, mindfulness is the most wholesome mind state. Engaging in coming back, recognizing when you've been lost, remembering to bring attention—this is cultivating this wholesome quality. This is right effort.

The fourth kind of right effort is the effort to sustain wholesome states that have arisen. Surprisingly, at least in my experience, this sometimes does take effort. We wouldn't think of such a thing. It's like, well, if happiness has arisen, why would it be a problem to sustain that? But in my experience, at least the way my mind works—and you can look into your own mind to see how yours works—I find that sometimes when I come into these wholesome mind states of calm or peace or happiness, the first thing my mind does is acknowledge it. It recognizes it and says, "Oh, that's nice. That's nice that happiness is here, or that calm is here." And the next thing it does is say, "Now, because the mind is so calm, that's the perfect time to pay attention to the pain in my back." So I turn my attention away from the calm to put it someplace else.

What I've discovered for myself is that this movement was a kind of indication that there was a little bit of discomfort with being with some of these wholesome states. One of the ways to support sustaining the wholesome states is to simply be aware. Calm is present. Happiness is present. With happiness, I found the mind will quickly leap off into trying to figure out how I can stay happy. Then I'm immediately lost in planning, and I'm miserable because I can't figure out how to keep this happiness—as opposed to just being with the happiness. That was a revelation for me. Oh, it's just happiness. And happiness is fueling this miserable planning.

Another wonderful way to sustain or cultivate these wholesome qualities is to actually recognize the qualities that are being cultivated as we practice. So often we are engaged in working with some difficult state of mind. We're trying to be with anger or wanting, something that feels difficult. We're trying to stay with that, focused on the experience of the anger, the feelings in the body. All of that is very helpful. And it's also

helpful to recognize that at the same time you're being with that quality of feeling in the body, mindfulness is being cultivated. Interest is being cultivated. Energy is being cultivated. Confidence is being cultivated—confidence that we can engage.

Recognizing the qualities that are essentially being pulled along with the engagement in mindfulness practice supports their continuing. Often we miss that in our practice.

We're engaging in mindfulness, but we're not recognizing the quality of mindfulness itself. We're engaging with investigation, but we're not really noticing that interest and energy have arisen. Beautiful qualities of mind come along for the ride as we practice. Recognize them. Appreciate that this is happening.

Sometimes people ask about or wonder about the teaching on right effort, because the teaching on mindfulness is very much about being with what is. Can you just meet what is happening? And the teaching on right effort sounds like very much a doing—we're trying to encourage wholesome states and let go of unwholesome states. But the practice of mindfulness that we are doing actually includes the four right efforts.

As we engage in moment-to-moment mindfulness of our experience, for example, if we're cultivating mindfulness of being angry, if we're cultivating mindfulness of that experience of anger, this supports the letting go. It's that letting be—we're just meeting it with mindfulness. And it supports the letting go, the abandoning of that experience of anger. It helps to prevent reactivity. Being with that state of mind and body without reactivity helps to prevent the arising of reactivity to anger. So it's preventing the arising of an unwholesome mind state to just be with it. So often when we're working with these difficult states, or when we're not mindful of these difficult states, immediately reactivity comes in. Mindfulness helps to avoid that quality of reactivity—avoiding the arising of unwholesome states that are not yet present. And it supports the arousing and maintaining of beautiful states of mind as we engage in meeting that experience. It supports equanimity. It supports the quality of mindfulness, of concentration. It supports wisdom. It supports beginning to understand how the mind can let go.

So in a sense, when we look at right effort in this way, it's like four sides of a single process. Anytime we're engaging in our practice, all four of these things are really happening simultaneously.

Part of the challenge of making effort is to continue, to keep going. I'm going to read a quote from the Dalai Lama: "No matter what is going on, never give up. Develop the heart. Too much energy in your country is spent developing the mind instead of the

heart. Be compassionate, not just to your friends, but to everyone. Be compassionate. Work for peace in your heart and in the world. Work for peace. And again, I say, never give up. No matter what is going on around you, never give up."

This is what we have to do with our effort—never give up. Keep this gentle persistence of effort going.

As we engage in this gentle persistence of effort, it leads to energy. Part of my understanding of how this happens is that when we're engaging in wise effort, we find that we're letting go of clinging, letting go of reactivity, letting go of resistance to the way things are. As we engage in this practice, we align ourselves with truth instead of resisting truth. And resisting truth takes a lot of energy. So as we come into alignment, a lot of energy is freed up. Engaging in this practice of wise effort, not only does the very act of taking those steps of making effort create energy, it also frees up energy that's been bound into resistance to the way things are.

This balancing of energy, this balancing of effort, is the art of meditation. We're often on one side or the other of the energy equation. Too much energy often results in restlessness—we feel like jumping beans, there's just so much energy in the system, we can't sit still. Too little energy often results in sloth and torpor—sleepiness, dullness, difficulty bringing our attention. So we need to monitor our energy and see how we can bring it into balance.

One of the ways to balance energy is through our level of effort, because effort and energy are so closely connected. There's a beautiful exchange from the suttas that illustrates this. A deva asks the Buddha, "How did you, dear sir, cross the flood?"—meaning the flood of defilements, the flood of samsara, the flood of suffering. "How did you cross the flood?"

The Buddha replied, "Without tarrying, friend, and without hurrying, did I cross the flood."

"But how did you, without tarrying, without hurrying, cross the flood?"

The Buddha replied, "When I tarried, friend, I sank. When I hurried, I was swept away. That is how, without tarrying, without hurrying, I crossed the flood."

To me, this points to how we have to simply meet each moment as it arises. Don't sink into a stupor around it and don't try to rush past it. Moment by moment—what is happening, without tarrying, without hurrying? At times in my practice, just saying that to myself was so helpful. Without tarrying, without hurrying. That is the kind of way we apply our effort.

It's not hard to be mindful. In an instant, mindfulness is here. How hard is it for you to know the pressure of your body on your chair or cushion or bench? How hard is it for you to feel and know the sensations of your hands? How hard is it for you to know that you're hearing the sound of my voice? It's not hard. For most of us, just hearing those things points us to them almost automatically. Oh yes, there are the sensations of my body. There's the sound of the voice. There's the feeling of the hands. It's not hard for a moment to be mindful.

What's hard to do is sustain it over time. And this trying to sustain our mindfulness over time is often where we over-effort, we over-exert, we exhaust ourselves trying to be present. We come into the hall, sit down, and try to muster up the energy at the beginning of the sitting to be present for the whole sitting. And that is exhausting.

So the level of effort that's most helpful is to not think about trying to sustain mindfulness over a long period of time, but rather to only make the effort needed to stay present for a short period of time—a second, half a second. As Joseph says, half a breath. The secret teaching of the art of meditation is to just make enough effort to stay present for half a breath. And then at the end of that half a breath, do it again. Make enough effort to stay present for the out-breath. And then at the end of that out-breath, enough effort to stay present for the in-breath.

Moment by moment, reminding yourself just to come back, rather than trying to force the mind to be present. Gently reminding it—oh yes, come back, come back, come back. In this way, we can pull ourselves along with this light touch of effort, rather than a forceful, heavy pushing into trying to be present. It can be very light, very gentle. And that kind of effort is much more sustainable.

One of my teachers talks about lifting weights. He says it's kind of like going to a gym with a goal of lifting fifty-pound weights. If we start by trying to lift fifty-pound weights, we're going to injure ourselves. So instead, let's start with one-pound weights. And then when we can do that with ease, move to two-pound weights, then increase slowly over time. Gradually we can get to lifting heavier weights. It's kind of like that with the effort we make—we don't start by trying to be present for a long period of time. The mind isn't quite capable of that. So we stay present for a few moments, and then remind ourselves to be present for the next few moments, and the next few moments, and the next few moments.

The art of meditation is learning how frequently to remind yourself to be mindful. That's the effort we make—reminding ourselves to be mindful, over and over and over again.

At the beginning of a sitting, at the beginning of a retreat, we need to remind ourselves frequently. And it's not a heavy thing. This is just really light. Oh, the breath, the sound. It's reminding yourself frequently. Over time, the energy begins to develop, and it sustains us. It lasts for longer periods of time. So we can begin to tune our level of reminding to the energy that is available. It doesn't make a lot of sense if the mind is pretty continuous and steady already to be reminding yourself every second—that's getting in the way. But you need to kind of have a sense of how much effort to make. And this is really the art of meditation. This changes hour to hour, day to day, even minute to minute—the level of effort that we need to make changes.

Sometimes when I find myself over-efforting—and I think this is a very common phenomenon, particularly with people in our culture—we tend to really want to do it right. We want to be present. We want to get our mindfulness going. We have this very strong efforting culture. So when I begin to notice that there's a little bit of that efforting and striving going on, or sometimes even a lot of that efforting and striving going on, one game I play with myself is to ask: How little effort do I need to make to be mindful? Kind of backing off on the effort and seeing—if I don't try so hard, is the mind still here? Just letting go, backing off, backing off. And quite often I find that I actually need to make much less effort than I thought I needed to make.

Sometimes we need to make strong effort, which doesn't mean bearing down and forcing. Rather, it means really just continuously being with the breath, noticing the breath, dedicating yourself: Can I be mindful for the out-breath? Can I be mindful for the in-breath? You can do this in walking as well. If you find your mind is getting scattered in the walking, pick a place on the path, one or two steps out. Can I be mindful until I reach that point? And then do it again. Can I be mindful until I reach the next point, two steps away? In this way we can really pull ourselves along. And the effort begins to balance, the energy begins to balance, as we tune our effort to the level of mindfulness and energy that are present.

I'd like to close with a couple of quotes. One from the Dhammapada, just a brief injunction: "It is up to you to make strong effort. The Tathagatas simply point the way." So it's up to us. We are the ones that have to engage in the practice. Nobody can do it for us. We need to engage.

This last quote is by Piyadasi Thera: "We must, by our own resolute efforts, rise and make our way to the portals of liberty, and it is always, in every moment, in our power to do so. Neither are those portals locked, nor the key in possession of someone else from whom it must be obtained by prayer or entreaty. That door is free of all bolts and bars, save those we ourselves have made."

CHAPTER 32

The Wandering Mind

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella invites practitioners to transform their relationship with the wandering mind from one of frustration to one of curious exploration. Rather than viewing mental wandering as a problem to be fixed, she presents it as a natural phenomenon that offers profound insights into the nature of consciousness and self.*
>
> *Fella distinguishes various flavors of wandering—from gentle drifting and daydreaming to intentional problem-solving and intense mind storms fueled by strong emotions. She emphasizes that when mindfulness is absent, we cannot force its return; it re-arises spontaneously when causes and conditions align. This points directly to the Buddha's teaching on anattā (not-self), as expressed in the aggregates teaching: "Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were the self, it would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible to say with regard to consciousness, let my consciousness be thus."*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with this pattern: noticing what we wake up into when mindfulness returns, exploring the feeling tone (vedanā) of wandering states, and observing the cause-and-effect chain by which attention drifts—such as when an unnoticed sound leads to perception, thought, and proliferation (papañca). Fella shares how this exploration helped her understand the quality of awareness itself, that sense of presence teachers often reference. She encourages practitioners to approach wandering with gentle interest rather than judgment or complacency, recognizing each moment of remembering as a spontaneous, effortless arising of mindfulness worthy of celebration.*

In my own exploration of practice, I found it very helpful to explore patterns and habits that arise over and over again. When we see something that happens to us repeatedly, as we explore it, we can start to understand things about it that will support our ability to further be with that experience and then deepen our understanding.

With patterns and habits that happen over and over again, we get to see different perspectives on what's seemingly the same phenomenon. It's not actually the same phenomenon because every time something arises, it's new. So as something happens to us repeatedly, we begin to see different ways it comes into being. We see different ways that we hang on to it or push it away. And we see different ways that it falls apart. Each time a pattern arises, we have the opportunity to see new things, to gather more information, to understand more deeply how that pattern works in our minds.

Tonight I'd like to explore a particular pattern, a particular habit of mind that happens to every single one of us all day long: the wandering mind. This is something I know you're all very familiar with, and yet it's not something we typically think to explore. Often we simply recognize that we're waking up in the middle of wandering, or we recognize that we've been lost in thought, and we just try to move right back. We have this idea that we need to get back to mindfulness. But it's very interesting to actually explore this phenomenon of wandering mind itself.

First I'd like to give a definition of what I mean by wandering mind. I use the term to mean anytime there's the experience of the mind losing touch with the present moment. We often think about it as the mind wandering out of the present moment, but the mind doesn't actually go anywhere. There's not actually a wandering. It's simply that the mind loses touch with the present moment. Mindfulness becomes low or even non-existent. The consciousness, the experience of the present moment, isn't being paid attention to, and yet the mind is still doing its thing—still seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, and recognizing things going on. It's just that there's not that awareness connected with that experience. Our experience of this is that the mind has wandered. That's the way we talk about it: "My mind wandered."

There are many different flavors or ways that we can experience this. It might simply be a kind of drifting out of present moment experience where there's not particularly any attachment to the content of what we're thinking about. The mind has just lost its vigor or its connection with experience, picks up on something, and wanders off. There's that feeling of it drifting out of the present moment. This can sometimes be experienced as daydreaming—just images or strange dreamlike images coming through the mind.

Sometimes the wandering mind has a more intentional or active quality to it, where it feels like the mind is engaged in thinking about some problem, thinking about the past, trying to figure out how we should have done something better, what we should have said, planning for the future, how to say something properly, what we're going to be doing. There's a little more intentionality or push to the thinking process.

This can get even more intense. It can feel like a mind storm where there's a strong emotion, or the thinking process is fueled by strong greed or aversion. This often comes with a lot of thinking. Something like self-righteousness, for example, comes with a lot of thinking: "I'm right. They shouldn't have done that." There's a strong push to it, and a lot of thinking results.

This state of the wandering mind is generally one of very low mindfulness. Mindfulness is not very strong, or it doesn't even exist—it's just not present. We're really, really lost. We can't do much about this state of mind when we're lost in it. We cannot make ourselves come out of the wandering. There's nothing we can do to come out of it. There has to be a kind of spontaneous re-arising of mindfulness. At some point this will happen to us, and this is how we notice that we've been lost in thought. Mindfulness spontaneously re-arises and we recognize, "Oh, here I am. I had been paying attention to the breath a few minutes ago, but that's not where I am now. I'm off on some train of thought." We cannot make the mindfulness re-arise when we're in this state of being lost.

It will simply re-arise at some point because causes and conditions have come together to allow for the arising of mindfulness in that moment.

In that moment of recognizing—or the mind recognizing—that it has been lost in thought, that moment itself can be recognized. Sometimes when we remember, when we wake up into the middle of wandering, we wake up right in the midst of it. We recognize, "Oh, the mind has been thinking about yesterday's lunch." When we wake up, we wake up right in the middle of that, and we realize that we had not been connected to the present moment experience. But now there is the reconnection with recognizing that we had not been here.

Sometimes, though, there's a kind of mysterious thing that happens. Perhaps some of you have seen this too. The mind can wander out of the present moment and wander back in, and then at some point we recognize or remember that we had been thinking—but we neither saw the getting lost nor the coming back. It's as if we're paying attention to the breath, and then without our recognizing it, the mind wanders out and wanders back, and we're back paying attention to the breath. Then we realize, "Wait a minute, I remember that I was just thinking about that friend of mine, but I didn't see the getting lost, or the thinking about it, or the waking up in the middle of thinking about it. Here I am, back with the breath." Sometimes this wandering can sneak up behind our backs. We can wander back into the present moment without ever having realized or recognized that we hadn't been in the present moment.

Looking at this pattern, this process of the wandering mind, can be very educational. We can learn a lot by exploring this pattern. I'm going to point to some of the things we can learn, and then I'll talk in quite a bit of detail about some ways to explore this process.

One of the things we can learn by exploring this pattern of the wandering mind is a lot about ourselves—about the kinds of things we get stuck to, the kinds of thoughts that tend to hijack us. Somebody mentioned the other day the top ten thoughts, the top ten kinds of things that tend to carry us away. By exploring this pattern, by simply beginning to recognize how our minds wander over and over again, we get familiar with the things we get stuck to. We begin to get familiar with where we get caught, what we cling to.

Another thing we really get to see very clearly with this wandering mind is that our minds are out of control. We sit down to meditate, we sit down for a session of meditation, and we have the intention to be present for our breathing, for body sensation, for thoughts, for moods, for feelings. That's our intention. Nobody sits down with the intention to space out—well, maybe sometimes we do. But mostly we sit down with the intention to be present. And we don't intend for the mind to wander. We have very little control. We have some. There is some amount of say, some connection with the process of the mind wandering out of the present moment. But once the mind has wandered, once mindfulness is not present in a moment, we have no control over when it comes back. We have no control over how long it's gone. It will simply come back when causes and conditions come together for it to reappear.

We sometimes think of this as a problem, that we don't have this control. But actually it points us to a deep truth. It points us to the not-self nature of our experience.

The Buddha describes various aspects of our experience—these aspects called the five aggregates: consciousness, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and body. These encompass all of our experience. Every part of our experience falls into one of these categories or groups. I'm just going to read out the part where he talks about consciousness, because that's what this is related to, in a way:

"Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were the self, it would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible to say with regard to consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus.' But precisely because consciousness is not self, it lends itself to disease. It is not possible to say, 'Let my consciousness be thus.'"

This points to this fact of the wandering mind, pointing to this lack of control we have over our minds. Typically, in our experience, we think of things being mine, things being me, things being I, things being myself. And because we have that view—the view of self that we talked about the other night, this identity view—that view is a kind of belief.

It's a way that we perceive our experience. We look through this filter of identity view, and what we see in our experience confirms that identity view. As Carol was discussing, our views distort perception. Essentially, one of the main distortions of perception that we have is this view of self, and it filters everything that we see.

Because we believe we are a self, when we look out into the world and experience things and do things, our view of self kind of self-selects what we experience to confirm that view. We pick things out of our environment that confirm it and don't notice things that don't confirm it. Or if we notice things that don't confirm it, we don't even conceive of the fact that they don't confirm it.

The wandering mind is just such an experience. It shows us over and over again this truth—it points to this truth that there's not control, that consciousness is not under control, that mental formations are not under control. But we don't recognize it as being that kind of evidence. It's hard for us to take in this evidence. It's hard for us to actually recognize things that don't confirm what we so deeply hold to be true.

Another aspect of exploring the wandering mind that we can learn about is related to this exploration of not-self. As we observe the experience of the wandering mind—as we observe any experience, actually, not just the wandering mind—we can see experience as a stream of cause and effect. All of our experiences are just arising out of causes. It's just this stream of cause and effect, cause and effect, cause and effect. There's no doer. There's no causer. There's just this process, this flux of cause and effect happening.

When we see this, when we start to see how one thing arises and that leads to the next thing, which leads to the next thing—just like dominoes falling—this experience arises, then that experience arises, and that experience arises as a result of the previous one. Just boom, boom, boom, boom. That recognition of how things unfold out of cause and effect is also another pointing to the fact that there's no one in control.

So the exploration of the wandering mind can point to things we can learn about ourselves, ways that we get caught. We can learn about how we get stuck on things, where we're particularly prone to greed or aversion around our arising experience. We can see the out-of-control nature of our experience. We can see the cause and effect nature of our experience, that things are just a process, a flux going on. And we can also, through this exploration of the wandering mind, begin to see and understand awareness itself—some qualities of awareness, how it feels, and understanding awareness as a process.

The easiest place to start this exploration of the wandering mind is when we remember in the midst of the moment when mindfulness re-arises. Typically the moment is when we wake up into a wandering thought and we recognize, "Oh, I've been lost in thought." That moment of recognizing mindfulness re-arising—that's the easiest place to begin this exploration. Developing a skillful relationship with this moment is key. It's a key to our practice.

Many of you are describing that as the days go on, as we progress into the weeks of this retreat, there's much less judgment happening in that noticing of the mind coming back into mindfulness. And that's key to the practice unfolding as a smoother and less effortful experience. When we can recognize and really accept and understand the fact that we have no control over when that waking up happens, it can help also to lessen that sense of judgment. It's much more of a sense of celebration. Yes, here we are. I'm back again. There's not much point in judging that moment. In fact, that moment itself is mindfulness again.

But typically what we do in that moment is this: we recognize, actually there's been a moment of recognizing—I'm aware. And then the next moment we think that we've been lost. And so then we judge ourselves. But the moment of recognition has already happened. We've come back into awareness already by the time we judge ourselves for not being aware. So beginning to recognize and acknowledge what's actually happening—that awareness has re-arisen, that mindfulness has re-arisen—this is important.

Taking an interest in this moment, taking an interest in the moment of coming back into mindfulness, making an exploration of what that moment is about—I found personally that highlighting this as a place to explore in my practice really supported the letting go of judgment around that moment. That moment of remembering, that moment of mindfulness re-arising, is a purely spontaneous, effortless moment of mindfulness. It wasn't a mindfulness you did; it just happened. And it's a pointer to the kind of ease of mindfulness that can be present for us. Because we're not doing it.

It's just happening. It's nothing we're making effort to do. So if we're judging ourselves for not being mindful in that moment of mindfulness coming back, we're missing the opportunity to connect with that spontaneous, effortless moment of mindfulness. It's really a magical moment in a way, that moment of coming back into awareness.

So in this moment of waking up—we might call it waking up, or the moment of mindfulness re-arising—notice what you're waking up in the midst of. Mindfulness has re-arisen. What is it aware of in that moment when it re-arises? It might be aware of anything at any of the six sense doors. Just notice what it is noticing, what mindfulness

is noticing in that moment. It might be body sensation. It might be moods or emotions. It might be planning or remembering or fantasizing or daydreaming. It might be a feeling tone.

Actually, in this exploration of the moment of waking up into mindfulness again, I found a gentle exploration of feeling tone to be a very interesting way to connect with the experience. Often, when there's some kind of mind storm going on, the experience can be unpleasant, and we connect with that unpleasantness. But a good percentage of the time—at least in my experience of playing with this, looking at the moment of remembering and noticing this wandering process that happens—particularly as the mind settles down, as there's more concentration, more stability, often the wandering aspect of the mind is more of a drifting off of experience. The energy just isn't quite strong enough to keep us connected with the present moment, so the mind loses the mindfulness and drifts out of the present moment.

Often I've seen that when I notice the feeling tone in that kind of experience, when the mind is drifting, the experience in the waking up is pleasant. Connecting with the pleasant after the drifting has happened has been a very helpful way to ground myself back in the present moment. It's actually also a bit of a carrot in terms of reconnecting with the present moment—the mind has woken up into this space of some kind of drifting phenomenon that's a pleasant kind of drifting experience. To reconnect with what's actually happening, reconnecting with that pleasant experience... now it's not going to last. It's going to have its impermanent nature; it will arise and pass. But reconnecting with the pleasant aspect of that experience—sometimes the mind actually drifts off into pleasant, and it's not noticed that the mind is drifting off into pleasant. I'll talk more about that in a few minutes.

When we reconnect with the pleasant that's actually happening, it brings us back, it reconnects us with the present and the pleasant aspect of that experience. So that's something I offer you: just checking into the feeling tone around the wandering mind, particularly around the waking up.

Again, often in the waking up, if we wake up into some fantasy, we kind of jerk ourselves back to the breath or whatever else we think of as the present moment, because obviously this fantasy is not the present moment—it's what I'm not supposed to be doing. But when we wake up into that, can we just recognize what is happening then and there? Pleasant experience. And then, because we're no longer fueling the fantasy with our thoughts, that pleasant experience fades and something else arises. But just reconnecting with what is happening.

See if you can notice the very moment when you wake up. Or when I say that, "see if you can notice"—that sounds like something to do. But it's not something we can really do. It's much more that we can incline our interest toward this phenomenon of waking up and notice where we are when we recognize the waking up.

Often what happens as we start this exploration is that we see there's a kind of lag between the initial coming back into mindfulness and the recognition of the mindfulness. It's as if—and this is my way of describing it, I'm not sure exactly what's happening—but it's as if there's a certain level of mindfulness or continuity of mindfulness that needs to be present in order for mindfulness to recognize itself as being there. You're coming out of a daydream or you're coming out of a mind storm, and there's just a moment of awareness. Then you're kind of pulled back into the mind storm. Then there's another moment of awareness and you're pulled back. It's kind of like climbing out of mud. At some point there's this recognition: Oh, I'm back. Here I am. I am paying attention to this mind storm.

Initially there can be this feeling of pulling ourselves out of a sticky kind of thought pattern. But as we explore this more and more, as we open our minds to exploring this pattern of waking up and taking an interest in this moment of remembering...

And kind of highlighting it as: well, can I notice how soon? What is the soonest I can recognize that I have woken up? Something about that exploration seems to encourage the mind to recognize more quickly as it comes back into mindfulness. Something about that exploration seems to attune us to the recognition of that moment of waking up.

So at some point, over time with this exploration, you might really begin to notice this moment. At whatever moment you notice or recognize "I'm back," it can be helpful or interesting to notice the difference between what it feels like to be present now and what it was like a few moments before to be lost in thought. This exploration has helped me to understand what the quality of awareness and being mindful actually feels like. What does it feel like to be mindful? The sense of presence, the sense of awakeness—what are the qualities? What is this experience of being mindful?

For myself, in my first years of practice, teachers would sometimes say, "Sense the presence in your experience," or "Connect with the awareness," or "Recognize the awareness that's present." And I would have no clue what they were talking about. It was beyond me to understand what a sense of presence meant. Then, as I began doing this exploration of the moment of remembering, this moment of recognizing that mind-

fulness has re-arisen, I began to recognize the difference. I began to see that when the mind comes back into awareness, there's a kind of contrast between what it feels like now to be here and mindful and what it felt like a few moments ago.

We can't really know so much in the moment what it feels like to be lost, but there's a lingering memory in that moment of remembering. There's a lingering memory of what it felt like. And there can be a clear sense of difference, of distinction, allowing us to get a sense of the qualities of mindfulness—the clarity or brightness of the mind. So our practice gives us many opportunities to explore this moment, to explore these qualities of the mind coming back into awareness.

One of the things that has been very beautiful for me to recognize about this moment of remembering is that getting familiar with what it feels like to wake up—really just that sense of coming back into mindfulness—getting familiar with that feeling begins to point it out to us more quickly. This moment of remembering actually happens to us a lot, both in our formal practice and in our daily lives. Often what happens in that moment of recognizing mindfulness coming back into being is that we experience a connection with knowing what's happening while it's happening. We see something, we hear something, and we know what's happening while it's happening. Some aspect of our mind actually connects with that experience. But what we typically do is immediately leap onto that thing and start thinking about it or doing something with it. So getting familiar with that moment begins to point it out to us so that we recognize it when it happens.

Walking down the hill to go to the dining hall, the moments of waking up will happen. This is an exploration to do also in the daily activities, in between times. Recognize the moment of coming back into awareness. It's very powerful and it will support you here on the retreat and also support you in your daily lives.

So that's an exploration of the waking up process. We can also explore the way the mind begins to wander out of the present moment. We can feel the mind start to lose its connection with experience. We can actually watch how the mind starts to wander. There are several ways that it does this.

One of the processes—and this is beginning to see the cause and effect relationship—is that often when the mind wanders, it wanders out of some sense experience. For instance, you're sitting in meditation in the hall, paying attention to the breathing, and a sound arises. Out of that sound there's a recognition, a perception: "That's the sound of a door opening." And leaping out of that recognition of the door opening is a thought that there's somebody coming into the sitting late. And then there's a bunch of thinking

that happens after that—how that person shouldn't be doing that, or what's going on with that person, or "I know that's my neighbor because I know they weren't there." The mind explodes into what's called *papañca*.

We can catch this process in the midst of it happening. The mind wanders when some aspect of this process is not noticed. You're sitting in meditation with this kind of intention to stay with the breath or to be with body sensations. And there's the sound. Sometimes, I think partly because we have this agenda to stay with one object, there's the sound and we don't really recognize that the mind has picked up on it. The sound goes unnoticed—noticed by the mind, but unnoticed by mindfulness. When the sound is unnoticed by mindfulness, there's the possibility of that whole chain arising: perception, thought, *papañca*, all of it. So we can catch this in the midst of it happening.

willingness to recognize what the mind is paying attention to. As we're paying attention to the breathing, we have this agenda to stay with the breathing, or perhaps to stay with body sensations. And then there's a sound, and it's outside of our agenda. So even though the awareness has shifted to the sound and picked up on it, we don't notice that. It's that view again—because we have this view of "this is what I'm doing" or "this is my way of practicing," it's almost like we don't notice or recognize that the attention has shifted.

As we move more and more into just recognizing things as they are—the *yathā bhūta* that Carol was talking about—we start to recognize these subtle ways that the mind moves attention. We start to pick up on the fact that the mind is already attending to something else. That can be challenging. And so again, this isn't something so much to do as it is to just begin to recognize.

You may wake up or recognize—the mindfulness comes back into being—at any point in that process of recognizing a sound, perceiving the sound, thinking about the sound, and then proliferating around the sound. Any point you wake up in that process, just recognize that's what's happening right now. The more interest you take in the process of waking up, the more quickly you'll begin to recognize how the mind does what it does.

We can also start to notice the moment when the mind begins to let go of what it's paying attention to. This is a further refinement on what I was just talking about. Suppose you're paying attention to the breathing or body sensation, allowing your focus to come into that place. You may start to notice at some point the quality of the connection with that experience. What does it feel like when it's really connected, when the mind-

fulness is really connected with that experience? And then you can start to feel when it loses that connection—so that you're still paying attention to it, but it's not quite as connected. You start to notice that drifting away from the experience.

I noticed this at one point on retreat where I was really paying attention to the breathing. I was using it as a primary object, really focusing on the breathing. And I began noticing that I could see the mind losing touch with the breathing. Initially what I did with that was to notice, "Okay, the mind has lost touch with the breathing, come back to the breathing." And then I would notice it lose touch with the breathing and, "Oh, come back to the breathing."

At some point I recognized, as I noticed the mind losing touch with the breathing, that the awareness was strong—that the awareness was aware that it was losing touch with the breathing. And this recognition crossed my mind: "I'm mindful here. Why do I have to do anything with this? Why don't I just see what the mind is doing?" And the mind just opened into a new space, a new experience of settledness that I hadn't touched before.

So we can just see—if we start to notice the mind losing touch with the experience, we can use that to come back and cultivate a stronger concentration. And we can also just recognize, "Oh, this is what the mind is doing right now. It's let go of the breathing. What's it going to do?" It's an adventure. We get to see what our minds do.

So why does the mind wander? Most of us are familiar with some of the obvious ways the mind wanders. It often wanders—particularly early in retreat—because of greed or aversion, because of thinking about the past or thinking about the future. Or thinking about the present, for that matter, an endless kind of description of the present moment: "Oh, now I'm experiencing this. Oh, now I'm experiencing that. Oh, now I'm going to tell somebody I'm experiencing that." This is the most familiar reason, the most obvious reason why the mind wanders out of the present moment—because of the presence of greed or aversion or these reflections.

Some other reasons why the mind wanders: as the mind starts to relax, as it settles into concentration, as it lets go of the surface chatter—the obvious thoughts of the mind—we touch into these subtler levels, these little thoughts that come up. That can be another reason the mind wanders. It's actually because there's been some letting go happening, and we're touching into deeper layers of thought that we're not so familiar with.

The mind can also get concentrated. As the mind gets concentrated, if the energy isn't quite strong enough, as I mentioned earlier, the mind can go into these dreamlike states and images will start to appear. Then the mind gets hooked to those images and we drift out of the present moment because the mind gets hooked to images coming out of that more concentrated space. Sometimes this means we need to help bring up the energy a little bit—that kind of concentration drifting into dreamlike states.

Often just opening the eyes helps to cut the wandering in that situation. But generally, that kind of experience isn't an indication that you need to try harder.

Sometimes when the mind starts to wander, particularly at this point in the retreat, some of you may find that you've been applying yourself and things have been going really well—the mindfulness is getting steady. And suddenly you sit down and the mind is just all over the place. "What am I doing wrong? It was going so well. I must have to try harder." Just force yourself—come back, stay with the breath, stay with the breath.

Sometimes when the mind starts wandering after a period of particular clarity in the practice, at least as I've explored this phenomenon, what I've noticed is that it can mean the mind is touching into some more subtle phenomenon that it's not used to experiencing. And because it's not used to this subtle phenomenon, it doesn't quite know how to connect to it, and the mind wanders off. So it's not so much about trying harder or trying to get back to what you were noticing. It's much more about a gentle recognition of what is actually happening here.

On one retreat, I was working with the breath, and the breath had been getting very smooth, very continuous. I was able to just be right with the breath for longer and longer periods of time. And then one morning I sat down and suddenly the mind was just all over the place. I'd take a breath and the mind would be off. I'd take a breath, okay, come back, pay attention—the mind would be off. And I just began to recognize, okay, something's happening here. What is actually happening?

That's the key—not to try to force yourself into the present moment to stay with something, but to try to connect with what's actually happening. And what I saw as I watched the experience unfold is that as I paid attention to the breath, almost immediately within the space of a breath or two, the breath got so subtle that I couldn't feel it anymore. And then the mind would wander.

When I recognized that this was the process happening, I could just hang out with that experience and recognize, okay, it's subtle here. What can I notice about that subtlety? Not to try to force the mind into it, but just to touch the experience in a light way. So sometimes when the mind starts wandering like that, after a period of settledness, it

can indicate that what the mind is naturally paying attention to is a little more subtle than you're used to. And it's simply a matter of time before the mindfulness catches up to that subtlety.

So an increase in the wandering mind doesn't always mean that you've lost concentration. It might just mean that you need a touch more interest, just lightly trying to stay connected, a little bit of interest in understanding how this process of wandering is happening. Just recognizing, as I did with that example, that as the breathing got subtle, that's when the mind wandered—recognizing that process helped me stay connected to the experience. The interest supported it, and the gentle touching of the experience.

As we get more comfortable with the wandering mind, less reactive to it, we can get interested in exploring it. But sometimes we can also get complacent. Sometimes we use our self-judgment as a tool—we beat ourselves up, and then we beat ourselves up enough so that we don't want to do that thing again. That's how we sometimes work with the wandering mind. And as we let go of that self-judgment and self-criticism, sometimes we can get complacent. "Oh, yeah, there's the mind wandering. No problem."

We do need to engage. We need to engage with the processes of the mind, with the things that are happening as they are. An interest in the process of wandering itself is very helpful with this—not getting complacent around interest in what the mind is doing moment to moment. There's no need to judge yourself for the fact that mindfulness disappears and mindfulness reappears, but take an interest in what you're noticing around that whole process, around the mind letting go of objects and mindfulness rearising. That really can help with not getting lost in the trap of complacency. Complacency is a big trap for meditators.

So I'll end with an enjoinder for interest in this area—taking an interest in this process, but not necessarily trying to do anything around it, other than just being interested in exploring the two sides: the side of wandering out of the present moment and the coming back into the present moment. Trying to do things around this exploration can just tie us into knots. Really just allowing curiosity—and that's actually what I hope this talk has done, piqued your interest around this process of the mind wandering such that you want to explore it, but not necessarily to do anything in that exploration. Just notice what you notice.

Notice what you notice. Notice things as they are. When the mindfulness comes into being, what do you notice in that moment? No need to judge.

When you notice the mind letting go of what it's paying attention to, no need to judge. Just what are you noticing? Always, always coming back to just that simple moment-to-moment exploration of what is actually happening. And from that, the practice unfolds.

So thank you for your attention. Let's sit for a couple of moments, just letting go of the words in favor of what the mind is actually experiencing in this moment. Perhaps body sensation, perhaps thoughts, moods—things as they are.

CHAPTER 33

Impermanence (Aniccā)

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella examines aniccā (impermanence), one of the three characteristics of existence (tilakkhaṇa) alongside dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) and anattā (not-self). She explains how vipassanā practice involves clearly seeing these characteristics, drawing on teachings from her teacher Sayadaw U Paṇḍita.*
>
> *Fella distinguishes between obvious impermanence—birth ending in death, meetings ending in partings, accumulation ending in dispersal—and the subtle moment-to-moment change revealed through settled meditation practice. She references the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's instruction to observe arising and vanishing factors, and the Buddha's teaching to Rāhula that developing perception of impermanence eliminates the conceit 'I am.' The talk includes a powerful passage from the Mahābhārata about how beings see death constantly yet never truly recognize their own mortality.*
>
> *Through personal stories from Burma and retreat practice, Fella illustrates how impermanence becomes viscerally understood rather than merely intellectual. She describes how watching pain without resistance reveals its dancing, changing nature, and how observing wanting shows clear arising and vanishing based on conditions. The talk emphasizes that recognizing impermanence naturally leads to compassion for all beings subject to the same truth, and supports the letting go of clinging when we truly understand that nothing permanent can serve as a basis for lasting happiness.*

Tonight I'd like to talk about impermanence, *anicca*, the Pali term.

Anicca is one of what are often called the three characteristics of our experience—that everything we experience in our bodies and our minds has these three characteristics. They have the characteristic of being impermanent, inconstant. They have the characteristic of being unsatisfactory as a lasting source of happiness, of being *dukkha*, often translated as suffering. And they have the characteristic of being not-self, empty of any solid nature, the *anatta* characteristic.

As we bring our mindfulness to our experience through our practice of mindfulness meditation, we begin to see these characteristics. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, gave a dharma talk about the term *vipassana*. He asked us first what *vipassana* meant, and I responded that it meant to see clearly. That's basically what the *passana*

part of *vipassana* means. He added that the *vi* part means "various things," and that essentially the various things we see clearly in our insight meditation practice are these three characteristics.

Tonight I'd like to explore with you this characteristic of *anicca*, of impermanence.

Impermanence, change—this is not really news to us. Everybody knows things change. We see it day by day. We see our bodies change. We see our friendships change. We see people die. We see people being born. We see buildings collapse. We see all kinds of things change that really are markers of change happening all around us.

In the Buddhist teachings there are four aspects to change: all birth ends in death, all meeting ends in parting, any accumulation ends in dispersal, and anything that rises falls. By that last one, the teachings say that anything elevated in space will fall, and anything elevated in power will fall. These four aspects of impermanence are the everyday way we see change happening.

And yet still, we don't really take it in. There's a way in which we know that things change, but we don't really *know* that things change.

In the Mahabharata, there is a character, Yudhishthira, who is asked, "What is the greatest wonder?" Here is his response:

"This I think is most wonderful: that the man of the world, even though he is seeing before his eyes constantly creatures dying and passing away, never for a moment does the idea enter him, 'I too have to fall. I am also a creature destined to be destroyed.' Even if it is told to him, it never enters his mind. Only the surface mind understands the language, but the actual sense never goes into his head—that every man must one day die, yet every man lives as if they were immortal. This is the greatest wonder."

I'd like to explore this quality of impermanence and look at how we can move from having the surface mind understand this truth to really having it penetrate.

There are different ways in which impermanence can be seen. There are the obvious ways I've mentioned so far: birth ending in death, accumulation ending in dispersal, meeting ending in parting, rising ending in falling. This is the obvious change in the world—things are born and they die, things break. This is the gross or obvious level of impermanence.

There is also a more subtle level of impermanence, a kind of change that happens moment to moment. This is more difficult to see and does seem to require the mind being settled in some stillness. I'll talk about both of these, as they're both valuable to really understand—both levels of impermanence.

So why is it important to take in the actual sense of impermanence? Much of our suffering actually results from not truly recognizing and understanding impermanence.

One Buddhist scholar says, "Dukkha is but a logical corollary arising from the law of universal impermanence." The fact of unsatisfactoriness, the fact of suffering, is a logical corollary arising from the law of universal impermanence. For the impermanent nature of everything can lead to but one inescapable conclusion: as everything is impermanent, they cannot be made the basis of permanent happiness. Whatever is transient is by that very fact unsatisfactory.

Our suffering often results from clinging to things that we think will make us happy. And as those things are impermanent, they end, so the happiness is not lasting. Now, in many ways, we know things are impermanent. We don't really try to cling to that new car, for example, thinking, "Okay, now I'm going to be happy for the rest of my life because I have that new car." But there's a way that we actually do feel like it will make us happy, that it is a kind of source of lasting happiness. It's because we have this view, this way of seeing the world, that somehow we can stack up things that we like and just create a life filled with one happy thing after another, and that will be lasting happiness. We do pin our hopes on happiness in the things of the world. There's really a way in which we delude ourselves that we can be happy by stringing together a series of happy moments. And when that doesn't work, somehow we feel like we failed, that there's something wrong with us. But there's nothing wrong with us. This is natural law. And really taking in and understanding this natural law, this fact of impermanence, supports our letting go of clinging. Because when we really understand that something is impermanent, there's not so much of a move to hold on to it. The mind just doesn't see the point in clinging to it.

A poem from Rilke speaks to this way that we try to find happiness over and over again by arranging our world: "And we spectators always everywhere turned toward the world of objects. It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down. We rearrange it and then break down ourselves. Who has twisted us around like this so that no matter what we do, we are in the posture of someone going away? Just as upon the farthest hill, which shows him his whole valley one last time, he turns, stops, lingers. So we live here, forever taking leave."

Taking in the obvious level of impermanence—one profound way to really start to take this in is to reflect on death. Birth ends in death. Reflecting not only on our own death, but the fact that our friends will die, our families will die. Someone stated—I don't remember who it was—that within one hundred years, or maybe one hundred twenty at the most, everyone on the planet currently will no longer be living. It's kind of amazing to me to reflect on that. One hundred twenty years and everybody alive now will be dead.

Reflecting on death, reflecting on the fact that we don't know when it will happen. It is a certainty for us. It is one of the few things we can count on. But we don't know when it will happen. And the other aspect of this, particularly within our culture, is that our culture seems to want to hide death away under the covers. It doesn't really want it to be out there, seen.

I was in Burma several years ago, and several of us were taking a walk down the river. We were at a retreat center, working at a retreat—some of us teaching, some of us managing, some of us translating. We were just taking a walk that day by the river, and we saw that there was kind of a hubbub. A bunch of people from the village had gathered, and we found out through the translator who was with us that three young novices, young monks, had been swimming that morning and that one of them had drowned. They were trying to find his body. We stood around and waited with some of the villagers and some of the monks and nuns that were there. We knew some of them. They found his body and brought it up. This young boy, maybe about ten or twelve years old, had gone swimming that morning and had not finished swimming. It can happen at any time, any time.

Being Burma, things were not quite so... death is much more a part of life in Burma. Death is a part of life, but in our culture, it doesn't seem to be accepted as part of life. They brought the body up and laid it out on a platform that had been set up, and people were all around the body.

He was still in his wet robes. And it struck me really hard that I was 47 years old and I had never seen anyone dead before. Forty-seven years of life without seeing death. That's the way our culture functions. So it's hard for us to come in contact with it.

This actual sense of mortality never entering our minds is referred to in the Dhammapada: "Many do not realize that we here must die. For those who realize this, quarrels end." As Don Juan says to Carlos Castaneda, an immense amount of pettiness is dropped if you turn towards the truth of death.

So this acknowledgement of our mortality, even just this one aspect of this obvious level of impermanence, can have a huge opening impact on our hearts. Really acknowledging that the person we're having this quarrel with in this moment—both of us may die at any moment. Quarrels end. This is a very powerful recollection for us.

Along with these obvious aspects of impermanence, death is one of the divine messengers, as it's called in the Buddhist texts. Aging, sickness, and death are seen as divine messengers, opening our hearts to the truth of impermanence.

There's a story in one of the suttas about a man who died and went to hell and was met by the king of death. The king of death was questioning him, and he says, "But my good man, didn't you ever see the first divine messenger appearing among humankind?" The man says, "No, I didn't see him." And the king of death says, "But didn't you ever see a man or a woman, 80, 90, or 100 years old, frail, bent like a roof bracket, crooked, leaning on a stick, shakily going along, ailing, youth and vigor gone, with broken teeth, with gray and scanty hair, bald, wrinkled and blotched limbs?" The man replies, "Well, yes, I did see such a thing." And the king of death says to him, "My good man, didn't it ever occur to you, an intelligent and mature person, 'I too am subject to old age and cannot escape it. Let me now do noble deeds by body, speech, and mind'?" The man replies, "I could not do it. I was negligent."

And the king goes on with the same inquiry about sickness and death. "Didn't you ever see anybody who was sick? Didn't you ever see anybody who was dying? How could you have missed these heavenly messengers?" "No, I could not see them."

We have our view obscured by our own agendas. We don't see these truths, these heavenly messengers. When we can see them, it opens our heart. It doesn't have to be a depressing thing to come into contact with these truths. We learn, as we connect with these truths, to really look at what's most important to us. We learn to live from our deepest values. These truths, these divine messengers, can reorient our priorities, point us to what our real priorities are, and can result in compassion as we see that not only we but all beings are subject to these truths.

This is what we've been doing in the compassion practice—recognizing that all beings are subject to this same suffering of aging, sickness, and death.

I had a clear understanding of the connection between seeing impermanence and how that leads to compassion. On a retreat about a year ago, I was at the Forest Refuge for about three months practicing. About five weeks into my retreat, I woke up one morning and heard all these cracking and popping sounds. It was incredibly loud. I wondered if somebody was outside chopping down trees. When I looked out the win-

dow, everything was coated with massive amounts of ice. There had been a huge ice storm—maybe you heard about it; it was in the national news apparently. Power was out in New England for a long time.

When I looked out the window and saw the tree outside, it had been this beautiful little spinney of trees, and it was just bent. I could see that it was breaking. I took a walk and could see so many trees that had been devastated by this ice storm.

I could hear them. I understood then that what I'd heard, those loud pops and breaking sounds, were trees cracking and falling under the weight of the ice. My heart went out to all the beings living in the forest—where had they gone? How much fear and challenge it must have been for them to live through this night. My heart felt such compassion through this connection with impermanence.

This opening to impermanence can be a beautiful experience, and that quality of compassion has such a lovely texture to it.

Another excerpt from Rilke, celebrating in a way this opening to recognizing impermanence:

Everything here apparently needs us. This fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all. Once for each thing. Just once, no more. And we too, just once. And never again. But to have been this once completely, even if only once, to have been at one with the earth seems beyond undoing.

At a less obvious level than aging, sickness, and death, meeting and parting, accumulation and dispersal, is what we might call subtle impermanence—an impermanence that begins to point itself out to us as we settle our minds in meditation. The moment-to-moment changing of experience.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus made this philosophy of change his standpoint, his hallmark. He really pointed to this as being the truth of the world. Everything changes. There is no static being, says Heraclitus, no unchanging substratum. Change, movement is lord of the universe. Everything is in a state of becoming, of continual flux. He continues: "You cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you."

One commentator on this philosophy goes one step further, saying: the same man cannot step twice into the same river. For the so-called man, who is only a conflux of mind and body, never remains the same for two consecutive moments. The same man cannot step into the same river.

Through meditation we start to open to this moment-to-moment changing nature of our experience. We begin to touch into this aspect of experience by noticing how much our minds change. We see that our moods and emotions come and go. During a day—today, for instance—how many different mind states did you experience? How many mind states did you experience moment to moment? Our minds change constantly.

As we turn our attention to our experience, we see its changing nature. Paying attention to something as simple as the breath, for example—it obviously appears and disappears with each breath. It rises, it falls. It rises, it falls. That part is really obvious. But even in seeing this clearly in meditation, somehow the fact of impermanence doesn't really hit us. It doesn't really penetrate.

When we stay more clearly with the rising and falling of the breath, we see even more clearly that no two moments of the breath are the same. We stay connected from the beginning, through the middle, to the end of the in-breath, and we see many sensations in that time. Ever-changing flocks of experience. No experience we have lasts very long.

The more we meet our experience without resistance and without holding on to it—without clinging or aversion—the more this characteristic of impermanence becomes clear to us. The resistance and the clinging to experience actually obscure or mask this quality of impermanence.

Sometimes in paying attention to our experience, we can be surprised by how things change. This surprise is, in a way, a hallmark of the sense of impermanence really entering.

When we're paying attention to something and then suddenly it's gone, it's like, "Whoa, where did that go?" That's the beginning of impermanence really entering the mind.

Another example: if we're not resisting painful experience in the body, as we pay attention to what we call pain—what we think of as a solid mass or block of pain—when we're not resisting it, it becomes this dancing, sparking, moving, flowing experience. You find one place in that experience where you can feel the pain, and then boom, it disappears, then it appears a few centimeters away. Just this continual changing experience. Not one solid thing the way we had felt it to be, but a continually flowing, changing experience.

On one retreat I was really exploring this and was quite surprised at one point to see there were moments in my exploration of the pain when the pain disappeared completely—for just a split second, just a moment. Then it was back, changing, moving, and

then boom, it was gone again. And I could see that if any resistance to the pain crept in, then those moments of non-pain were not perceivable. That, for me, was a kind of support for letting go of the resistance. Because in the moments of non-pain, there was just a moment when the mind would deeply rest. No pain. And then pain was back. So in a way, that non-resistance supported the mind to be able to stay present and see, again, this ever-changing flux. See appearance, see disappearance.

Body sensations are impermanent. Mental experience is impermanent. All of our thoughts, moods, feelings, images—everything that happens in our mind is impermanent. And in fact, it is more fleeting than the body. The Buddha even pointed to this. He said, "It would be better if an uninstructed ordinary person regarded this body made of the four great elements as himself or herself, rather than the mind. For what reason? This body is seen to continue for a year, for two years, for five years, ten years, twenty years, fifty years, a hundred years, and even more. But that which is called mind, is called thought, is called consciousness, arises as one thing and ceases as another continually by day and night."

So mind is impermanent. And I'll talk more about that in a moment.

This belief in permanence, the fact of impermanence not entering into our minds and our hearts, is partly because we have this fundamental misperception, this erroneous way that we see our world. We see what is impermanent as permanent. Partly this is because of the clinging, as I mentioned before—when we cling to something, it masks the impermanent quality to it. Another reason for this belief in permanence is because things are changing so rapidly that the mind can't really touch or see that change unless the mind gets really still. So in a way, the rapidity of change obscures the fact of change.

One great way to think about this is just to consider how a movie works. I know many of you have heard this example. Now it's all bits on a digital file or something, but in the old film version, there were these still frames, and they were moved very rapidly past a light and shined onto the screen. The rapidity of the movement, the rapidity of the change from one frame to another, made it appear as though there was actually change happening, as though there was actually something happening on the screen—that there are people up there doing things, whereas it's actually just individual frames going by one after the other. But we don't see that because it's happening so quickly.

Another really amazing demonstration I had of this—of the way our minds have the capacity to create permanence, create objects out of things that aren't actually objects—was at the Exploratorium, the science museum here in San Francisco. One year I took my nephew there. He was about ten years old. We walked in, and you know, there's all

the exhibits—this big warehouse of different displays. Way in the distance in the warehouse, there were these bars hanging from the ceiling, long bars about four feet long, not more than an inch or two in diameter, with flashing lights on them. There were maybe ten of them strung up across the back of the room. I looked at that and thought, "Huh, I wonder what that is"—just kind of seeing these flashing lights.

We walked around through the various exhibits, and at some point we sat down to have a refreshment, a drink. My nephew was sitting there and he said, "It's a school bus!" I looked at what he was looking at—he was looking up at the flashing bars. And I saw, when I looked up there, flashing yellow lights and a little bit of flashing red. I said to him, "I don't see a school bus."

What are you talking about?

And then he said, "It's butterflies."

I said, "What on earth are you talking about? I can't see this."

And so I took the time to sit there and really hang out with this exhibit, just observing it. And what it seemed to take was just the right movement, just the right motion of the eye from one bar to the next. The eye carried the image of one strand of flashing lights into space across to the next bar and created this illusion of a forty-by-ten foot screen—or about forty feet by four feet—hanging in space. And across that screen was driving a school bus. It was so clear. The image was so clear I could read the name of the school district on the side of the school bus.

This blew my mind—how the mind can construct this out of flashing lights. I think this is an optical phenomenon; our minds do this. Somebody called it persistence of vision or something like that. Our minds do this, and because of this we impute permanence to our experience. This was a great example. You could really clearly see there was nothing there, and yet the mind created it.

So we have this belief in permanence because we don't see the rapidity of change. In our exploration of experience, it can be interesting to explore what we think of as solid. What do we perceive as solid, as lasting? Look at that. Bring your attention to it and notice what happens as you observe it.

Right now, bring your attention to the experience of the pressure of your buttocks on your chair or cushion or bench. Just hang out with that feeling, that sensation. Come in close to the actual sensation of pressure. Can you feel throbbing? Pulsing? Vibration, tingling? These sensations are some of the markers or heralds of change. Body sensations are impermanent. We can see this by bringing attention to our body.

In our minds, we have habits and patterns that we somehow think of as being me or mine—patterns that we strongly identify with, that somehow feel like they're there all the time. It feels as though there's some reservoir of that thing hanging out somewhere, just waiting to erupt.

I had this pattern for myself. One of my many patterns before I started my practice was that I really identified pretty strongly with being miserable. I was a miserable person. There would be moments when I wasn't miserable, but when that happened, my mind usually said something like, "Well, I'm happy now, but really, I know that I'm miserable." The mind, because of its belief in that miserableness—or fill in the blank for yourself—imputes a kind of permanence to it. I believed there was this reservoir of miserableness lurking all the time.

When my mind began to settle and I actually observed in meditation what was happening, I could begin to see patterns arising out of causes and conditions, falling apart when causes and conditions changed. I could clearly see that when that pattern was gone, it was gone. It comes together out of causes and conditions and falls apart. And in between, it's not there.

So in looking at patterns and habits, recognize whether you have a sense of imputing permanence to them. In watching them, notice when they're there. Clearly notice when they're there, when you're clinging to them. But also pay attention to when they're not there—especially with some of these strong patterns and habits that we have. Recognize their presence; recognize their absence. It's a very powerful support for understanding the impermanent nature of our mental patterns.

The other exploration around this is to observe what you think of as yourself. When you have a sense of yourself being there, what is it that you are calling yourself? I found for myself, as I did this exploration, that there were just various patterns of often body contraction and thoughts and moods that were very familiar. Those were the ones I identified with. There was the angry me, the contented me, the self-righteous me, the worried me. Where is the angry me when the contented me is present?

So observing these patterns, observing these things we call self, you'll start to see they're not permanent. One instruction to Rahula, the Buddha's son—he gave an instruction to his son: "Rahula, develop meditation on the perception of impermanence. For when you develop meditation on the perception of impermanence, the conceit 'I am' will be eliminated."

So there's a connection here between really taking in the fact of impermanence and seeing through what we think of as self. I'll enjoin you: develop meditation on the perception of impermanence.

Impermanence might be understood as actual things appearing and disappearing. Sometimes that's the way it feels. And sometimes the surprise we have when something disappears is because we have imputed a thingness, imputed a permanence to something. Then when it disappears, it's shocking to us. But the deeper understanding about impermanence is that there's not really a thing there. It's a state of universal flux—even as something arises, it's dissolving and falling apart.

There's an analogy I found so beautiful as I was looking through some of the texts on this. It's like drawing a line on water—even as you draw it, it's disappearing. That's the way our experience actually is. Even as it comes into being, it's vanishing.

Over and over again, the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, suggests that we recognize how things come into being and how they dissolve. There's an aspect of the Satipatthana Sutta called the refrain, which is mentioned after every instruction for meditation—around the body, around feelings, around mental states, around mind objects. I'll read the one for feeling: "Abide contemplating in feelings their arising factors or their vanishing factors or both their arising and vanishing factors."

What this is pointing to, what the word "factors" is pointing to, are the conditions that support the coming into being of feeling. Over and over again, the Satipatthana Sutta enjoins us to look at the factors that cause something to come into being, the factors that cause it to disappear. This is a strong reminder for us to pay attention to how things come into being, how they fall apart.

So there's a strong connection between change and conditionality. Things don't change randomly. They come into being because of causes and conditions. When those conditions change, they pass away.

We can also observe this in our meditation. On one of my early three-month retreats—one of the first I did, I think—I was noticing that I experienced a lot of aversion to the other people on the retreat, especially during walking meditation. This was the winter retreat at IMS, and typically we were walking in rooms where people were kind of up close next to each other, and I just felt a lot of aversion.

So I spent some time walking outside, and I began noticing that I wanted to look at people when they walked by. I began noticing this strong wanting. I'd moved away from the aversion but had moved into this wanting. For a while, I kind of just put the blinders on. I said, I'm not going to look, I'm going to be a good yogi. And I basically ignored the wanting.

At some point I realized that the wanting wasn't going away. And finally—I was a little slow—it's like, oh, maybe I should pay attention to the wanting. So I started paying attention to the wanting, not acting on the wanting. I kept my gaze down so that I didn't follow through on looking at the person when they walked by. But I really observed the quality of wanting.

What I noticed was that I would be just walking, doing my walking meditation, and if somebody appeared in my peripheral vision, wanting appeared. Boom. There was a very clear connection for me. The arising factor for the wanting was the appearance of this person in my visual field.

Then I watched the wanting. I felt the wanting. I felt how it was like being pulled—just this feeling of being pulled to look at this person. And I just kept watching the wanting. The person would walk around a little while, and then they might go into the building and disappear. And then the wanting disappeared. The vanishing of the person led to the vanishing of the wanting.

I thought this was so cool. It was really interesting to watch this process happen.

Wow, look at that—poof, wanting arises, poof, it vanishes. So I got into it for a while, just watching this process happen. And then at some point I recognized that I was actually holding on to the wanting in order to see it disappear. When I realized that, it disappeared instantly. The person was still there in my vision, but the wanting vanished because the clinging vanished.

This kind of exploration is available all day long on this retreat. You really have an opportunity to observe how your mind puts things together, how things fall apart, how things come into being and fall apart over and over again. Everything that we experience is impermanent. Everything that we experience is conditioned. Our thoughts, our feelings, our body sensations—it all comes into being and it falls apart. And not only that, the causes and conditions that create something coming into being are themselves impermanent. The causes and conditions for our experience are impermanent.

There's one sutta that points at this, and it has very deep implications. The Buddha says consciousness comes into being in dependence on a dyad. In dependence on the eye and forms—that's the dyad—dependence on the eye and things in the world, eye consciousness comes to be. So because of the eye, because of forms in the world, there is the seeing.

And then he goes on: "The eye is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. Forms are impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. Thus the dyad of eye and forms is moving and tottering, is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. Eye consciousness is impermanent, changing, becoming otherwise. How can it not be when it's based on what is tottering already?"

I won't read the whole section here because I don't have time, but you get the idea. He goes on further—eye contact, feeling that results from the seeing, the perception that results from the seeing—all of it is in dependence on something that is already impermanent, tottering, falling apart as it comes together.

It's not necessary for you to believe this. Look at your experience. Just look at your experience. See if you can find anything that lasts. If you find something that lasts, look more closely at it. Keep looking. In that, you might see that breaking up. If you find something that seems solid and lasting underneath that, look more closely. Keep looking at your experience. You will not find anything that is lasting.

When we meet this recognition of impermanence, we can see this. The truth of impermanence really results in recognizing: wow, I have no idea what's going to happen next. It's a deep knowing of not knowing, a deep recognition of the fragility, the instability of everything.

And this can be unpleasant. We can react to this. We might react out of fear, sadness, grief, a feeling of disgust or betrayal. How can this be? That too is an arising experience to pay attention to—notice the reaction to the recognition of impermanence. My understanding of what's happening there is that it's a view of self. It's seeing the impermanence through the view of self—that there is someone to be afraid, to feel betrayed, to feel sad, to feel grief. So looking at that helps to support our understanding and recognition of the characteristic of not-self.

As the Buddha said to Rahula, cultivate the meditation on impermanence, the perception of impermanence. This will eliminate the conceit "I am."

I'll end by reading a couple of paragraphs from an essay called *A Walk in the Woods* by Prakanti Palo: "Everything and everybody, that includes you and me, deteriorates, ages, decays, breaks up, and passes away. And we, living in the forest of desires, are entirely composed of the impermanent."

Yet our desire impels us not to see this, though impermanence stares us in the face from every single thing around. And it confronts us when we look within—mind and body arising and passing away. So don't turn on the TV, go to the movies, read a book, seize some food, or pursue a hundred other distractions just to avoid seeing this. This is the one thing really worth seeing, because the one who fully sees it in himself is free.

This is what we're doing here.

CHAPTER 34

The Obvious

Andrea Fella · 58 min

In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Andrea Fella offers profound guidance on working with the layered nature of our mental formations (saṅkhārā). Drawing on the Buddha's analogy of the plantain tree from the teachings on the five aggregates (khandhas), she illuminates how our habits, patterns, and beliefs create an apparent solidity that forms our sense of self—yet like the plantain trunk, when examined closely, we find only layers with nothing solid at the center.

Fella challenges the common assumption that we need to dive deep to find the "core" of our patterns. Instead, she emphasizes simply meeting what is most obvious about our experience—gathering data without agenda, like early astronomers patiently observing the night sky. Through personal examples, including working with depression and discovering unexpected mettā underneath, she demonstrates how acceptance and non-resistance allow layers to naturally fall away. The Buddha's teaching to Bāhiya provides the essential instruction: "In the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard."

Practical techniques include checking one's attitude toward experience, recognizing the four flavors of relationship (greed, aversion, delusion, or balance), and understanding that transformation often happens gradually—like the Buddha's analogy of rope rotting on a beach. This patient, accepting approach to whatever arises reveals the constructed nature of self and opens the path to freedom from suffering.

We've been exploring our minds now for several weeks, and I'm sure many of you have recognized that a lot of what we get to see on retreat is the momentum of our minds—the habits, the patterns. Even patterns or habits that we thought were really old, long gone, sometimes seem to resurface as the mind gets quiet. As the strictures that we put on our mind in daily life fall away, these old patterns and habits can resurface.

As we get more familiar with our experience, we often have a sense that these habits, patterns, and experiences are layered. We have a sense that what we're experiencing—say, for example, a pattern of anger—has a pattern of fear underneath it, and that pattern of fear is perhaps born out of a resistance to a sense of vulnerability. We kind of know that these layers are there.

I'd like to explore this idea of layers as an analogy and as a way of thinking about our practice.

Last night Sally talked about the five aggregates. One of those in particular, the mental formations, is connected to an analogy that the Buddha uses, which I'd like to explore. The mental formations—this aspect of the aggregates—is really the area where our habits and patterns lie. This is where our emotions, our beliefs, our habits of planning, of judging, all of that lives: in that aggregate, that bundle, that group of the *saṅkhāras*, the mental formations.

In creating an analogy for this, the Buddha described this particular aggregate of mental formations as being like a plantain tree or a banana tree. In my exploration of the suttas, I have really found the Buddha to be a brilliant mind with respect to analogies. The analogies are so apt and can teach us so much if we explore what they're trying to say. In my thinking about this analogy of the plantain tree, I really see how it speaks to layering.

A banana tree, a plantain tree, basically looks like a pretty solid thing. The trunk might be as much as ten inches in diameter. It can be pretty big, and it looks solid. But if you start to explore this trunk, what you find actually is that it's composed of layers. All of the leaves have a stem that comes down and joins into this trunk. If you start pulling away, peeling away the leaves or the stem pieces—which are the bottom parts of what were leaves—you see that this trunk, this apparently solid thing, is just composed of these layers. You can keep peeling off layer after layer, and there's nothing solid in the middle of this plantain trunk.

Thinking about how this applies to our mental formations as an analogy: our habits, our patterns, our beliefs are layered like this. Like the plantain tree, they can create a sense of solidity through the very fact of the layering. The sense of solidity that we experience is the way this layering aspect of the mental formations forms our sense of self. With so much accumulating, our minds have this sense of, "Yeah, this is really solid. This is a real solid thing."

Having a sense of these layers—the way that we understand our minds, for example, anger being laid on top of fear, being laid on top of resistance to vulnerability—we often feel that what we're supposed to do is really dive in and understand the core, get to the core of the thing. Find out about that resistance to vulnerability, or even what's underneath that, perhaps something deeper. We have this sense of diving in or wanting to go down. It's like we think, "This outer thing—that's not the important part. It's the inner thing that I need to really get to so that this whole thing can fall apart, so that I won't be bothered by this anymore."

In my own practice, I've found that this diving underneath is not really very helpful. What's most helpful actually is to just be with what is most obvious about whatever this outer layer is—to meet this outermost layer, the ways it manifests in our bodies, the way it creates emotions, moods, thoughts, beliefs. Just get to know it. Get familiar with it.

One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, talks about gathering data about our experience. It's most helpful to simply think of the process of investigation, of looking at our experience, as gathering information—not particularly with any agenda, but just gathering data. Perhaps with some agenda of understanding, but not with an agenda to change, to fix, to control, to get rid of. This gathering data in order to understand what we are observing.

One analogy that Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses I find particularly interesting because it points me to the vastness of our task in a way.

And he points to the first human beings who started observing the night sky to understand its patterns, looking up at the stars. Just imagine, before there was any knowledge about any of the stars, how patient they had to be, and how many times they had to observe the stars, and over what length of time they had to observe them before they started seeing patterns. There's the obvious pattern of the heavens that seem to be pretty stable. And then you might start noticing, oh, there's a few that are moving. How long they had to actually sit there and watch before coming to an understanding about what might be happening up there.

This is the kind of patience and sense of contact with experience that we need in our practice—just gathering the data about what is happening in our experience. The more continuous that data gathering can be, the more clear the understanding is. The continuous contact with our experience begins to reveal its nature.

All of you have been seeing the impermanence of experience, recognizing that things change—not just intellectually, but actually seeing the changing nature of experience. This comes through the contact, the continuity, meeting our experience moment to moment. We also can start to see, with this continuity of mindfulness, cause and effect. We can start to see how one thing causes another, causes another, causes another.

Seeing that cause and effect relationship begins to show us how these layers are put together. We start to see—not just intellectually with the idea that "well, yeah, I think that underneath this anger lies fear"—we start to actually see the fear, and then the anger being created on top of it. We start to see the actual process by which these layers

get created. This supports the recognition of the cause and effect relationship. And seeing the cause and effect relationship supports the understanding that there's not a self here doing this, that it's just a process of cause and effect unfolding in our experience.

As we explore our experience, it's really helpful not to make assumptions about what might lie underneath, what layers might be beneath this outer layer that we're looking at. Even if we have some idea about what might be underneath, it's really most helpful just to meet that outer layer, just touching the most obvious experiences without any agenda or any idea about what we might find beneath it. And if we are noticing that there are assumptions present, we can at least recognize that we have those assumptions and hold them lightly.

On one retreat several years ago, I was watching a pattern of mild depression that was arising kind of regularly. This was a retreat in Burma with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and he encourages that there not necessarily need to be absolute silence on the retreat. So there are periods of time during the day where people are talking, having dharma discussions with each other. There's particularly one time of day in the early evening, after it's cooled off, that seems to be the promenade time. Groups of people, twos and threes, get together and walk up and down.

Sometimes I might not have somebody to walk with. And I began noticing that this depression seemed to be triggered by seeing some of these pairs of people. I could see that there was a trigger—I could feel that connection between the depression and seeing the groups of people walking up and down. My immediate assumption was that it was getting back to the sense of high school: "Oh, I was always an outsider, I was always an outcast, this must be related to that." But this was an assumption. I didn't actually see that. So I knew that it was an assumption, and I was very skeptical of it. I was holding it very lightly.

As I continued exploring this pattern of mild depression, particularly while I was doing walking meditation, it went on for several weeks. So I really got a chance to observe it, spend a lot of time watching this pattern come and go, finding ways to observe how I was caught by it and when I could just be with it without feeling caught by it.

Then one afternoon I was simply paying attention to the feelings manifesting in the body around this depression. I felt these feelings, and I was just able to be with them without any resistance whatsoever. I felt this pressure in my chest just start to expand, and there was no resistance to that expansion. I just watched it expand, expand, expand, and at some point in that expansion, the feeling flipped and became an expansive feeling of mettā.

This surprised me. This was not what I expected to find underneath that depression. But the next split second, the next moment of my experience, I heard my mind saying, "This is stupid, this is corny, this is sappy." This beautiful feeling of expansive mettā—there was reactivity to it in my mind. What this seemed to be pointing to was that some degree of this depression had to do with a kind of repression around the feeling of connectedness that mettā brings.

Not holding my original assumptions tightly helped me to just be with the experience as it unfolded. If we have expectations, or if we're looking for something particular underneath in the layers, we might miss what's actually there.

Another lesson for me around this particular experience—and I've seen this in other situations as well—is this surprising sense of a beautiful quality underneath what felt like a painful pattern. The beautiful quality of mettā, and a skewed response to it, were part of this pattern of depression. That's another piece I have really come to respect as I work through various layers of habits and patterns in my experience.

To not simply assume that everything about this pattern needs to be gotten rid of. There may be some beautiful quality underneath.

A quality that's helpful with respect to working with these layers in our experience is acceptance—non-resistance, simply being able to be with whatever's happening. We've been saying this over and over again; I think most every talk has touched on this topic. Be with your experience as it is. Don't hold on to it. Don't push it away. Accept your experience as it is. This same quality supports us as we work through our layers of experience, just meeting what is obvious about our experience.

Working through these layers of experience, these patterns, these habits that feel like an accretion of stuff—sometimes it can take a long time. After all, we've been practicing these habits and patterns and beliefs for many years. We've had a lot of practice with them. Many, many years have put these patterns together. And so to expect that a few weeks of retreat will completely unwind years, decades of practice of anger, aversion, hatred, and greed is expecting a little much. So patience is helpful.

I've found in my experience of my own practice that this slow process of working through habits and patterns has been the norm. There's a sense of gradually, slowly wearing down these habits and patterns. This is mostly how my own experience has unfolded.

There's another analogy that I love in the suttas about this gradual process. The Buddha says that if you think about a ship that has gotten shipwrecked and the parts of the ship are all strewn across a beach somewhere—the wood and the rope for the rig-

ging and all the parts of the ship just lying on the beach—over time, the wind, the sun, the sand, the water all wear down these parts. In particular, he focuses on the rope, the rigging for the ship, and says that over time, this rope will simply rot.

I love this rotting rope analogy. Thinking through it, if you consider how long it takes for this rotting to happen, and how imperceptible it is day to day, the change—this gives you some idea about what's happening in our practice, this slow process of wearing down our habits and patterns.

Sometimes it's a slow process, perhaps seeing subtle, slow changes, and then we may not actually see the last little bit of that pattern fall apart. Again, like with the rotting rope on the beach: it's lying there for years, perhaps, and looking at it, it looks like a rope. But one day you go to pick it up and find it just falls apart in your hand because all the fibers have worn out. They're no longer holding each other together.

Sometimes our patterns can fall apart like this too. I had one very strong pattern of anger toward one particular person that went on for several years. I worked with it a lot in my practice. I looked at it directly. I explored it in many different ways. And at some point I realized that when looking at that anger directly, the mindfulness wasn't quite strong enough to meet the strength of the anger. Trying to bring attention to that pattern, the mindfulness just got overwhelmed and I was swept away into the anger.

So at some point I realized it wasn't so skillful to turn my attention to try to be mindful of that anger. What I would do when I saw the anger arise was simply recognize it, acknowledge it, meet it for just a moment, and then turn my attention to something else, staying mindful in my experience by putting my attention on something neutral. In most cases for this particular pattern, it was arising when I was walking. So I just put my attention in my feet, over and over again.

Whenever I noticed this pattern of anger arising, I would acknowledge it, meet it, and without any aversion, without any resistance to the anger, it was like meeting it and saying, "Yes, I see you. This is not the time to pay attention to you because I can see that I'll get swept away." I actually made a bargain with my anger. I said, "I'll pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger."

And so I just redirected my attention, put my attention in my feet. Over the course of several months of engaging in this practice, I started noticing that the bouts of anger got further and further apart. They weren't coming up so frequently.

And then one day—and I don't know how long this process took—one day I was walking up my sidewalk to my house, and I recollected that it had been a very long time since I had felt that particular anger. In recognizing that, the person I was angry with

came to mind, and I couldn't find the anger. I was surprised. Where did it go? I kind of checked around. I couldn't find it. I didn't believe that it was completely gone, but it has never returned. This was years ago now, years.

And it's actually been replaced with a feeling of metta, wishing for the happiness of this person I was so angry at. So it is completely gone. And it disappeared without my ever noticing it disappear. I just noticed one day that I hadn't seen it for a long time.

Sometimes our layers fall away like that. There isn't always a sudden exploding insight where we see everything completely clearly with a sense of complete understanding of how everything was formed. Sometimes it just falls away. And in my experience, that's a lot of how our practice works. There are times when we have these sudden awakenings where we see deeply into a pattern or habit and it falls away, but in my experience, those are much more rare.

So we don't know how long it will take to work through a particular layer in our experience. But basically the instructions are always the same: if we can meet that outermost layer with acceptance, just be with it. Notice what's obvious about it. No need to dig, no need to jump over it, no need to try to go underneath it.

For example, with that pattern I used at the very beginning, talking about the anger and having a sense that there might be fear under the anger—sometimes, having a sense of that fear, we feel like, "Okay, well, this anger is here, but really what's happening is the fear underneath, so I should be with that fear." But the anger is still present, layered on top of the fear. So being with what's most obvious about our experience: if anger is the most obvious thing, be with the anger. Be with how it feels in the body. Notice the thoughts it produces. Over time, you might start seeing fear thoughts and feeling the fear more obviously. Then we can move into that layer and start exploring those aspects of the whole pattern of layered experience.

Just noticing what's obvious about our experience—this gentle holding, this gentle touching of experience. I think in my first talk on effort and energy, I talked about that rubbing quality of investigation. Just being with the surface, staying in contact with the surface of what's obvious in our experience. Not trying to chip or dig or pull apart or figure out what's underneath. Just meeting the experience that's obvious.

The other aspect of this instruction around meeting experience is that if there is resistance to the experience, if there is non-acceptance, then that's what we have to pay attention to. It's almost as if the non-acceptance to anger—"This anger is not acceptable" or "I need to get rid of this anger," this sense of resisting the anger—is actually a layer on the outside of the anger that's holding it together. Sometimes these non-accepting at-

titudes can be hidden from us. We think there's just the anger in our experience and we're paying attention to it, but we don't particularly notice, as Winnie talked about, the agendas underneath. It can be helpful to open our minds to exploring, checking into whether there's some agenda happening. And again, we've all talked about this: checking the attitude, checking the relationship to the experience.

I haven't heard anybody in the hall talk about the technique that Sayadaw U Tejaniya recommends for this. It's possible somebody mentioned it on a night I wasn't here, so if you've heard this before, just take it in again. This is basically a way to uncover some of these hidden agendas, these hidden attitudes that might not be so obvious to us as we're hanging out with our experience.

The technique Sayadaw U Tejaniya recommends is to ask ourselves the question: What's my attitude about this experience? Another phrasing might be: What's my relationship to this experience? In asking this question, it's like dropping the question into the stream of our experience. The instruction is not to do anything with it. You just drop the question in and then continue your practice. Sometimes just dropping that question and inclining the mind to notice—is there something else happening here?—is enough. That's another way to explore the attitude: a sense of dropping back and opening up.

Is there something else happening? Is there something else going on that I wasn't noticing?

So in putting this question in, we simply notice whether it becomes obvious to us once we ask. If there's nothing obvious, there's no need—and it's not helpful—to try to figure out the answer to that question. If you drop the question in and there's some obvious response, an obvious sense of, "Oh yeah, I want this anger to go away," then you can include that sense of wanting it to go away, that sense of resistance, in your practice. Including that is simply recognizing: okay, resistance is what's happening. What is resistance like?

In this checking of attitude, there are roughly four flavors you might find. They come in all different varieties, but they fall into roughly four categories. It will either be wanting to get rid of something, wanting to hold onto something—so aversion and greed—a sense of delusion around it, of not wanting to experience it or not connecting with it, or a sense of a view or filter underneath it. Carol, I believe, talked some about delusion. And the fourth flavor is balance of mind.

Sometimes when I've given this instruction to people, they say, "Well, I don't see an attitude." And I ask them, "Did it seem like your mind was balanced?" "Yes." "Well, that's the attitude." Balance of mind can be an attitude. So you may see obvious greed or aversion, maybe not so obvious delusion, or you might see balance of mind—or it might not be clear to you. If it's not clear, don't worry about it. Just keep going with your practice.

This checking of attitude is usually helpful to do just occasionally. It's not something to do every thirty seconds. Perhaps every few minutes you might check into your attitude, particularly if you're feeling caught around experience. If there's some kind of struggle around being present for your experience, that's a good time to check your attitude. Another good time is when it feels like things are going really well. Just check in and see if there's some agenda around that experience.

Sometimes our attitudes can be really subtle, such that we don't even see them, that we might not recognize them. That's one reason not to try to hold on to finding an attitude. Sometimes we can't see them. Sometimes they're a little more subtle than our mindfulness is capable of seeing.

I had an example of this around that same period of depression I was referring to a few minutes ago. On my retreat several years ago, before I noticed the shift to mettā, I was just watching the cycling of the depression, the resistance to the depression, and the absence of depression. I was seeing those three things happening. Sometimes they would cycle pretty quickly. I would notice, "Oh, there's depression. Oh, there's resistance. Oh, it's gone." And then, "Oh, there's back in it." It was like watching this pattern unfold.

Watching this for quite some time, I felt like I was just right with it. It didn't feel like there was any particular attitude or agenda about watching it. But at some point, I recognized—I saw—that the resistance to the depression was simply a natural phenomenon arising like anything else. It was no different or more special than any other phenomenon arising in my mind stream.

And at that point, in seeing that the resistance to depression was just something coming and going, I saw that I had had an attitude: the resistance to depression had been a problem. The resistance was a problem, and I needed to do something about it. But I hadn't seen that until it fell away.

So sometimes we can't see our attitudes until there's a shift and we see the absence of that attitude. Sometimes when a layer drops away—a layer of a strong habit or pattern we've known for a long time—we feel like all traces of it have disappeared.

I had this happen with one particularly strong pattern around self-hatred. I had a very strong pattern around that. On one retreat, I had a deep insight into the nature of the thoughts around the self-hatred—simply that the thoughts were just thoughts. They were just empty phenomena. In seeing the empty nature of those thoughts, the pattern just crumbled. This was one of those sudden awakening-type insights.

I didn't trust it for a while, but it was years before I felt anything like that self-hatred again. There was a sense, for a little while—I mean, I didn't trust that it was completely gone. I kept telling myself there must be some vestiges of this; it was such a strong pattern. But it was several years before I noticed little filaments of thoughts arising in the mind. "You're no good"—that thought that had been so devastating to me. At this point, the thought was simply arising, and there wasn't a belief attached to the thought, which is what really got truncated in that insight about the self-hatred, seeing the emptiness of the thought. It was the belief in the thoughts that was cut. And yet the pattern of thought still kept arising, those thoughts.

This points to another way that layers work in our experience. My teacher Sayadaw U Pandita describes different layers of defilement in our minds—defilement being all of these habits and patterns of mind that create suffering. He talks about the most gross layer of defilement being the layer that comes out into bodily action, where the pattern of that defilement is so strong that it comes into our behavior. We act on that pattern. The next layer down is the layer where the defilement comes into our thoughts but doesn't come into our bodily action. And the next lower layer is what's called the layer of underlying tendency toward that pattern.

So that underlying tendency can be there even if the pattern is not arising in our mind stream. There's a way in which if we get close to that place in our minds, we can drop into that pattern, that habit again, because that underlying tendency is there. It's really helpful, even in seeing a pattern fall away suddenly like that, to keep attuned to movements that are similar to it.

In my experience now with this pattern of self-hatred, it's pretty much only when I'm on deep retreat that I see these little fibers arising and sense, "Oh yes, there's actually still a very subtle kind of belief around that pattern." So not getting complacent when it feels like a pattern falls away. Noticing with care when we see those tiny little fibers. In my mind, I looked at it as like a bunch of this plant got uprooted, but there were still some roots left in the ground. Those were the underlying tendencies, still ready to sprout. And if we're not careful, they can sprout again.

As a layer falls away, we can experience a huge amount of relief, a sense of freedom when we find that we're no longer being whipped around by a pattern or habit that was so strong for us. It can be this real sense of freedom. Usually this is not enlightenment. It's simply the relief of letting go, of no longer being at the mercy of a particular pattern. But over time, and with more mindfulness, we sometimes can start seeing these deeper patterns underneath. We start seeing subtler kinds of suffering underneath, the next layer, which perhaps have been masked by the more obvious layer of suffering—the old pattern.

For myself, the old pattern of self-hatred falls away, and it feels for a time like, "Wow, there's no problems anymore." Everything that comes up feels like no problem. Everything feels very easy, partly because we're so used to responding to things through that old layer, and we're feeling such freedom from not having it. And yet there's still subtler clinging underneath. We're not fully enlightened.

After some time of getting familiar with this new state of no longer reacting through that old pattern, we start to see, "Oh, there's new suffering here. There's new patterns that I hadn't noticed." And this is not a mistake. Sometimes people say, "I feel like I've gone backwards. For so long I wasn't experiencing much suffering, and now suddenly I'm experiencing all this suffering again."

There are many, many layers of subtlety to our clinging. The obvious levels of clinging are at the strong mental formations, the strong sankhāras of greed and aversion, which manifest in what we might call the afflictive emotions: anger, frustration, hostility, cruelty, wanting—some of these very strong patterns that we have. Those are the obvious layers of clinging. Over time, through the practice, some of those can get much weaker. Some of them even fall away. And then we start noticing subtler levels of clinging. We can start noticing clinging to wholesome mind states, a wanting to construct wholesome mind states.

Whereas before, that wanting to construct the wholesome mind state wasn't experienced as suffering—in fact, it supported us to be with the more obvious layer of suffering around our afflictive emotions—as the afflictive emotions fall away, we start experiencing the suffering of holding on to these wholesome mind states. Many, many layers of holding. Many layers of clinging.

And an even deeper layer of clinging: clinging to being the one who feels, the one who perceives, the one who knows. When the mind gets very quiet and very still, then we can start to see these more subtle levels of clinging.

And again, I'll say it again: no matter where we are in our practice, whatever is happening—whether it's clinging to knowing, clinging to consciousness, fear of the sense of self being lost, or whether it's obvious anger and frustration—the instructions are the same. We meet what's obvious about our experience, and we check our relationship to that experience, to see if there's any subtle attitude in the mind holding it in place. Just keep being with, being with, being with whatever is coming up in experience.

So seeing through this solid sense of self—if we keep looking, if we keep looking at our experience, like with this analogy of the plantain tree, we find nothing in the middle, nothing in the center that's solid, that can be called I or me. There's simply a process of things being experienced and being known, experienced and known, experienced and known.

One teaching by the Buddha around this, seeing through this solid sense of self, is a very famous sutta that many of you, I'm sure, have heard of. It is a teaching that the Buddha gave to a monk called Bahiya, who came to him after a long journey saying, "Please teach me your Dharma in brief." And after a few more requests—he had to request three times—the Buddha finally gave him this instruction:

"This is how you should train yourself. In the seen is only the seen. In the heard is only the heard. In the sensed is only the sensed. In the cognized is only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself."

That is the instruction. Meet experience. Just be with what is happening. Without filters, without views. Look at the attitude to uncover those filters and views. Just be with the seen, the heard, the sensed, the cognized. The bare being with experience.

So that was the instruction: be with your experience in this simple way. And then he went on to tell Bahiya: "When for you in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized, then there is no you in terms of that. When there's no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

So he points to this instruction of just noticing our experience. Notice the seen, the heard, the sensed, the cognized. That will reveal that there's no you there. You don't have to believe in this teaching of not-self. The Buddha pointed to simply being with our experience. When this is the case, there will be no you there. And there's no you there, no self, no problem. This leads us to freedom.

Very simple, very simple practice. It doesn't matter—we say over and over again—it doesn't matter what we're mindful of. It can be boredom. It can be bliss. It can be equanimity. It can be anger, frustration, irritation. It can be disinterest. It doesn't matter what we bring our mindfulness to. What matters is that we contact our experience with the mindfulness.

Whatever you are experiencing in this moment—that is the path to freedom.

So let's sit for a couple of minutes.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 35

Not Knowing

Andrea Fella · 52 min

> *In this talk from a month-long retreat, Andrea Fella begins with a guided meditation that expands awareness progressively through the body and beyond, cultivating a spacious, relaxed quality of knowing. This experiential foundation sets the stage for an exploration of "not knowing" as both a profound truth of moment-to-moment experience and a doorway to liberation.*
>
> *Fella examines how we habitually bring baggage from the past—our views, opinions, and beliefs about who we are and what we can do—into the present moment, creating self-fulfilling prophecies that constrain our experience. She discusses the perceptual process described in the teachings on the five khandhas, illustrating through the famous sutta story of the blind men and the elephant how perception can be mistaken for reality. A personal story about misperceiving bat sounds as pigs being slaughtered vividly demonstrates how prone to error our conceptual mind can be.*
>
> *The talk addresses the paradox that seeking insight can obstruct insight itself, since we cannot truly know what we're looking for. Drawing on teachings from her teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Fella suggests that relaxing our effort to find something specific allows genuine understanding to arise naturally. She acknowledges that opening to not knowing can evoke fear and vulnerability, but through careful investigation, we discover that in each present moment, everything needed is actually known—it is only our projection into an imagined future that creates suffering. This recognition transforms the apparent abyss of uncertainty into the solid ground of immediate experience.*

Tonight I'd like to begin by doing a guided meditation—essentially an exercise in expanding awareness as a pointer to a kind of awareness that can be very broad and very relaxed.

You don't need to alter your posture. Just find a place or a way to sit where you'll be comfortable for about fifteen minutes or so, perhaps as long as twenty. While we go through this exercise, it's really helpful to relax and keep coming back to that relaxation as we go. For now, go ahead and let your eyes close.

I'd like you to just allow your awareness to take in the sensations in your head—whatever physical sensations you're feeling there. Pulsing, tingling, vibration. Dryness, coolness. Just experiencing the sensations in your head.

Now I'd like to invite you to expand that awareness to include the sensations in your neck, almost as if your awareness were a bubble that you were allowing to relax and expand from just encompassing the sensations in your head to now include the sensations of your head and the sensations of your neck. Relax and widen the awareness.

Allow the bubble of awareness to expand now to include your shoulders, so you're taking in the sensations of your head, your neck, and your shoulders. See if you can relax your mind. It's easier to not try to do this so much, but more relax into it.

Allowing the bubble of awareness to expand to include your torso—all aspects of the physical sensations in your torso, from top to bottom, front to back, and side to side. The interior dimension, the three-dimensionality of the experience, including your head, your neck, your shoulders, and your torso. Pulsing, vibration, pressure, movement. Relax.

Allowing the awareness to expand outwards to include your arms. Staying connected with the sensations of your head, your neck, your shoulders, your torso, and your arms. You might envision this awareness as an expanding cognizant fluid bubble.

Now allow your awareness to stay connected with the physical experience of the upper part of your body, and also notice any emotional or mental experience or responses to the process that we're going through. Allowing this expanding bubble of awareness to take in not only the texture of the physical experience, but the texture of your emotional, your mental experience. Relax. This isn't something to do. Just see what you can open to.

Allowing your awareness to expand to include the physical sensations of your hips, your buttocks. Staying connected to the experience of your head, your neck, shoulders, torso and arms, your hips, your buttocks, as well as any mind states that may be coming. Relax and allow the awareness to expand to include your thighs and your hamstrings.

Staying connected to the physical experience, noticing the impact this has on the mind, allowing the awareness to expand to take in the whole body—including your knees, your lower legs, your feet, along with your head, neck, shoulders, torso, arms, hips, buttocks. The internal physical dimension of the body and the texture of the mental experience.

Now I'd like to invite you to allow this bubble of awareness to expand beyond your body, beyond the confines of your body. Allow yourself to let go of the idea of the edges of your body. Let yourself feel into the texture of awareness—the feeling of knowing.

Staying connected with the bodily sensations and the mental experience, allow yourself to open to include the experience of hearing. There's not much work that you need to do to hear, to include hearing in this practice. You've already been hearing without much effort during the course of the guided meditation. From time to time, you might notice the experience of hearing producing a kind of ripple through this field of awareness. And you might notice also sometimes a change in the mental experience producing a ripple through this field, this feeling of knowing. Relax.

Staying connected to your physical bodily experience, the experience of the mind, emotions, thoughts, moods, and hearing—I'd like to suggest expanding this field of awareness still further by opening your eyes. Notice the impact that opening your eyes has on the experience. Relax.

Allow yourself to take in the physical experience of the body—the vibration, pulsing, tingling, heat, coolness, pressure, hardness, softness. Recognize and acknowledge any emotional experience, any moods, mind states, or thoughts. Stay connected to all of that, taking in the vibration, the pitch and tone of hearing.

the form and color of seeing.

Relax. The body actually does all of this by itself. You might notice awareness moving rather rapidly between experiences, picking up on something here, then something there. Or you might notice a sense of awareness just suffusing in a very light way the whole of the experience. The experience can be very ordinary—very present but very ordinary.

Staying connected to your bodily experience, your mental experience, especially your mental experience right now, allow yourself to start looking around, noticing the movement as well as what you're seeing. Actually look at things. Notice how the mind responds as your eyes land on certain things. Notice how the body responds. As much as possible, stay connected to all of this experience.

You can break your posture if you like and start to move a little more, noticing again how the mind and body respond to that movement. I'd like to encourage you during this talk to see if you can stay connected with some sense of this awareness while I explore the topic of not knowing.

The more we practice, the more we come into our experience, the more we really deeply see and recognize that we just do not know what is going to happen to us. We feel this, we recognize this, on both the obvious, more gross level of our lives—really recognizing and understanding that we don't know from moment to moment what's go-

ing to happen to us. In the conventional sense, in all likelihood, five minutes from now we'll all still be sitting here. But we don't actually know that. There's a way that we really can connect with that truth the more deeply we enter into this practice.

On a more subtle level also, this is true. We really begin to see, as we touch into our moment-to-moment experience, the deep truth that we have no idea what the next arising experience will be. So entering into the present moment, really coming into our experience here and now, we can enter into it as an exploration of not knowing.

When we come into the present moment—particularly at the beginning of a retreat, but often during the retreat as well, over and over again—we often bring baggage with us that obscures this not-knowing quality of being in the present moment. We bring our views and opinions and ideas about who we are into the present moment, about what we can and can't do. Then we take those views and opinions from our past, from our history, from our conditioning, and we create a future in which we can and can't do things.

In a way, that historical conditioning, that baggage we bring into the present moment, conditions our experience to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We find we can and can't do these things that we think we can and can't do, because these views and opinions are operating. So in a sense, with this conditioning and these beliefs, we think we know who we are. We think we know. We don't give ourselves much room to not know, to not be bound by those views.

I know that most people have had this experience of coming into contact with a friend or someone you've known for a while. That person, having known you for a while, has views and opinions about who you are and what you can and can't do. We bristle sometimes when we meet that kind of energy from a friend. It's like, "You don't really know me." And yet that same thing we do to ourselves. We do that to ourselves quite often. And we do it to our friends also. So this holding to views of who we are obscures the possibility of opening to this not knowing.

Not only do we bring in baggage from the past and project it into the future, we also have views, thoughts, and beliefs about what's happening to us in the present moment. One way this comes into play is through the assigning of meaning when we meet an experience. Something happens and it's about me. What does it mean about me? How does it relate to me?

Then there's the perceptual process that happens in the present moment. There's a very natural process that occurs: when something happens—the sound of a bell, the sound of a bird, the touch of a footstep, the arising of an emotion, a feeling of pressure

or tension or tightness, the seeing of color and form—as soon as that happens, the mind recognizes it. It labels it. It's a very natural process of the mind. And yet we so often make the mistake of confusing that perception with reality.

Perception is something that simply arises in our minds. It may or may not be correct. It may or may not be accurately perceived. And from that movement of perception, which is just a natural functioning of the five skandhas, the five khandhas that Sally talked about, we very quickly move from perception to thinking about, to creating whole stories about. We move into that world of papañca where we create a whole world in our minds and often believe it.

So we're several layers removed from what's actually happening in the present moment, from what's actually being contacted with our present moment experience. We mistake the concept for reality, thinking that we know something. Concepts are useful—I'm not saying concepts are not useful. We need to use concepts. But it's also very helpful to be clear on the difference between the actuality of experience and the perceptions arising around it.

In a sense, I think partly we really count on these concepts because they stabilize our world for us. Things are actually changing pretty quickly. Through the use of concepts, we come into a place where we feel like things are kind of grounded here. We know what's happening. We have this sense that we know what's happening. And again, entering into the present moment, coming into contact with actual experience, we start to see that we don't know. The mystery, the mystery of experience.

There's a famous story in the suttas about mistaking perception for reality—the story of the blind men and the elephant. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the story, so I'll just review it briefly. A king asked his attendant to bring all the blind people together in the kingdom and to show them an elephant. To one person he showed the legs, to another the tail, another the ears, the tusks—all the various parts of the elephant.

After they'd been shown the elephant, the king asked them, "So tell me, what's an elephant like?" And the people who'd felt the legs said, "Well, an elephant is like a post." Those who'd been shown the tail said, "It's like a broom." Those who'd been shown the ear said, "It's like a winnowing basket." Those who'd been shown the side said, "It's like a storeroom." And having felt these things in their own direct experience, they started fighting among each other. "No, an elephant is like this!" "You're wrong, an elephant is like this!"

Part of the teaching aspect of this story is about the danger of creating views out of your own direct experience. We may not have the whole picture. So even though we have a sense of something true from our direct experience, creating a view and saying "this is the way it is" can be misleading—misleading at best, perhaps, and dangerous at worst.

So it's helpful to understand this process of perception, how it works, what the mind does around perception, so that we're not fooled into mistaking it for reality. And understanding also how prone to error concept can be. I have one story from my own experience around this mistaking of perception, how prone to error it can be.

I was on retreat in Burma, at a monastery relatively close to some houses in the nearby village. Every evening around dusk, or at least frequently in the evening around dusk, I would hear this squealing sound. And in my experience, the squealing sounded like a pig. This is the process of perception—the mind matches up what we understand from the past to our experience and does a search. I'm a computer programmer, so I think of things like this. It does a search through our experiences: "Okay, that's this." It matches it up. So that's what my mind did with this squealing sound. It matched it up with the idea, "That's a pig."

And not only that, this squealing sound had a sense of distress to it. So I envisioned that this was a pig being slaughtered for dinner or for the butcher. Compassion was the result of this experience. Each evening when I heard this, perception arose that it was a pig being slaughtered, and compassion came up.

Then one evening I was out walking around at about dusk, and I saw bats flying through the air, and they were squealing. I realized that was what I had been hearing. It had not been pigs being slaughtered. This perception process is very prone to error.

So coming into the present moment, recognizing this perceptual process as a process, can we just meet our experience without this clinging to what we think we know? Opening to the possibility of this not knowing. Opening to the possibility that these views we hold of ourselves don't have to constrain us, that we don't have to be boxed in by these views, that we don't have to box other people in by our ideas about them. Opening to the possibility that we're not what we think we are. Freedom from views. Freedom from the known, as Krishnamurti says. Freedom from the known.

In our moment-to-moment experience, opening to the possibility that we have no idea what we're looking at and what we're looking for. The very nature of insight is that we don't really know what might happen around an insight. The very looking for something can obscure the insight. We actually have no idea what we're looking for. We have some ideas about it. We think we know.

I remember on one retreat I'd heard a lot about this phenomenon called arising and passing, a phenomenon where you start to see clearly, moment to moment, things coming into being and disappearing, just in a continual stream, a flow of experience. I'd heard this described in quite a few dharma talks. I'd probably also read about it in books. And I really wanted that experience. I really wanted it.

One day I was doing walking meditation, and I realized that this wanting was expressing itself through a fantasy of describing to my teacher how I had had the insight of arising and passing. Waking up into the midst of that thought, I had to laugh, because at that moment I really saw that I had no idea what I wanted. I had no clue what this experience was. It was an idea in my mind. It was a thought that I wanted. I really wanted to be able to tell somebody I'd had this experience.

So it can be easier in some ways if we stop looking for insight and just meet our experience with this open mind of not knowing.

My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya tells a story about how this works. He was visiting Massachusetts a year or so ago, and one of his students' father had taken them out for a drive in the countryside. They were talking about all the deer wandering around, and there was some concern about the deer getting in front of the car. The father said to U Tejaniya, "Well, I've got a deer alarm." U Tejaniya didn't understand what that was, and the father explained, "It's a very high-pitched sound that disturbs the deer, so they won't come near the car. Can you hear it?" U Tejaniya said he listened and listened and tried to hear the sound, and he couldn't hear it. So he stopped trying to hear the sound, and then he heard it.

It's that kind of relaxation. When we look for something, we don't know what we're looking for. The very looking can obscure what we're trying to see. So relaxing, settling back, and just meeting experience.

In this place of just meeting experience, coming into our present moment really fully like this, where we get a deep sense of not knowing, it can be unsettling. We can have a response of even fear, a sense of insecurity, a sense of vulnerability, because it is so clear to us that we don't know what is going to happen. We just don't know.

So what is this fear? It's worth looking into this fear. The fear might result from the mind creating an idea about something that might happen because we don't know what will happen. It might create a disaster scenario.

which would then create fear as a result of meeting that disaster scenario. So that fear isn't really about the not knowing—it's about fearing a thought in the mind. If you can see this process, that can help allow the mind to settle again back into the present moment.

And yet, settling into the present moment, there may not be any sense of a disaster scenario out there, but just this sense of vulnerability. Or a sense of: how do I move forward if I don't know what's going to happen next? This sense of almost being paralyzed because we don't know.

In my exploration of this, I think this is about a reaction to the idea of not knowing, and what we think that means—that we don't know, that we don't have control, for example.

On one retreat, I found my way into the space of just really recognizing that I had no idea what the next split second of arising experience would bring. And it took me into a place of quite strong fear. At one point I decided: I'm going to meet this. I'm going to meet this not knowing. I'm going to really be with this not knowing.

And what I discovered in this process of really trying to meet the experience was that there isn't anything that's not known. In the moment, everything is known. Now, it is true that we don't know what the next moment will bring. But the processes of mind and body just pick up the next experience kind of automatically. When we're not creating a future and referencing it back to me, a sense of self, this truth of not knowing ceases to be a problem.

It's kind of like we're standing on the edge of an abyss, surrounded 360 degrees by this abyss, and we have no choice but to take a step—feeling like we're going to step into the abyss, not knowing. And we step into the abyss. And we find ourselves standing at the edge of the abyss, surrounded by the abyss.

CHAPTER 36

Part 5 of 5: Discussion (PM) — Daylong in the Style of U Tejaniya

Andrea Fella · 29 min

In this closing discussion session of the daylong retreat in the style of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Andrea Fella responds to practitioners' questions about the nuances of awareness-based meditation. The conversation explores how to work skillfully with physical discomfort and aversion, emphasizing that noticing an agenda—wanting pain to disappear—actually prevents the natural release that comes from non-reactive awareness.

A central theme emerges around recognizing mindfulness itself: what does it actually feel like to be aware? Fella describes how moments of spontaneous, unprompted mindfulness—those split seconds when we naturally wake up to present experience—are the key to understanding effortless awareness. Rather than immediately doing something with what we notice, we can learn to recognize and rest in the quality of awareness itself, allowing it to develop its own momentum.

The discussion also addresses the intimate connection between mind and body, particularly how mental tension can manifest as physical pain throughout the system. Fella shares her personal discovery that what seemed like whole-body physical inflammation around a frozen shoulder was actually mental holding that released instantly when recognized. She points toward the Buddha's description of liberation as the absence of mental pain and grief—a state where physical sensations continue but reactivity ceases, offering profound freedom regardless of bodily conditions.

During the course of the sitting, I found seven ticks on me. So if anybody has been in the brush or in the grass, they should check themselves carefully. There are a lot of ticks here.

Question: You've been talking about attitude, and I was trying to think of what that might be. This last stretch I had a lot of low-grade headache and discomfort in my seat and so on, and I was trying to notice whether or not my attitude was aversion. I'm wondering if that's the kind of attitude—in other words, an attitude towards a sensation.

Answer: Yes, that's what I'm talking about. If you're paying attention to headaches or physical sensations, there's often some way in which you are observing it that has a slight skew to it. With physical discomfort, it's often aversion. When you recognize that,

it becomes part of the field of what you are aware of, so that it's not operating in the background but has the opportunity for mindfulness to be aware of that experience of aversion.

Follow-up: As I recall, it's said that if you stay with an unpleasant feeling, it goes away. But I don't know if that's really the case always.

Answer: The physical sensations in the body are coming and going. If you stay with the physical sensation without aversion, you'll start noticing that impermanent quality, and it can get to a state where the physical sensation disappears. But if you've got the physical sensation and an aversion to it, it's very unlikely that trying to hold yourself on that physical sensation is going to make it disappear, because there's an agenda there.

That's another way to look at the term "attitude." Is there an agenda? Does your mind have an agenda? Is there something that you're trying to do or change or fix or control? Are you paying attention to that unpleasant sensation because you've heard that if you pay attention to it really carefully, it will go away? That's having an agenda.

Question: Can you say something about moving around versus staying in one place with the awareness? In particular, with respect to physical tension and relaxation. This is something I struggle with hugely—I get tense and then I don't want to be part of it. I'm really encouraged by your teaching about the importance of relaxation, and if you see tension, just see it and try to relax. But for me, my jaw, my neck, parts of my back, my abdomen—relaxing them is a big project. Just looking and relaxing doesn't quite work. I could stay there and it holds my attention fairly well to actually sit and really work gently with relaxing over time. I'm wondering whether that's skillful within this set of instructions or not.

Answer: It is, initially. I spent a lot of time working with relaxation at first and just recognizing, "Wow, there's all this tension." So relax, relax, relax. I remember whole sittings where that's all I did—just notice the tension and relax, notice and relax, notice and relax. After one particular sitting like that, I thought, "Thank goodness I can do this in my meditation," because my mind had gotten so tense around meditating that it really needed this dedicated movement towards relaxation.

Over time, what I've discovered more recently is that I was in this habit of starting my meditations by relaxing. Then I discovered I started falling asleep. I talked to Sayadaw Tejaniya about that and said I was really sleepy in a lot of sittings. He said, "Well, are you still trying to relax?" I said yes. He said, "Well, stop that."

So over time, what begins to happen is that instead of needing to consciously relax, what you just need to do is turn to become aware of the tension and just notice it. That noticing itself will allow it to relax. But if a tense mind is trying to look at tension, it's probably just going to get balled up. So I would encourage you to work with that relaxation for a while.

Perhaps for a whole sitting, and then try the next sitting where you do a little bit more exploration of just being with what's coming up. But it's very helpful to get the mind to a place where it has that relaxed quality so that it can start to just notice what's happening—just very naturally notice what's happening.

Thank you. What happened with the walking? We haven't talked about the walking.

The thing I noticed is that having no instruction—not doing a slow, conscious walk or focusing on breathing or anything—I didn't quite know what to do except enjoy everything.

Were you aware of what was happening?

Some of the time, I would say. Not knowing what to do felt a little confusing at first.

One of the things I pointed to in one of the guided meditations—I think it was the one right after lunch—is beginning to recognize what it feels like to be aware. The recognition of mindfulness itself, so that you know what it feels like to be mindful. That begins to really serve you in this practice. It serves you in your walking and it serves you in your daily life, because you get a sense of what it means to be present, of what it feels like to be present. And that itself begins to wake you up, because this quality of becoming aware of what's happening while it's happening actually occurs a lot throughout our day.

It happens for a split second. For a split second we know it's happening while it's happening, and then immediately our habitual tendency is to leap on that thing and start thinking about it, start doing something with it in our minds. So we aren't trained—our minds are not trained—to notice this recognition of noticing mindfulness. We're trained to do something with what we notice. And so we completely miss mindfulness itself.

As we start to get familiar with the feeling of mindfulness, that's the direction—particularly in the walking. Well, it's in everything, but in the walking especially, just getting familiar with what it feels like to not be trying to do a meditation. And that's where it feels a little awkward. It's like, well, what am I supposed to do?

I remember when I first started meditating, early in my practice, teachers would say, "Connect with the sense of presence." I had no idea what they were talking about. I didn't know what it meant to be present. I didn't really know what it meant to be aware of awareness. That exploration has been very interesting for me as I've investigated what it actually means to be aware. What does it feel like?

At this point it has a very tangible feeling for me. I know what it feels like to be aware. There's a very clear sense of what mindfulness is. Because of that, as I'm going through my day, those moments—those split seconds when mindfulness just kind of naturally comes in—our mind is doing lots of things and it occasionally touches in and knows what's happening in itself while it's happening. When you recognize that quality of mindfulness in those split seconds, they wake you up. Instead of just automatically jumping on them and doing something with them, you're suddenly present: "Oh, here I am, cutting an apple. Oh, here I am, walking across the street."

Learning and becoming familiar with that is something you can work with in the walking: What does it feel like to just be aware?

In the guided meditation I also pointed to a particular place where you can explore this—the moment when you recognize that you have remembered mindfulness, the moment you have woken up into something or other. Normally in our sitting practice we have something to anchor ourselves on, like the breath, and we recognize that we're not paying attention because we're not paying attention to something in particular. In this practice we're not really anchoring on anything, so the movement is simply to learn to recognize those moments when we spontaneously come back into awareness.

Those are beautiful moments, actually. I've learned to think of them as almost the linchpin or the key to waking up—those moments of spontaneous coming back into awareness—because they're completely effortless. It's awareness that you haven't created. It's nothing that you have done. Simply causes and conditions have come together to make that awareness reappear in that moment. And if you can be there for that moment, if you can recognize it, you'll get a sense of what it means to be effortlessly mindful. Because that moment of spontaneously waking up into mindfulness is an effortless mindfulness.

Getting familiar with that feeling, it begins to point itself out. When we are familiar with it, it points itself out to us. Then we can learn to ride the wave of that effortless mindfulness. The moment when mindfulness reappears—just seeing how long it lasts. Getting familiar with that wave, the momentum of mindfulness, we then learn how to skillfully prompt mindfulness.

I would call that spontaneous re-arising of mindfulness "unprompted mindfulness." And that's how it all begins in the first place—there are these moments of unprompted mindfulness, of spontaneous re-arising of mindfulness. When we have that spontaneous re-arising, we have the opportunity to then remind ourselves to be mindful, to keep being mindful. And that I would call "prompted mindfulness."

This is where I would encourage you to go with walking meditation: see if you can begin to recognize the quality of awareness itself and become familiar with it.

A question arose about whether awareness includes states like grasping, or whether it only refers to those times when we are doing none of those things and there is just pure attention. Awareness can be aware of anything, including grasping. The purity of awareness itself does not contain that grasping, but it is a long process of getting there. As I have said, when you become aware of grasping, there can be a simple recognition: "Oh, there's grasping happening." It is like watching some strange creature form before your eyes. "Oh, there's grasping. What's the big deal? That's just grasping." It is not a problem. So awareness can be aware of anything.

Another question came about tension and relaxation, specifically physical tension. The practitioner described how they had developed a practice of starting with relaxation, and when the mind wanders and they return, the first thing they do is open and let something relax, whatever needs to. But their question had to do with there seeming to be more than one level of tension. There is the tension that comes and goes—perhaps the jaw—tension that simply releases when one becomes aware of it in a particular way. Then there is tension like what they were experiencing in the shoulders, which had been there for more than a week and does not just release. And then there is tension from parts of the body that constricted years ago and stay constricted. That latter group seems, as far as they can tell, unaffected by simple attention. There may be some very subtle effect, but it seems to be on quite a different level.

I think this observation is correct. Particularly those patterns that have been held in the body for years and years—it is almost like there is a formation in the body around them. A musculature has formed in that pattern. So it is a completely different level than something like clenching your jaw. Over time, I think there can be a releasing of the tension around those deeper holdings, but it is a very slow process. And there may be ways you hold your body that keep it locked in place. It is probably a combination of both body and mind that would help to release that kind of tension.

But mostly what we are working with here—there is the physical tension, and there is relaxing the physical body as much as possible. The main work with meditation, though, is to make sure the mind is as relaxed as possible. That is really where the be-

nefit comes in: you can be relaxed in your mind around physical pain in your body. It is not necessary, in fact, for the physical pain to go away for the mind to be completely at ease.

There is one definition I came across recently. I was just teaching a class and read a description of what the Buddha said about this quality of liberation, enlightenment, or nibbāna.

One description is the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. That sounds nice, but then it went on to say that this person experiences no mental pain or grief. That sounds pretty good—that no matter what's going on, no mental pain or grief. This is essentially a definition of what the Buddha calls nibbana: immediate, visible in this life. No mental pain and grief.

Now, this doesn't mean there won't be physical pain. The physical body will experience pain. There will be both pain and pleasure in the physical body. But with the work of meditation, we learn to let go of that reactivity—the mental reactivity to pain—and that's where the release comes from. There can be some releasing on the physical level, but most of the work is mental: learning not to be reactive to those states.

There's something else I've noticed around physical pain, something I find very interesting. This has been in the last year or so that I've really come to see this. There are times when there's some kind of injury to the system, or perhaps an area in the body that's particularly painful. For me, it was a frozen shoulder. It was quite painful.

As I was paying attention to the pain, it seemed initially that there was the pain in the shoulder—especially if I tried to move it in particular ways—but there also seemed to be this whole-body quality, almost like the entire system was inflamed. It felt like the whole body was in a kind of uncomfortable, painful situation. It felt physical to me.

As I explored the experience and simply noticed what was going on around it, at some point I noticed a release in the mind around some kind of holding. And that whole-body inflammation or irritation vanished—just like that. It was a shock to me to see that this was actually mental. It manifested physically, but its cause was mental, that kind of whole-body agitation. Anyone who has chronic pain may be experiencing some of that mental tension, which makes the pain reverberate through a larger part of the system.

I was quite surprised when I saw this. It was a lesson in just how the mind's tension could produce what seemed to be physical pain.

Question from participant about the continuity of awareness during meditation

The continuity is what we're going for. Yes, that is what we're doing—noticing sound, noticing tension, noticing smell, noticing movement. But what you're describing sounds like it stayed at a certain level, what I might call ordinary experience. It sounds like the mind was recognizing and identifying things at a particular level. That's fine—you can go for forty-five minutes like that.

But at some point it's worth checking in: was there perhaps some kind of attitude about how the meditation was supposed to go? Some agenda or belief around how paying attention should happen? Unnoticed, that might keep the meditation at a particular level.

Participant responds about experiencing shifts between ordinary awareness and periods of deep stillness

So it sounds like—I mean, that's kind of the description I was talking about, or related to it. It sounds like the mind getting more malleable and fluid. But what I found with this particular practice is that the mind can go between that really ordinary level of recognizing experience and then suddenly just drop into a very quiet space.

What it takes is the ability to recognize quietness, to really stay with the mind as it moves into a deeper space. It's quite possible that as you move into that space, if you don't notice that you've really suddenly become quiet, you could start drifting and become kind of sleepy or dull. Or if you can just notice, "Oh, the mind has shifted to a different level, it's paying attention internally"—not to make a lot of words out of it, but just to stay with the experience—that is where the mindfulness can go into a deeper level. It's not that you're trying to make it happen. It just happens. And it's that learning to stay with it.

The mindfulness gets more familiar with staying with these changing states of consciousness, essentially. It goes from the ordinary level down to a very quiet level, down to a very subtle bodily level, to a very open, broad awareness where you're just taking in everything in a flow, and then back to ordinary—oh, there's a person talking, there's a chair squeaking. And it just moves through all these different levels. It's not that we're trying to find any particular level in which to meditate. We are just trying to be present for how the mind is working. And what happens as we begin to make that mindfulness more continuous is that we do start to see more of this moving between different levels of awareness.

Question: When you said about the tension in the mind, that there's a release in the mind—my understanding is that there is no separation, that mind and body are integrated, so to speak.

They're very intimately connected. There is a difference between mind and body. So you can see, for instance—I didn't go into this aspect of the practice today; I didn't have enough time—but in the experience of something like hearing, there's the physicality of the sound wave hitting the eardrum. That's a physical thing, just this vibratory energy. And we can experience that turning into sound—pitch and tone, simply pitch and tone. And then there's the process in the mind by which it recognizes "chair squeaking." And that's mental.

There is a physical part of the experience where there's that contact. But it's very interconnected—it is completely interconnected. But there is a distinction. And it's actually helpful to begin to explore what is body and what is mind, to begin to recognize the distinction. When I teach longer versions of these retreats, I do get into that exploration a little bit.

So we need to stop. It's five o'clock. Thank you all for coming. It's been lovely to spend this day with you.

CHAPTER 37

Part 4 of 5: Working with Emotions

Andrea Fella · 28 min

In this fourth talk from a daylong retreat in the style of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Andrea Fella offers practical guidance on working with difficult emotional states in meditation. Drawing from her own experience of six and a half weeks studying with U Tejaniya in Burma, she shares his refreshing perspective: when she reported seeing many defilements, he responded simply, "That's right attitude." This approach fundamentally shifts our relationship to difficult mind states—from trying to eliminate them to understanding how they arise, what sustains them, and what allows them to release.

Fella introduces the metaphor of the mirror of mindfulness: just as a mirror reflects equally a beautiful landscape or a dead body without being changed by either, our knowing awareness can reflect any experience, including reactivity, without itself becoming reactive. She offers practical tools for investigation—noticing how emotions manifest in the body, recognizing accompanying thoughts without engaging them, and especially checking one's attitude, since resistance often forms an unnoticed outer layer around difficult states. For particularly sticky emotions, she suggests widening awareness to include other present-moment experiences, creating a larger container for the difficulty.

The talk includes guidance on using reflective phrases characteristic of U Tejaniya's method: "This is nature," "This is impermanent," and the Buddha's reflection "This is not me, this is not mine, this is not who I am." Fella also addresses what to do when emotions become overwhelming—when the tsunami of anger swamps our small wave of mindfulness. In such cases, she recommends skillfully redirecting attention to something neutral like feet on the ground or hearing, while remaining mindful, allowing the emotion to do its thing in the background without engagement.

I'd like to talk for a few minutes about working with emotional states, or sometimes difficult states of mind, in our meditation practice.

The point of working with these states isn't to get rid of them. I think I said this earlier—it is to understand these states: how they come to be, what holds them in place, what allows them to release. That's a kind of shift that's helpful to contemplate as we engage in working with difficult emotions or difficult states of mind. An attitude or inclination of curiosity about these states, not an attitude of wanting to get rid of them but an attitude of interest, is supportive. So bringing an interest to these difficult states of mind.

When I was on retreat with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma—the first time I was there I spent six and a half weeks with him—maybe a week or so into the retreat, I went into his room for my interview and said, "I'm seeing a lot of defilements." He said, "That's right attitude." For me, that was such a refreshing approach to these states of mind.

At least in my experience, and I think as meditation teachers often we—well, we talk about working with these states of mind, these difficult states, the reactivity—but underlying it there seems to be a subtle way that we are saying the effort is to get rid of these, or that we are trying to settle the mind past these states so that you can get down to the real practice. With Sayadaw U Tejaniya, I got the strong sense that no, he was actually really, really interested in my understanding of my difficult states of mind.

This was reflected in our interviews with other people as well. All of the interviews with U Tejaniya are group interviews, about ten people at a time. Hearing people talk about what's going on for them, how they're observing their reactivity, how they're working with their reactivity—it just frees up this whole idea that these are something to get rid of and turns it instead into an interest, a curiosity about how this comes to be.

With just that shift, there's a big movement towards non-reactivity about these states of reactivity themselves. That may sound like a bit of an oxymoron, but it is possible to be non-reactive while observing reactivity. Essentially what we're doing is looking at the mirror. The mirror of mindfulness, the reflecting power of mindfulness, can reflect anything, including reactivity.

It's almost like we can think about every experience as having two sides: there's the knowing side, and there's the thing that we are knowing. That thing we are knowing might be reactivity—it might be anger or aversion, or it might be greed and excitement—but the knowing side of that can simply reflect it.

The more we learn to understand and appreciate this knowing quality of our mind, this reflective quality, the more we gain the benefits of that reflective quality. It inherently has some beautiful qualities. It's inherently non-reactive. Like a mirror, it simply reflects. If you have a mirror, it doesn't care what's in front of it. The reflecting power of the mirror is unchanged by what's in front of it. It equally reflects a beautiful landscape and a dead body. The reflecting power of the mirror is unchanged by what it reflects.

Likewise with our mind, the capacity of our minds to know what's happening—it doesn't care. That aspect of our mind that simply knows what's happening simply reflects what's happening. As we more and more touch into that aspect of our mind, we see that there's a kind of natural balance or equanimity that goes along with that reflective power of the mind.

So as these two things come together—the difficult state of mind and the knowing of it—if we can recognize that we are knowing the difficult state of mind, it gives a little bit of distance. We can reflect that difficult state with a balanced mind, just be with it. That's like taking off the lenses and looking at them instead of looking through them.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya often says, "Nothing I tell you is something to do." When I talk about things, it's actually just information, just supposed to settle and percolate through your mind. You don't have to try to do any of the things I'm talking about.

In the next few minutes I'm going to say some things that sound like things to do around emotions if they get challenging or difficult. But hold them lightly. These are a set of things that, having heard about them, may occur to you as things to work with in your meditation practice. If that happens, that's great. If not, don't worry about it. You don't have to try to think, "Well, what were those three things she said about working with emotions?" Just let this filter in, and then if you have a difficult emotion in your practice, some of this may arise for you to work with. It's grist for the mill.

The basic work when there's some difficult state arising, a difficult emotion arising, is to allow there to be that kind of curiosity, to investigate what's happening around it. You could ask yourself some questions. What's happening in the body? How does it make me feel? Then kind of recognize what thoughts come along with the feeling.

If there's a lot of thinking around the feeling, it's often helpful to see if you can not engage so much in the thinking, as opposed to just recognizing that these thoughts are coming up. There's a way you can recognize: these are thoughts, these are just thoughts. These are fear thoughts, these are anger thoughts, these are frustration thoughts, these are greedy thoughts, these are excited thoughts.

It's also really helpful to check the attitude, particularly if it feels like there's a struggle around the emotion. If you are working with a challenging state of mind, it's really helpful to check the attitude. You might find resistance if it's a particularly challenging state of mind. Resistance is a very common attitude that sometimes goes unnoticed in our meditation practice because we are so focused on the meditation and being with something that we don't notice we're resisting being with it.

So if you check in and notice that there's some kind of difficult state of mind, and you check what the attitude is, and you feel like, "Wow, I really don't want to be paying attention to that"—that's resistance. And it's really more helpful to open up to that resistance rather than try to force yourself through to somehow be with the difficult emotion when resistance is really the thing that's happening.

I often like to think about, or talk about, the way our minds are as being composed of these layers of experience. Many people have this experience of themselves—that within a state they know something is going on, there's a sense that something's underneath it, deeper. And there's often a feeling or a sense of, "If I could only get to that thing underneath, then I would figure this out." So there tends to be a kind of digging or trying to figure out the thing that's underneath, as opposed to just being with what's obvious about the state itself.

Just meeting the obvious about some difficult experience—over time, as we meet and touch the outer layers, what seems to happen is that we're seeing it from different perspectives. We see our experience of, say, anger. If you're experiencing something like anger over and over again and looking at that, you may see different ways that it makes your body feel. Or you may see different things that trigger it. Or you might see a kind of mood, a holding on to that anger—like, "Yeah, I really want to be angry." There may be different things that you see around that anger, the longer that you look at it. And some of that may start to reveal something that's underneath it. You might start to see, "Oh, there's actually some sadness here"—just by hanging out with the obviousness of it. No need to pick it apart or pry it apart. Just meeting the obvious.

The way I like to think about the attitude—if we think about our experiences being this kind of sphere of layers and we're just meeting the outer layer, just what's obvious—the attitude is often something that's actually going on that we're missing, that's actually a larger layer. So that resistance: there's this anger going on and there's resistance that's not really being noticed, and that's actually the outermost layer of what's happening. If we, in checking the attitude, recognize, "Oh, there's resistance happening," it becomes within the field of experience. Then just recognize: what's obvious in my experience, now that I have noticed this resistance? Again, there's no need to dig or try to get rid of the resistance. We can observe resistance without resistance.

So again, we're not trying to make resistance go away. We're trying to understand. This is an act of understanding that we are engaging in.

If a difficult state of mind is particularly sticky—if you feel like you keep getting kind of stuck to it, or it just feels like it's hanging on for a long time, or you feel like your mind is trying to figure it out—there's something that can help. This does sound like something to do, and I think if it occurs to you to try this, go ahead and try it. If you feel really stuck to a difficult emotion, it can help to open the awareness to what else is going on in your experience besides this difficulty.

In any moment of experience there are hundreds of things, if not thousands of things, going on. And this difficult experience is just one of the things happening. There's hearing that's happening, and there's body sensation outside of the emotion. There are potentially other thoughts and moods. So open up your field of awareness to see, "Well, what else is going on?" Not to push away that difficult emotion, but to put it into a larger context—to put it into a context where there are many, many things going on here right now. What else is happening here? "Oh yeah, there's the feeling of warmth on my skin, and then there's the pressure of my seat, and oh, there's that anger, and now there's the feeling of my knee pressing down against the cushion, and the sense of my hand, and then there's that emotion." So it becomes more like that emotion gets put into a larger container.

I've often also found it helpful with particularly sticky states of mind to keep track of, or just notice, one of three states around it. For instance, if you're experiencing loneliness, you may just at times be experiencing that loneliness and there's not particularly a problem around that—just the pure state of loneliness. Then there might be times when that loneliness is there and you really feel caught by it. You feel the stickiness of the loneliness.

So that's two ways of relating to an emotion: essentially, when we're having an emotion, whether we are reactive to it or not. Just noticing that difference in the mind. When there's an emotion present, are we caught by it, or are we at ease around it?

The third thing to notice about that kind of emotion is when it's absent. Notice when it is not there. So if you're working with a very habitual pattern of loneliness, notice when you're caught by it, notice when it's present but you're not caught by it, and consciously recognize when it's absent as well. Highlight that to yourself: "This is what it's like to not be lonely."

That piece is actually really, really powerful. It's surprisingly powerful to recognize that, because it seems that some of these habitual emotions, these sticky emotions, carry a sense of identity around them, a sense of ownership. And what recognizing the absence of the emotion does is it begins to poke holes in that identity. We recognize, "Oh, here I am without that emotion. Here's what it's like to be without that emotion." So that's very helpful.

Then there's another way to work with some difficult states of mind, and that's by using reflection. This aspect of the Sayadaw U Tejaniya style is quite different from most mindfulness practices, where you're actually using thought in the mind to support the meditation. I've suggested some of this already through checking the attitude—"What's my attitude?"—and through using questions: "What am I aware of?" Not as things to

think about, but as a way to drop them into the meditation and see what happens as you orient your mind around a question. As the mind is oriented around a question, it naturally takes in information almost through the perspective of that question, and may begin to understand things in a way that it didn't understand them before.

So this use of questions is kind of just a way to incline the mind towards some understanding, but then letting it go. You don't need to think about it. If you find yourself thinking about these questions, let go of the questions. Just don't go there for a while.

Did some of you try, in the guided meditation before lunch, the request I suggested: "May the body relax, may the mind relax"? Did that have an impact for any of you? Did you notice a difference? It's like it's not anything you need to do—you just drop that into the mind stream and see what happens. These questions, these reflections are like that. So you could reflect, ask the question: "What purpose is this emotion serving?" Again, not to think about it. Or: "Is this emotion necessary?" These are questions that would support a kind of investigation of the emotion, essentially inclining the mind towards understanding an aspect of it. In one case, asking what purpose this is serving may reveal something you haven't seen that's underneath that emotion.

It's also possible to use reflection to incline the mind towards wisdom, towards a deeper understanding of the process of mind and body. For example, you could use the reflection "This is impermanent" just as a way to recall that truth. This state is impermanent. Just recalling that. This will end. This has an end.

A couple of other reflections that align with the truth of experience—one that Sayadaw U Tejaniya suggests, and that I have found extremely helpful, is: "This is nature." Whatever is happening in your experience is a natural phenomenon. It's just what has arisen based on causes and conditions. It has come into being based on your history of experience, the state of things arising in the present moment. It's this confluence of events that has created what has happened here in this present moment. It's no different than a tree growing out of a seed. There are natural laws that allow that process to happen. You plant a seed, and the appropriate conditions of water, sunlight, warmth, and moisture allow that seed naturally, based on just natural laws, to grow into a tree. Essentially, there's just this stream of causes and conditions that have brought this emotion into being. It's just like a tree. "Oh, here's a phenomenon that's happening. This is nature."

For me, the use of that phrase—"this is nature"—brings in the whole notion of impersonal conditions coming together. It really supported a letting go of me trying to do or manipulate or adjust or fix. "This is nature." It really allowed the mind to relax around the experience.

Another reflection you can use—this one I offer from the Buddha—he suggests that you can reflect: "This is not me, this is not mine, this is not who I am." This is a way to align your mind with that truth, that these emotions that happen, these difficult states of mind that happen, are simply things that come and go. They are not who we are. This helps to remind us of that fact. And the noticing of the absence of that emotion also supports that recognition. This is not who I am. If it were who I am, it would always be there. But it is not. Here it is absent. So: this is not me, this is not mine, this is not who I am.

The last piece I'll bring in around working with difficult mind states is this: sometimes these difficult mind states can be overwhelming. The power of those mind states, the momentum of those mind states, is stronger than the momentum of our ability to be mindful of them. It's like we have a small wave of mindfulness and a tsunami of anger. It swamps our attempt to be mindful. Even just turning our attention to it, we get sucked in. What I find most helpful in that state—and this takes some discernment of your own mind, to recognize, "Okay, if I try to bring mindfulness to this, I just get sucked into this black hole of emotion"—

So maybe it's not the time to pay attention to this. If you find that an emotion is overwhelming, if it swamps your ability to be mindful, see if you can consciously turn your attention to something else in your experience—without aversion to the thing that you're turning away from.

This is like a skillful ignoring of the state, simply turning your attention to something in your experience. Something neutral is helpful. I've found that neutrality is more useful than trying to find something pleasant, because if you're trying to find something pleasant, it's like that part of your mind which is struggling says, "No, don't do that to me. This is important. You better pay attention to me rather than pay attention to that pleasant thing." The neutral thing seems to be easier to turn to.

So paying attention to your feet on the ground. Hearing is a great door to open when there's difficult emotion. I usually do not recommend that people pay attention to their breath when they're experiencing a difficult emotion. In my own experience, and it seems like for many people, strong emotions have a lot of physical experience in this part of the body. If that's where you're trying to pay attention to your breath—somewhere in your torso—it's likely that you'll just get pulled back into the sensations around that emotion and get sucked back into it again.

I've found it helpful to cultivate, for difficult states of mind, something that's really neutral, that's not in the vicinity of the main place where emotions are experienced in the torso. Feet on the ground are good. Sitting bones on the chair—something ground-

ing. Hands have pretty good sensation. Hearing is good. Something that will allow you to really move away from the emotion. But again, not trying to stop that emotion. It's not an act of trying to get rid of it. It's more like you're saying, "Okay, you can do your thing in the background. You can just do your thing. I'm just going to turn my attention to someplace else." Kind of like putting a child in their room for a timeout: "You do your thing in there, and we're just going to be calm over here." It's simply a redirecting of attention.

It's helpful to stay mindful in that space, though. If you let your mind just drift, if you just try to distract yourself through some fantasy or some non-mindful activity, it's likely that the power of that emotion will hook into your non-mindful state and just take over again. Staying mindful of something neutral allows that emotion to do its thing without your being engaged with it.

CHAPTER 38

Part 3 of 5: Discussion (AM) — Daylong in the Style of U Tejaniya

Andrea Fella · 29 min

In this morning discussion session from a daylong retreat in the style of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Andrea Fella addresses a common challenge practitioners face: the deeply ingrained habits from previous meditation experience. She offers two practical approaches—one from teacher Steve Armstrong involving relaxation when noticing technique arising, and her own method of checking the attitude toward habitual patterns rather than trying to eliminate them.

The discussion reveals how this awareness-based practice differs fundamentally from concentration practices. Using the analogy of settling muddy water, Fella explains that concentration practice is like using a centrifuge—settling the mind through deliberate activity—while U Tejaniya's approach is like placing the jar on a shelf, allowing natural settling while intimately getting to know the 'mud' of our mental habits. This process develops wisdom through direct observation of impermanence, cause and effect, and the unsatisfactory nature of clinging.

Practitioners share their experiences with aversion, attachment to pleasant states, and the searching quality of mind when trying to find objects of awareness. Fella addresses each with characteristic patience, emphasizing that the practice involves meeting our habitual patterns with curiosity rather than trying to fix or escape them. She introduces walking meditation instructions that maintain the same open awareness approach—simply noticing what we're aware of and checking our attitude, rather than focusing specifically on physical sensations of walking. The session illuminates how this practice serves as 'mind 101,' offering deep familiarity with our mental patterns that ultimately allows natural letting go.

So many of you are familiar with meditation and probably have some particular ways that you meditate. One of the things that people often find in moving into this style of practice is that you have habits of meditation, and those come up. You find yourself paying attention to the breathing, just kind of automatically, because that's what you do when you meditate.

I'm going to suggest a couple of ways to work with that. It's not a bad thing, but it's also a habit, so it's not a natural thing. It's a natural habit that has evolved, but it's not just paying attention to things as they are, because this habit is functioning.

One method comes from Steve Armstrong, another teacher who has practiced quite a bit with Sayadaw U Tejaniya. The other is a way that I have found very helpful in my own practice.

Steve suggests that when you notice you're engaging in a technique—when you notice that you are doing something in the meditation, trying to pay attention to something in particular, or particularly engaging in focusing with the breath, or perhaps when you open to the attitude and you see that there's greed there and then you automatically turn to look at greed—when you notice that there's a technique happening, relax. Pick up again on that natural awareness that is apparent when the mind relaxes. Relax and just notice what you are naturally aware of. Essentially, you're relaxing that tendency of that technique.

Another way that I found helpful for myself when I first started this practice: I went to Sayadaw U Tejaniya and said, "Well, when I relax the mind, what is apparent—I'm not trying to do anything—but what's apparent is body sensations. That's the main thing that I'm noticing." He said, "Well, you need to consciously turn your attention to the mind because it's a habit that you're paying attention to the body."

For me, simply relaxing and noticing what's apparent wasn't quite enough because the mind was just landing on the body as a place of relaxed attention. What I found helpful was to notice the mind's relationship to that habit.

The way I would begin my meditation would be to let my mind do its thing. It would normally just take in the bodily experience; the whole body vibration was my main focus of attention. When I relaxed and started my meditation, that would be what was apparent. When I noticed that pattern operating, I would simply check in: What's my attitude? What's going on right now in the mind around this pattern? Very often I found that the mind was relaxed and calm. That was a way into opening up experience for me—simply checking the attitude about that habitual pattern. In that case, it was opening up to calmness, to peacefulness.

So for me, the exploration was noticing the mind, essentially noticing the attitude of the habit of practice, the attitude around the habit of practice.

I want to take a little bit of opportunity now. We're going to do some walking in a moment, but I'd like to check in and see how that was for you, whether there are any questions, what you noticed.

Participant: Just to pick up on what you were saying—this is also my tendency and my habit for many years, focusing on the body. Now there's another thing that I noticed when you offered what you just offered, which is to notice what the attitude is towards feeling sensations in the body. Immediately for me what comes up is that it's pleasant. There is that sense of subtle pleasure. It feels good and it feels calm and quiet, peaceful, like you said. But I think there's also a little bit of perhaps attachment to feeling that sense of peace, which until now I never questioned—attachment to feeling peaceful, to feeling the flow of sensation, to feeling grounded, to feeling in the body, which I believe is a good thing. But anyway, it's just...

Andrea Fella: This is actually the power of this technique, I think. It really takes us back into our assumptions about how we're meditating and our attitudes about how we're meditating. It reveals some pretty subtle kinds of clinging and aversion that may be operating, that had been operating for a long time that we've not really been aware of. It's actually quite powerful.

What we do with this checking of the attitude is that it reveals one layer of what's going on in our mind, and then we open up to that. After a time we check in, and there's yet another layer, and another layer. There are just layers and layers of these attitudes and relationships with experience, and we peel them back through this exploration of what's happening in the mind. We just check in. That's great, thank you.

Participant: What was happening in my mind was pretty constant—just noticing aversion or negative mind states and noticing my attitude, which was wanting to push away. But it was just so constant that if I were not here, I would probably get up and do something. What I found myself doing every once in a while was just going to my breath. I saw the constant aversive states, the wanting to push them away, and the wanting to escape. I was being aware of that, but I don't know how long I could maintain with it.

Andrea Fella: You have to know that. There is a place for primary object in this practice. If you find that it's hard to stay grounded in what's happening as it is, it's fine to come and settle with a primary object.

So coming to the breath is fine. It's helpful if you recognize the tendency to do that—if it's happening out of aversion or greed—and try to at least acknowledge whether that's occurring. See if you can move to the breath with an acknowledgment of, "Okay, I'm seeing that I'm getting overwhelmed here," or "I'm seeing I just can't stand to be

here anymore, so out of compassion for my mind, I'm going to come into the breath for a while." There will be mixed motivations, but if you can at least incline towards that non-aversive or non-greedy motivation, it will help to settle the mind more.

Question: Not to be doing this meditation with a motive or anything, but does something eventually shift over time?

The way this practice works, at least the way I like to see it—when we do a concentration practice, when we bring our attention to the breath over and over again, just coming in and paying attention to this one thing, it tends to settle the mind more quickly than this open style of practice. The mind gets settled down. But in a way, what we're doing is ignoring all those attitudes, all those tendencies towards greed and aversion, by just saying, "Keep coming back, keep coming back, keep coming back."

With this practice, what we're doing is really getting familiar with our minds. So it settles, but it settles more slowly.

There's an analogy I like to use around this. When we're doing concentration practice, the way we're settling our minds is like if you've got a jar of muddy water and you want that mud to settle out—concentration practice is like putting that jar of muddy water in a centrifuge machine. It settles through an activity of doing.

The practice I'm offering today is more like taking that jar of water and putting it on the shelf. It settles, but it settles more slowly. And what the practice of settling is, is to really get to know the mud really well.

In a way, I look at this practice as a real getting to know your own mind. It's like Mind 101, this practice. In concentration practice, we can ignore some of those tendencies. In this practice, we can't ignore them. We have to meet them.

So it takes some courage to just meet, over and over, these habitual tendencies. But if you can look at it as: this is actually the practice—this getting to know things really well as they settle—that is the practice. It's not what we do in order to get to something else.

As we pay attention, we get really familiar with our habits and patterns. We get familiar with our minds—that's one benefit. And also, we start to see the impermanent nature of those experiences. We can see the cause and effect nature of those experiences. So we're actually developing some wisdom through looking at these difficult experiences in and of themselves.

The insights that happen around insight meditation practice have to do with understanding cause and effect, with recognizing impermanence, with recognizing how unsatisfactory things are to hold onto, with recognizing that everything is simply a process of flow—that there's nothing, not an entity here, not a thing here, not a thing that is me. It is a process.

These understandings can come out of that process of seeing things settle. We don't have to settle in order to have those insights. It takes a little continuity of mindfulness to have them, but that continuity can develop in the settling itself. So we're really looking at the mud here. That's the practice.

But again, if it gets overwhelming or it gets to the place where you just feel like, "I'm out of here," you can come back to something more grounding. I will talk a little bit in the first part of the afternoon about working with more difficulty—about some techniques that Sayadaw U Tejaniya offers for working with more emotional experiences.

Question: In the long run—because I know it's not about getting rid of the mud or trying to get rid of anything—but in the long run, does it settle? In terms of a life, does something shift?

It seems to.

Question: Is there a purpose to living with the mud?

The purpose is towards the wisdom, the understanding. When we really begin to understand how our minds react to things and the kinds of forces at play, when the mind sees that those things start to happen—it's like the mind has spent so much time paying attention to these patterns and habits that we really get to know they are suffering. We get really familiar with the fact that this is not a happy place to be.

As time goes on and we start to see how these patterns come into being, we may get to the place where we actually start to see, "Oh, I can see the mind is kind of heading in that way." When that starts to happen—when we can see the causes and conditions coming together to lead us towards those habits—and when we have spent the time observing and knowing the suffering of those places, the mind begins to naturally say, "I see where I'm headed, and I don't think I'm going to go there."

The mind will do that. We don't actually have to stop it. It's the educational process of this practice, and this practice in particular, because we aren't settling with a concentration style. We really get to know our habits and patterns of mind very well, and we really get to know that they are suffering—that they cause us stress, that they cause us unease.

That is part of the education. That is part of what allows the mind to begin to let go.

A student asked: "So you're saying that at some level—not unconscious, but on a deeper level than the part of us that says 'I don't want to go there' but can't stop—the mind itself, by being with it somehow, is learning?"

Yes, it's learning.

Another student shared: "My mind did drift off several times, either through tiredness or spaciness. And I appreciated what you mentioned about how sometimes there's a balance of mind with that awareness, with the moment that I became aware I had drifted off. Because it did seem some of the time that my mind was balanced, and that made it easier to just accept it without approach or avoid. But the second thing is what you mentioned about when it seemed I was aware that it felt good—the settledness, the being settled of the mind. It was a kind of gratefulness, because I haven't been doing my practice as much as I want to due to a certain situation, and it just felt so good to be here in that. But then I saw right away that there was this approach and clinging, this 'I really want this.' Could you say a little more about where to go with that?"

When you notice the clinging—essentially you saw that you liked this settledness, and then you noticed there was a kind of wanting to hold on to it—just notice that that's what the mind has done with this. There's nothing particularly to do about it other than to simply allow that to become part of the field. Don't worry about trying to let it go. Don't worry about trying to do anything with it. It will let go of itself if you simply observe it.

There's a way this practice feels to me, and I've been trying to find a clearer way of describing it. When I see some kind of aversion or greed, some reaching toward or away, it's like there's an energy to that reaching that's already happening, already come into being, already doing its thing. If the mind can simply reflect that—using this mirror analogy, just that mirror of mindfulness to reflect it—it's almost as if the mindfulness just rides on the back of that energy. You don't have to do anything with it. Just allow the mindfulness to meet that energy of wanting or aversion.

In that meeting, it's almost like an Aikido move. The energy of that thing, instead of going towards greed or aversion, becomes moved into the service of knowing. It's like this little quarter turn: "Oh, yeah, there's greed." And then the mindfulness just goes right on it and watches it. What often happens when mindfulness is able to meet it without any aversion or resistance to that greed itself is that it falls apart.

If you catch it early in the process, you can watch it actually form and have the mindfulness pick up on that right away. It will fall apart pretty quickly. If the greed has been developing for a while, you may have to just hang out with it for a time. But you don't have to do anything particularly with it. If it gets really strong, I'll talk later this afternoon about some ways to work with difficulties when they become intense. But I don't want to get too complicated just yet.

Another student said: "I'm not sure I'm reporting what happened correctly, but there was a lot of sleepiness and dullness, and every once in a while I would pop out of that and be asking questions about what am I aware of. Then I would be into this thing, thinking, 'What am I aware of?' And then it would become like—not grasping exactly, but looking for something to be aware of after I was aware of thinking."

So searching is the next thing that arose. If you find yourself in that space a lot—that "what am I aware of," that kind of searching—you can simply notice that searching is what's happening. That's the process that has arisen in the mind in that moment: this state of searching. Just notice what it feels like for the mind to be searching. But if you find yourself in that state frequently, just pick something. Just pick something obvious.

If you find that you can notice that state of searching and then it moves into recognition—oh yes, there's a sound, there's a body sensation—but it's not like these things come to you. It's like you're reaching, looking for them in the searching. It's not that experience of receptivity.

When you get into that searching mode, it's like you reach out and go, "Oh, there's a sound, oh, there's a body sensation." Can you just notice that that's the movement of the mind? If you're simply noticing that the searching quality is what's going on, at some point you may notice that there is something that comes to you—kind of surprising. "Oh, actually there's my butt! There's the sensation of my buttocks on the chair." Or there's a sense of calm that arose. So notice that searching quality, and at some point there will be something that arises naturally.

It's the same thing with the primary object. If you use an object to help you settle, at some point while paying attention to that breath or whatever you choose as an obvious place to rest your attention, you may notice that you're sitting there paying attention to your breathing and then somebody sneezes and you're automatically knowing that sound, the hearing. Then you notice there's an itch on your finger, then you notice your hand is cold, and the mind is just already noticing automatically what it is already knowing.

So if you use something to settle, at some point you'll start to recognize that there are other things spontaneously being known. Just allow that to support the movement towards the open style of awareness, and kind of let go of the need to hold on to that anchor of attention.

Does this eventually lead to that feeling of spaciousness, this open spaciousness?

There are different ways that the mind is aware in this natural awareness. One way is this very spacious, open awareness. Other ways, the mind might be paying attention by noticing this thing really clearly, then that thing really clearly, then that thing really clearly. It may not be a sense of open spaciousness—it may be a sense of really clearly knowing one thing at a time.

So I'm not going to say there's any one way that it looks. What I find with this practice is that the mind gets really fluid. It moves between states of consciousness really quickly, between different styles of awareness really quickly. And it knows how it is paying attention. It feels like the mind becomes more malleable, and the mind is aware of its malleability.

I want to have some time for walking, so I'm going to offer just a few minutes of instruction. There's not much to say, actually. When Sayadaw U Tejaniya was asked how to do walking meditation, his response was, "I don't do walking meditation. I don't practice walking meditation. I practice awareness while walking."

The focus is on awareness, not on the walking.

Many of you who have done walking meditation before are probably familiar with bringing attention into the feet and paying attention to the movement of the body. In this practice, we are simply aware. It's the same instructions as in the sitting: Notice that you are aware. Notice what you are obviously aware of. And from time to time, check your attitude.

With walking, there's probably going to be a lot of seeing happening because we have our eyes open. You can try it for a while, noticing how your mind explores the world of seeing. If it gets too distracting, if you find that your mind is pulled out into seeing and thought too much, you can narrow down your field of vision—not to stop using it, but to not let your focus wander quite so much.

Walk at a natural pace. There's no need to walk back and forth. There's no need to walk slowly. Just walk at a natural pace. I like to encourage people, for the first few minutes, to explore and see what pace feels easeful. There's usually some pace of move-

ment that mindfulness can naturally pick up on. Tune into the mind and notice how easeful it feels to walk and be mindful. Find the pace that feels most comfortable for this process.

So start by checking into ease. When you've found that pace—and it may change over the walking period—simply notice what you're aware of.

Am I aware? What am I aware of? What's my attitude?

Watch what your mind naturally pays attention to, particularly with the world of seeing. You might notice that your mind is kind of taking in a panoramic experience of the world of seeing. You might notice that the attention is jumping from thing to thing to thing really quickly—you're looking at that, and then that, and that. Or you might notice that your attention kind of lingers on something and then it moves to something else.

Now again, this exploration of how attention functions through seeing is similar to the exploration of how awareness functions in general. Because awareness can function in many different ways, and there's no one right way. We tend to think that we have to construct a state of mind in order to meditate and hold ourselves in that state of mind—if I get to this state of mind, that's what I need to do. What this practice is about is learning about the various ways in which our mind pays attention, and being aware of that.

So as you walk, you may notice that you're in the realm of seeing. You may notice that your attention changes, that how you are attending to things changes. Pay attention to that as well. And it may go into your body too. You may be noticing your feet, the sensations of your feet on the ground, or the sound that you make as you walk. There's all kinds of experiences—a river of experience that we get into when we walk.

So occasionally checking your attitude, checking into your emotional state around the walking.

Enjoy your walk.

CHAPTER 39

Skillful Means for Concentration

Andrea Fella · 1h03

> *In this comprehensive talk on concentration practice, Andrea Fella illuminates the dynamic relationship between abandoning the five hindrances and cultivating the five factors of jhāna. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching that we can abandon the unwholesome (akusala) and cultivate the wholesome (kusala), she explains how these two processes work together—as we let go of hindrances, we simultaneously strengthen concentration factors, and vice versa.*
>
> *Fella offers practical guidance for working with hindrances in samādhi practice, distinguishing this approach from vipassanā. Rather than turning directly toward hindrances, she suggests allowing them to recede to the background while maintaining gentle contact with the breath. Using the Buddha's vivid analogy of the banyan tree that strangles its host, she illustrates how hindrances feed on attention and can be starved through skillful redirection.*
>
> *The heart of the talk explores the five jhāna factors: vitakka (aiming attention), vicāra (sustaining attention), pīti (rapture), sukha (happiness), and ekaggatā (one-pointedness). Fella emphasizes that only the first two are within our direct control—the others arise naturally as results. She offers gentle alternatives to forceful concentration, including peripheral attention, intention-setting, and the image of a child's scooter building momentum through repeated light taps. Each concentration factor counters a specific hindrance: vitakka counters sloth and torpor, vicāra counters doubt, pīti counters ill-will, sukha counters restlessness, and ekaggatā counters sense desire. This teaching provides a framework for understanding how access concentration develops and why the "bliss of seclusion" from hindrances becomes possible.*

Tonight I'd like to talk about the factors that support concentration and the factors that get in our way.

Before I get into that, I want to reiterate what Philip said last night about how to listen to a Dharma talk, particularly on a concentration retreat. See if you can stay connected with your breathing and just let the words come through. Not that you're not paying attention to the words—you can pay attention to both the breathing and the content at the same time. But there's no need to try to hold on to the words. Trust that what

you need will land. And if something feels like it's a little too much or it's not landing in a way that makes a lot of sense to you, just let it go. There's a lot of information in this talk, and you don't need to hold on to all of it by any means.

I'd like to start with some words of the Buddha. Speaking to his monks, he said: "Abandon what is unwholesome, O monks. One can abandon what is unwholesome. If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. Cultivate what is wholesome, O monks. One can cultivate the wholesome. If it were not feasible, I would not ask you to do so."

This term "wholesome" in this sutta is a translation of the term *kusala*, which is often translated as wholesome but is also translated as skillful. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, in particular, translates it as skillful. He says that somebody who is cultivating a skill, such as a carpenter, would be talked about as being a *kusala* carpenter. So the term in Pali apparently was used in this way of meaning skillful. We can look at this term in terms of what is skillful for us in cultivating concentration—the skill of the Eightfold Path, with cultivating concentration being the cultivation of the factors of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The skill of that cultivation is understanding what is helpful to let go of and what is helpful to cultivate.

The states or qualities that are helpful to let go of are our old friends, the hindrances. I know many of you have probably heard many talks on the hindrances on retreats before, and I am going to talk about the hindrances, but this is not going to be a standard hindrance talk. I'm going to approach it from a slightly different direction. So those are the qualities that we want to abandon—abandon the hindrances.

Qualities that we want to cultivate with respect to concentration include several sets of lists. One set in particular is called the jhanic factors, the factors of concentration. These two lists of qualities—one that is meant to be abandoned and one that is meant to be cultivated—actually work together. As we abandon the hindrances, we are simultaneously cultivating these factors of concentration. And as we cultivate these factors of concentration, if our attention is going towards cultivating them, then simultaneously these hindrances are being abandoned. So there's a very powerful process at work between these two lists. I'm going to talk about both sides of this equation tonight.

The Buddha talked about the hindrances with respect to how we can denourish them. We can think about these two lists in terms of denourishing the hindrances and nourishing these qualities of concentration—essentially feeding the supportive qualities and starving the unwholesome, unsupportive qualities.

I'll start with the hindrances. You're all familiar with these states from your meditation practice—the states that essentially hinder our ability to get concentrated, that hinder our ability to settle and stabilize in the present moment, that hinder our ability to have a sense of well-being. These states of sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt.

The Buddha used an analogy for the hindrances that I really appreciate. He had a brilliant mind, and the analogies that he used were very apt. If we can understand his analogies, it can help us understand something about what he is talking about. He talked about the hindrances as being like a banyan tree.

Some of you may know what a banyan tree is, but I'm going to describe it and how it functions, because it helps us to understand something about how the hindrances work. The banyan tree begins its life as a seed deposited in the crook of a tree, probably by some fig-eating bird, because the banyan tree is a species of fig. This fig seed gets deposited in the crook of a tree and begins to send out shoots, roots that are seeking the ground. As these roots hit the ground, they stiffen and get thick, forming a kind of latticework. Every place these roots touch each other, they get even stiffer. The roots of the banyan tree are now starting to compete for nourishment with the tree that is hosting it. As the tree gains nourishment from the soil and from the sun, more roots come out, and it forms a latticework that essentially surrounds the original tree.

—strangling it, preventing it from receiving its own nourishment, eventually killing that tree. And in its place stands this structure of a tree whose trunk is formed entirely of this latticework of what were once roots.

This is how our hindrances function. They nourish themselves in our minds. And as they nourish, they strengthen and strangle the wholesome, beautiful qualities within us. So we need to take care with what we feed, with what we nourish in our minds. We want to find ways to let go of the hindrances, to remove their source of nourishment.

I'd like to speak for a few minutes about working with the hindrances in concentration practice, because we don't approach them in quite the same way that we do in mindfulness practice. In mindfulness practice, we're usually taught that when a hindrance gets strong, when a hindrance arises, we turn our attention directly to it. We meet it with mindfulness.

In concentration practice, the first approach to working with a hindrance is usually to let it remain in the background. Stay with the breath if you can, knowing that the hindrance is there, acknowledging it. It's very important to recognize and acknowledge

that the hindrance is present, not to deny that it's there, but to allow it to recede into the background while the breath remains in the foreground. We're not suppressing the hindrance, but we're also not giving it any attention.

In my own practice, on my very first long concentration retreat—it was a metta retreat—I finally began to understand what it meant to leave the hindrances in the background. When a hindrance would come up, such as anger, I'd be doing my metta phrases and then anger might arise. It was actually a relief at some point to realize I didn't have to turn toward that anger and work with it and meet it in any way. It was simply, "Oh yes, there's that anger. I can just stay with my phrases of metta." It takes a bit of an adjustment if you're used to vipassana practice, learning how to let these states simply be in the background.

We don't need to meet them directly in order for them to dissipate. I think from our mindfulness practice we develop a belief that if we don't meet the hindrances directly, somehow they will get stronger. The way I understand how this process of ignoring the hindrances works—letting them be in the background—is that we're still cultivating our mindfulness and concentration, but on the breath. The attention is directed somewhere; it's directed to the breath. And there's no place for the hindrance to feed from. The mindfulness and concentration are being cultivated on the breathing, while the hindrance is simply allowed to be in the background. Since the mindfulness is in the foreground with the breathing, there's nothing to nourish that hindrance. It will essentially dissipate because it is an impermanent state of mind.

Basically, this is learning how to skillfully say "not now" to the hindrances without aversion—just turning away, just recognizing, "Yes, I see you. Not now."

This is not always possible. Sometimes the hindrances have more momentum than that. They are stronger and have more of a pull on us. If they're a bit stronger, one way to work with them is the approach Philip mentioned last night, thinking about this foreground and background of attention. The way I was just describing working with the hindrances is having the breath in the foreground and the hindrance in the background. Sometimes if the hindrance is stronger, that may get reversed. The hindrance may be in the foreground, but you can keep track of the breath in the background, infusing the state of mind—the difficulty, the anger, the desire, the sleepiness, the restlessness—with the breathing. You're staying connected to the breath even as you're meeting and being aware of the hindrance.

If the hindrances become stronger still, we may have to work with them more directly. There are a couple of different approaches to this, one being the use of what might be called antidotes to the hindrances. For instance, if ill will is arising, you can

use the metta practice we've been starting to work with in the afternoons. The metta practice is said to directly counter ill will. You can bring the metta practice into your heart and mind and cultivate that quality, which will directly oppose the ill will. If sense desire is present, you can contemplate impermanence, which is said to counter sense desire. If you are dull and sleepy, you can do several things. One of the classic reflections for sleepiness is to reflect on your mortality—on the fact that you actually have a limited amount of time in which to practice. There are various antidotes for working with the hindrances, and I'll talk more about working with specific hindrances later.

And then there's our old friend mindfulness practice. If the hindrance is really calling your attention, if you feel it's not possible to be with the breath, not possible even to bring up an antidote, not possible to breathe through the hindrance—turn directly to the hindrance with mindfulness. The choice of when to do this is really personal, really individual. It's something each of us has to learn to navigate on our own: when do we need to let go of cultivating mindfulness of breathing in favor of turning more directly to the hindrance? That's something you need to explore for yourself.

Try playing with these various approaches and see what works for you. Over time, you'll get familiar with how your mind works around these hindrances with respect to cultivating concentration.

It's really helpful not to think of the hindrances as being any kind of failure in the concentration practice. It's true that when the hindrances are present, concentration is not so strong. But we can cultivate concentration through working with the hindrances, through all of these ways that I've suggested. Even turning mindfulness towards the hindrances is cultivating concentration. So the relationship we bring to this practice, the relationship that we bring to working with the hindrances—rather than feeling like, "Oh, I can't do this, I'm never going to be able to do this"—is just meeting this moment, just meeting here and now as it is.

In concentration practice, as I mentioned a little while ago, cultivating the qualities of concentration themselves, these factors of concentration, actually supports a letting go of the hindrances. It's a very natural process that as concentration develops, the hindrances recede. Essentially, the hindrances are abandoned through the cultivation of concentration.

There are five factors of concentration. Philip mentioned these last night in his talk, just briefly: the factors of aiming and sustaining attention, *vitakka* and *vicāra*; the factor of rapture, of *pīti*; the factor of happiness, of sweetness, of *sukha*; and the factor

of unification of mind, of one-pointedness, of *ekaggatā*. Each one of these factors is understood to counter one of the hindrances. So as these qualities get stronger in our concentration, very naturally the hindrances begin to recede.

This process is at play in both directions. By letting go of the hindrances, if we're actively working with them, we're cultivating these factors through mindfully staying with the breath through a hindrance. We're cultivating that ability to connect and sustain with the breathing. By cultivating the ability to connect and sustain with the breathing, we're actively letting go of the hindrances. This is a very powerful dynamic in concentration practice.

These factors of concentration essentially bring the mind together into unification. These five factors are understood to be present in what is called access concentration, or neighborhood concentration. At the point where these factors are unified in access concentration, the hindrances are suppressed. They are temporarily suppressed—they're not gone for good—but as these factors become strong and balanced, the hindrances fall away. This is a really pleasant state. It's called the bliss of seclusion, the seclusion from the hindrances. And it feels really nice when the hindrances fall away.

This is access concentration. It's also sometimes called neighborhood concentration because it's in the vicinity of, in the neighborhood of, the absorption states, the jhāna states, which we'll talk more about in coming nights. These five factors are present in access concentration, working to suppress the five hindrances. And then, moving into the absorption state, they're also said to be present in that first absorption state, the first jhāna, in a very powerful way.

I'd like to explore these factors with you, to describe them so that you might get to know them a little bit, and also to talk about how they work together—which ones we can actively use to cultivate concentration and which ones are actually results. Of these five, aiming and sustaining, *vitakka* and *vicāra*, the first two, are the ones that we can actually actively initiate in our practice: aiming our attention at the breath and sustaining our attention on the breath. The other three—the rapture, the happiness, and the unification of mind—are a result of the concentration practice. They occur because causes and conditions have come together for them to arise. So they're more of a result.

I'm actually going to spend quite a bit of time talking about these first two, because that's where we create this container of concentration, through using these qualities of aiming and sustaining the attention.

Vitakka and *vicāra*, these two qualities, are usually talked about as a pair. There are a few places in the suttas where they're talked about separately, but with respect to concentration practice, they're usually discussed together. They work together. *Vitakka* is the initial movement of directing the attention, often called initial application of mind, or aiming—directing the attention. Basically, this is about directing the attention towards the breathing in this practice of concentration that we are working on in this retreat. Aiming the attention at the breath.

Vicāra is a sustaining of attention. It's usually understood to mean holding the attention with, or sustaining the attention on, the breath—holding the attention on the object. As a pair, these two qualities bring together right effort and right mindfulness, these two aspects of the Eightfold Path that support the cultivation of our mind and support the cultivation of concentration. These two together bring together right effort and right mindfulness. This is our practice.

create our container of concentration through applying our attention and sustaining our attention.

There are some analogies offered in the suttas around vitakka and vicāra. Vitakka is understood to be like the striking of a bell. Vicāra is like the sustained sound that follows. You can't have the vicāra without the vitakka initially, but the vicāra exists—the sustained ringing of the bell exists—even though we're not continuing to strike.

This aiming of attention is often thought of as a kind of narrowing down of attention. When we think about aiming our attention at a particular experience, often that's how we understand it. We're paying attention at the nostrils, at our sternum, or at our abdomen. And we think about needing to narrow down our attention so that that's the only thing we're paying attention to, as if somehow we can block out everything else.

This is not actually such a helpful way to think about vitakka, at least in my own experience of how concentration most skillfully settles down. When I think about narrowing, it becomes a kind of forcing—a forcing into. So I'd like to offer a few different ways to think about this aiming of the attention. Some gentler ways, perhaps.

One way is something I mentioned in one of the meditations yesterday. The breath is sometimes a very delicate creature. It's like one of those little rodents outside scurrying among the bushes. If you approach it too directly, it's just going to disappear. We sometimes have to be very, very light and very quiet with our attention, approaching the aiming of our attention as if we are looking at something from the side. If you go out at night—we can't do it tonight, the stars aren't out—but if you're looking at the stars sometimes, and you're trying to see a star that's kind of faint in the sky, you'll notice

that if you try to look directly at one of those faint stars, it disappears. But you move your eye just slightly to the side and it pops into view. This is the kind of thing I find helpful in turning my attention to such a delicate experience as the breath—not trying to look at it really directly, but allowing the experience to come in from the edges. Observing it as if through our peripheral attention.

Another way I have found helpful to aim the attention at the breath is to use what I might call a request, an intention, or an invitation. In my settling into the meditation, rather than trying to point my mind at the breath or direct my attention at the breath, once I find a relaxed container, I drop the invitation into the mind: "May the attention rest with the breathing." And then I just sit back and see whether that invitation allows a kind of natural connection. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. If it can allow that kind of natural connection, you can begin to learn how the mind more naturally pays attention to the breathing without being forced into it through an act of will.

Another way is allowing the breath to come to you—settling back rather than turning your attention to the breath. Settling back and inviting the breath to come to you. A receiving of the experience of breathing.

With vicāra also, we have a tendency to have an attitude of needing to hold on to the breath, a feeling that we have to latch our attention to the breath and hang on for all we're worth. And again, that approach will wear you out. It can work to create a concentration, but it's a kind of brittle concentration. This practice is like running a marathon. And that holding on is like sprinting. If you try to run the distance with a sprint, you're going to exhaust yourself.

So a more gentle, relaxed approach to this sustaining of the attention. Initially, it's more about short moments many times. Just a short meeting of the breath. Say, just enough energy to stay with half a breath. That's about maybe two seconds. Right now, just wherever you are in the cycle of your breath, how much energy does it take to meet half a breath? And then, do it again.

This is vitakka and vicāra working together. The aiming of the attention to incline the mind to pay attention to half a breath. And the vicāra, the sustaining, just for a few seconds. And then doing it again. And doing it again. And doing it again.

In this way, this is how you can keep the mindfulness and the concentration going, because it won't wear you out to just keep doing this. It's a very light touch, really light. Moment after moment, meeting the breath.

There's an analogy that I like to use around how this vitaka and vichara works in our practice. You've all seen these scooters that little kids use—these little two-wheeled scooter things that are narrow. To get going, to get the momentum going, you have to tap your foot down on the ground. So to get started, you have to tap pretty frequently, otherwise you're going to wobble and fall over. But after a while, you can ride for a longer time because the momentum has built up from the tapping.

The tapping is like the aiming of the attention. Initially in our practice, we need to aim more frequently, just seeing how long it sustains for, trying to sustain just for short periods of time. But as the momentum builds, we don't need to aim quite as frequently because that sustaining has built a momentum—like the scooter. After tapping for a while, you can ride for a while.

And with the scooter, you begin to get a sense of when it's getting wobbly. When do you need to put your foot down again and tap again? Likewise, we can start to get a sense of that in our meditation. When is the sustaining of the attention getting a little wobbly? When do we need to redirect, reconnect more carefully with that aiming of the attention back to the breath?

So it's really helpful to set up the container, to take the time to set up the container of the meditation with a relaxed attention. Vitaka and vichara together can be used to create a container of relaxed attention, or they can be used to create a fairly tight, rigid container. It's up to you how you use these, how you explore this. If you notice that the way you are aiming and trying to sustain the attention is making the mind feel tight, it's helpful to let go, to back off, to relax.

One game I like to play with myself at times in the practice—because I tend towards over-efforting, towards too much holding on, too much tightening around—I sometimes ask myself, how little effort do I need in order to stay connected? And I just back off the effort a little bit, seeing where the relaxed attention can stay in contact with the breathing. It's the contact we need. We don't need it to be grabbed on. It just needs to meet it very gently. Meeting it.

Taking the time to set up that container where the mind is meeting experience in this relaxed way is well worth the time. In my own practice, I've found that starting with this relaxation, settling back very much with a spacious full-body awareness, allows the mind to settle and relax from that space. Then gently guiding the attention towards the breathing. If I see that the attention tightens down on the breathing, I back off. I go back to relaxation. Going back and forth between that relaxation and inclining the mind back to touch with the breathing.

Doing that practice, slowly the mind begins to educate itself in how to focus on an experience in a relaxed way—how to direct the attention towards the breathing without gripping on it. That's been my experience. I really find it helpful to take a substantial amount of time to set up that container, that container of a very skillful vitaka and vichara. From there, the rest of it unfolds.

So take that time. Don't be in such a hurry to grab onto that breath and try to sustain that attention. Be more gentle about it, more relaxed.

Vitaka, this quality of aiming the attention, is said to counter sloth and torpor. How many of you felt sleepiness in the last day? It's a big companion, particularly on these first days of retreat. It's going to be present. It's not a failure in any way. It is just part of the terrain, partly just from coming into retreat from our busy lives. Of course we're going to be worn out.

Take some short naps. That's really helpful. A short ten- or fifteen-minute nap a couple of times a day can be very supportive for concentration practice as we're adjusting to the settling of energy.

the practice itself, as I think has been mentioned a couple of times, can make us sleepy also. The settling of the mind, the concentration—as the concentration settles, the mind can get kind of dull if there's not enough energy to balance that. Energy and concentration need to be balanced in this practice for the concentration to really deepen.

So if energy is not quite balanced with concentration, we're going to have something called sinking mind. The mind will just... it feels like you're fine, everything's going fine, and suddenly it's like—that's a sign that the energy is not quite matching the concentration.

It's helpful to use this quality of vitakka, of aiming, very consciously when the mind gets a little bit dull or sleepy. This is one of the factors we do have some control over. So using that, perhaps using a little bit more precision with paying attention to the breath, aiming the attention. What's the very first experience? What's the very first sensation that lets you know the in-breath is beginning? Using that bit more precision when the mind is dull can bring up the energy.

It's really helpful, particularly if you're experiencing something like sinking mind, to make very small adjustments. It's almost as if the concentration magnifies what happens in our minds somehow. And so if you do something kind of large—like, oh, I'm really sleepy, I'm feeling so dull, I'm going to take a really brisk walk to bring up the energy—you may find yourself with way too much energy. Some very small things can be

helpful. Just open your eyes. Just try to aim a little bit more carefully. Maybe take one or two longer, slower, deeper breaths to bring a little bit more energy in. The small adjustments actually can make quite a large change in our energy levels.

The quality of sustaining the attention, the vicāra, is said to be the antidote to doubt. We experience doubt in many things. We experience doubt particularly—one of the main places we experience doubt in meditation is doubt in ourselves, our own ability. We start thinking about the fact that everybody else seems to be able to do this and I can't.

When we're lost in doubt, we've lost connection with the experience. We're not even in the vicinity of the breath. So this quality of sustaining the attention is the counter to that. If we can just meet our breath and stay there for a few moments, then meet our breath and stay there, there won't be room for those thoughts of doubt to come in. As long as there's connection to experience, the doubt begins to recede.

So try this—basically needing to stay connected. If you're experiencing doubting thoughts, see if you can engage the willingness to try. Just, yep, there's doubt. Can I just connect with this next breath? Can I sustain my attention on this in-breath? Connect with this out-breath, sustain my attention on the out-breath. Be willing to try that.

That willingness actually is the beginning, the seed of faith. The willingness to engage in the practice is connected to the confidence that the practice will support us. So that also counters doubt—the willingness to engage.

The next factor of concentration is rapture, pīti. This is delight and joy that comes accompanied by a lot of interest. Sometimes pīti is defined even as rapt attention or joyful interest. It comes about basically through vitakka and vicāra, sustaining the attention on the breath in this gentle way. The mind starts to get interested in the breath.

One of my teachers talks about ways to support this interest in the breath—that as we stay with the breath, if we can find ways to make the breathing comfortable, then the mind will want to stay with the breath. He uses this analogy, my teacher Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Tan Jeff—and this comes from his own teacher, Ajahn Fuang—that if you want to catch an eel, eels are pretty slippery. If you want to catch an eel, you need to give eels something they like. And so you put a jar in the river with some dead animal in the bottom of the jar, which is what eels like to feed on. You just put the jar in the river and the eels will go right in there.

He says it's like that with the breath. You need to give the mind something that it likes, an enjoyable experience of the breathing. And so actually in concentration practice, it's fine to play with the breath, to explore ways to make the breath more comfort-

able, more pleasurable. As we cultivate this kind of comfortable, pleasurable breath, the mind gets more and more interested in staying with the breathing. And this quality of rapture begins to come about.

It can be accompanied by very pleasant experience—a lot of bodily experiences, often a fairly energetic quality, quite a bit of energy. It can be felt as tingling or goosebumps. It might be felt as flashes of energy or feelings of energy rushing through the body. It might feel like showering waves, like being pounded by the surf. That doesn't sound pleasant, but it's actually quite lovely—this feeling of waves of rapture washing through you. You might feel like you're filled with lightness, or like a bladder that's suffused with pleasure.

So rapture has these aspects of energetic experience in the body, pleasurable experience, interest in the object of attention, and a feeling of being nourished—a feeling that the body and mind are being refreshed by the experience. For me, it feels like all the cells in the body are just drinking up this wonderful elixir.

This is a result of our practice. It's not something we can make happen. We cultivate the sense of interest through turning our attention to the breathing, cultivating the pleasant, pleasurable aspects of the breathing. We can appreciate the breath, as Philip was talking about—the life-giving breath, the beautiful breath. All of these things will support and cultivate this interest, which will then in turn support the mind's ability to more fully connect and sustain attention on the breathing.

We can tend to be pulled to the sensations of rapture. They can be strong sensations, and they can also be very interesting. The sensations of rapture can be like, "Ooh, that feels interesting," and it can pull our attention away from the breath. It's really helpful to see if you can stay with the breath while the rapture is beginning and coming into being. The rapture itself is nourished by the attention to the breathing. So if you turn the attention away from the breathing to the rapture, you're essentially cutting off a large source of the nourishment for that rapture.

See if you can stay connected with the breathing while the rapture is happening, allowing the rapture. For me, it seems almost like working with a hindrance—allowing the rapture to be in the background, staying connected with the breathing in the foreground, not letting the mind get pulled to the rapture. But paradoxically, unlike with the hindrances when we do this, letting them be in the background and the breath in the foreground, the hindrances recede. With rapture in the background and the breath in the foreground, the rapture builds. It strengthens the rapture.

The presence of rapture counters ill will. When the mind is in such a state of interest in what's happening, it's not interested in exploring the sides of things that make it dislike what's happening. Ill will is a state of disliking what's going on. When we're in the state of rapture, there's a very natural interest in our experience. The mind is quite happy, contented—states that naturally oppose ill will.

The fourth factor of concentration is sukha, happiness. This is a kind of mental pleasure, a sweetness—the contentment we've been talking about. Sukha is present with rapture; it's present within the rapture. But it's a subtler experience, and so it's often obscured by the energetic quality of the rapture. Sukha itself is not quite so energetic. There's actually more of a tranquility to sukha. And so it often becomes more apparent as the energy of rapture begins to subside.

The commentaries in the Visuddhimagga offer an analogy that helps us understand the distinction between rapture and this sweetness—between piti and sukha. Rapture is compared to the state of joy and interest of somebody who's crossing a desert, very thirsty, and sees an oasis in the distance and knows that nourishment and liquid and refreshment are coming. The state of happiness, sukha, is compared to that person having reached the oasis, taken a drink, and now resting in the shade. There's no longer that sense of urgency or energy around having that drink, no longer that strong interest in the drink because the drink has been taken. There's a tranquilizing, a calming of that energy.

Again, it's not something we can do. It's a result of the practice of setting this container, this relaxed, attentive container. The continuity, the relaxation, connection with the breath supports these other qualities arising.

Sukha is said to counter restlessness and anxiety, the fourth hindrance. We can see how restlessness is a kind of excess of energy—both physical and mental restlessness are a kind of excess of energy. And sukha is moving into a tranquilizing of body and mind, so it directly counters that.

We can have a tendency to grasp at sukha. It is so pleasant. My own phrase for this when it comes about in my practice is "the oh yes state." Oh, yes.

It's real. Why would I not want to be in this space? Really, really pleasant. So it can, again, pull our attention. So again, let it be in the background. Allow the connection with the breath to remain in the foreground.

The last of the factors of concentration is ekagata. One-pointedness is the literal translation of this term, but it is often also referred to as unification of mind. This actually points to two ways of understanding this factor. One-pointedness refers to the un-

derstanding of concentration that develops as we direct our attention to a single object—simply paying attention to one experience. Unification of mind, on the other hand, can come about more as a stability of mind, even though there may be other experiences present besides this one object. This stability of mind, this unification of mind, is the kind of stability that gets developed in our Vipassana practice. The ekagata that we're developing here is more what we encourage through stabilizing on one object—just choosing our breath and staying with it. Ekagata is often used as a synonym for concentration.

It contains a balance of mind. Basically, there's nothing that we want to change when the mind is unified, when it is in this space of one-pointed attention. The mind feels balanced. It feels contented. No problem. So nothing that we want to change, nothing that feels like it needs to change—that points to the hindrance this state counters. It counters sense desire, the state of wanting, the state of wanting something, to have something that we don't have, the desire to possess things.

As we practice concentration and these factors come together, we begin to experience states of pleasure, of bliss, of balance that are beyond sense pleasure. We really start to see that way more satisfying than sense pleasure are these states of rapture, of happiness, of balance of mind. That "oh yes" feeling I talk about—way more satisfying than having a piece of chocolate.

From the Dhammapada: "If by renouncing a lesser happiness one may realize a greater happiness, let the wise one renounce the lesser, having regard for the greater."

And another passage from the Buddha: "Even though a disciple has seen clearly as it actually is, with proper wisdom, how sensual pleasure provides little gratification, much suffering and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, as long as she does not attain to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures—that is, the rapture and pleasure of concentration—or to something more peaceful than that, she may still be attracted to sense pleasures. But when a noble disciple has seen clearly as it actually is with proper wisdom, how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, much despair, and how great is the danger in them, and he attains to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, then he is no longer attracted to sensual pleasures."

So the state of concentration, in particular this quality of one-pointedness, allows us to let go of the grosser kinds of happiness that come from sense pleasure for a more refined kind of happiness.

As I said earlier, the cultivation of these concentration states essentially allows us to set aside the hindrances. We abandon the hindrances for the period of time in which we're in the state of concentration, bringing this beautiful bliss of seclusion. As we are entering into the state of concentration, we are learning about how the hindrances arise, how we can skillfully avoid them. We're learning about what supports the cultivation of this skillful state of concentration. Essentially, we're really learning about the skill of meditation, the skill of creating concentration. And it is a skill. It is something in which we can all gain skillfulness.

We cannot actually create concentration itself, but we can cultivate the qualities that nourish it. We can let go of the qualities that counter it—essentially watering the field of our minds such that concentration will naturally arise.

CHAPTER 40

From Stillness to Movement: The Place of Concentration on the Path of Insight

Andrea Fella · 56 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella illuminates the crucial role of concentration (samādhi) within the broader Buddhist path to liberation. She begins by reflecting on the Buddha's own journey—how he had mastered deep jhāna states with his teachers yet recognized these weren't the final answer to suffering. The key insight came when he recalled a childhood experience of concentration and realized that samādhi need not be an end in itself, but could serve as a doorway to wisdom.

Fella explains the two definitions of right concentration (sammā samādhi) found in the suttas: the four jhānas, and concentration "equipped with seven requisites"—the other seven path factors. This second definition emphasizes that concentration gains its transformative power through the intention and framework within which it's developed. She then maps the entire Noble Eightfold Path as a cycle, beginning with intellectual understanding of the Four Noble Truths, moving through ethical conduct (sīla), mental cultivation (wise effort, mindfulness, and concentration), and culminating in direct liberating insight.

The talk explores the spectrum of concentration practices—from one-pointed absorption to khaṇika samādhi (momentary concentration) that remains stable while meeting changing experience. Fella describes how concentrated awareness can penetrate the three characteristics: seeing through the illusion of permanence created by rapid change, recognizing the unsatisfactoriness of grasping at impermanent phenomena, and perceiving the not-self nature of experience as mere process. She concludes by describing how practitioners can transition from stillness back toward movement—turning the sharpened, stable mind toward changing experience to cultivate the wisdom that liberates.

So tonight I'd like to talk about how this practice of concentration fits into the path of practice as a whole.

The other night Sally talked about the Buddha's own path and how he had practiced in the style of his day—the deep concentration practices leading to some of the formless jhanas that Philip mentioned last night. He had discovered in that practice that the way they were practicing those states of concentration wasn't the answer to his question. The states themselves were not what he was looking for in terms of the solution to the problem he was struggling with.

Then, after his ascetic practices, he came back and had a reflection about a time when he was young, when he was a young boy sitting underneath the rose apple tree watching his father. He recalled a state of concentration that he had moved into at that time, and wondered, "Maybe that is the way. Maybe there's something in that."

I've been curious myself about what it was that he understood in that moment, because he had been through very deep concentration practices with two of his previous teachers. Yet somehow, in his reflection thinking back on that time when he was young, he had an understanding that maybe this was the way. I'm curious about what the difference was. Why did he not think that the states of jhana he'd practiced with his teachers were the way, while this state when he was a child was the way?

My understanding of this—and there are different views about this—but one way to look at it, one way to understand it, is that when he was practicing with his teachers in the deeper states of jhana, the framework of those practices was that those states themselves were the highest attainment possible. He saw for himself that that wasn't the answer he was looking for. But when he revisited the state of jhana from his childhood, he perhaps saw or realized that it could be a turning towards—that the state of concentration didn't have to be an end in itself, but could be a doorway through which wisdom could be reached.

This points to one way that concentration, or right concentration, is defined in the suttas. There are a couple of different ways it's defined. One of the main definitions is that right concentration is these four jhanas. In many places in the suttas it says, "And what is right concentration? It is this first jhana with all its attendant factors, and the second jhana with the letting go of the vitakka vicāra," and so on through the four jhanas.

There's another definition: that concentration equipped with seven requisites is right concentration. "What is noble right concentration with its supports and requisites? That is right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness. Unification of mind equipped with these seven factors is called noble right concentration with its supports and requisites."

This is pointing to the framework in which concentration is understood. Essentially, this definition of right concentration includes the purpose to which the concentration is directed, the intention towards which the concentration is directed. In the Buddhist path, concentration is developed and cultivated in the service of liberation, in the service of freedom from suffering, from stress, from dissatisfaction, from dukkha. This is

what the Buddha explored. The suttas describe him entering the states of jhana and then, after that, directing his mind—this concentrated and purified mind—towards understanding this problem of suffering.

When he looked at the world, the Buddha saw that people were going about their lives trying to be happy, trying to find happiness. And in every action that they did, he saw it slip through their grasp. Essentially, the way in which we habitually try to find happiness—without some instruction pointing us in another direction—actually leaves us feeling dissatisfied, leaves us feeling unhappy, struggling, suffering. Even if it's not a strong state of suffering, there's almost always something that feels a bit off. Something that's just like, "Why is it so difficult? Why aren't things working out the way that I'd like them to? Isn't there something more?" Almost always some feeling that things aren't quite right, that there's a dissonance in our minds with things as they are. We hold onto things, try to hold onto things that inherently can't stay. We try to get rid of things that we don't like.

In his awakening, as he directed his concentrated mind towards this problem of suffering, he understood how the suffering was created. He understood the suffering itself, how it came to be, the relationship between his mind, his wanting, his not wanting, the craving, and the suffering. He understood the possibility of freedom from that suffering by letting go of that craving. And he understood the path—how it's actually possible to become free from this suffering.

This path is usually expressed in terms of the Noble Eightfold Path. Most of you are very familiar with the Noble Eightfold Path: the path of wise understanding, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration.

This path is often understood in three sections. The first two aspects, wise understanding and wise intention, are wisdom that needs to be understood to some extent before we really want to engage in the path, before we want to engage in practices. The second aspect is the ethical component: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. The third aspect is mental cultivation: wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration.

That's one way that the path is often described, and that version of the path ends with concentration. There's another way that the path is described, where it begins with ethical conduct. The training that the Buddha offered, called the gradual training, begins with ethical conduct, then moves on to training the mind, and culminates in wisdom.

So in a sense, we could look at the Noble Eightfold Path as a cycle, as a circle. It begins with some form of wisdom—a kind of intellectual understanding. We need some intellectual understanding of what this problem of suffering actually is. What actions and states of mind lead us into suffering? What actions and states of mind lead us away from suffering? Some understanding of how cause and effect works in our experience: that when we act out of states motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion, those tend to lead us into suffering. When we act out of states motivated by non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion, those tend to lead us away from suffering.

So the initial understanding in right understanding is an intellectual grasp of the teachings combined with some reflection on them—actually thinking about them. Does this make sense to me? As we think about this, explore this, if it does begin to make sense to us, there are two parts that come together: we have a sense of suffering in our own lives, and this teaching is pointing us towards freedom from suffering. There's a little bit of a leap of faith that's engaged in, that's brought up when we engage in this path of practice. A recognition of "I'm suffering. This suggestion of this path says that it will lead me to the end of suffering. Perhaps I can engage." This movement towards engaging is the movement of right intention—the movement to actually explore these practices.

So those are the first two aspects of the Eightfold Path that we begin with: hearing the teachings, understanding them to some extent in our reflective capacity, and beginning to engage. But that's not the full fruition of those two aspects of the path—of right understanding and right intention. We'll come back to that later.

With this intention to engage, we start to explore some of the practices that are offered. The next aspect of the Eightfold Path is a set of ethical practices: the practices of wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. These are essentially the practices that begin to create some harmony in our relationships with the world, creating balance in our lives in the way that we engage—the way that we meet people, the way we meet our environment—harmonizing our relationship with the world, with other people, with this intention towards non-harming, living peacefully in the world.

As we engage in those practices, we start to see some of the ways in which our mind reaches out to want to do things. Because we're engaged in the ethical practices, we refrain from doing things perhaps that our mind is prompting us to do. And so we start to see the need for mental cultivation.

This need for mental development as a part of the path comes back to the understanding from the first aspect of the Eightfold Path, from right understanding: the understanding of how this suffering comes to be, of how this dukkha comes to be. When

we reflect on it and begin to look at it in our experience, we see that largely it happens because we are resisting the way things are or we're trying to hold on to the way things are. Either there's something in the world as it is that we don't like—we want to get rid of it, we want to push it away, or get ourselves out of the environment. Or there's something in the way things are that we want to try to keep and hold on to, which is an exercise in suffering because that thing will change.

We think that if we can arrange the world to our desires, then we will be happy. This comes back to what the Buddha saw. There's a poem that I like that describes this process we go through, an excerpt from Rilke's Eighth Duino Elegy:

And we, spectators, always, everywhere, turn toward the world of objects. It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down. We rearrange it, then break down ourselves. Who has twisted us around like this so that no matter what we do, we are in the posture of someone going away?

We have twisted ourselves around like this. Impermanence is a fact of life. The notion that we can arrange the world to our satisfaction and be happy is a fundamental misunderstanding of how happiness is possible for us.

When we see what's happening, we start to actually recognize that the suffering we're experiencing is a process happening in our own minds. The resistance to things as they are is a process going on in our own minds. The wanting to hold on to things is a process happening in our own minds. So we start to get the inkling that it's these processes in our minds that are the cause of our dissatisfaction. Hence, the need for mental cultivation—to cultivate wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration.

To look at our minds, to begin to understand how they work.

Our typical experience of the mind, as you're all very familiar with, is very scattered. It jumps around. It goes from thing to thing, from idea to idea. It's propelled by mental habits that largely feed on not being aware of them. These mental habits that we operate out of are largely based in unawareness.

So this practice of mental cultivation—wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—begins to bring some settledness into our lives. This is really what we've been practicing: the settling of our minds through bringing these three factors together. Wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration work together to settle the mind, to support this mental cultivation.

Much of what has been happening here on this retreat is learning about right effort and how right effort and right mindfulness work together. The effort to stay connected to experience in the present moment in a balanced way, in a relaxed way—staying connected with, not gripping onto, and also not losing touch with. That's an aspect of right effort: the balance of effort, the effort to begin to understand what things are worth saying "not now" to, the letting go of the hindrances, the turning towards the factors that support the development of concentration, using mindfulness to allow us to recognize what's skillful and what's unskillful in terms of creating concentration.

These two factors coming together—wise effort and wise mindfulness—result in wise concentration. The concentration resulting from, as we've said, the sustaining of mindfulness over time, whether on a single object like the breath, or whether a stabilizing of the mindfulness even with changing experience.

There's a large terrain that these three factors cover: wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration. I'm going to explore some of the edges of that terrain, which we've talked about over the week, but I want to really clearly define some of those edges and then explore some of the ways in which there can be a blending.

One edge of that terrain is one-pointed concentration—the concentration cultivated in the way we have been practicing these days, by bringing the attention back to one object of experience over and over again. It serves as a very stable and settling unification of mind to collect the mind around a single object. The body becomes still. There's a lot of peace, joy, contentment, calm. Sometimes rapture arises, sukha can arise. This is largely the terrain we've been exploring in these days.

Another edge of this terrain is what is sometimes called khaṇika samādhi, which means moment-to-moment concentration. This is generally a concentration that can be cultivated by stabilizing the mindfulness through changing experience. The mindfulness simply meets whatever the next experience is: a sight, a sound, a pressure, a vibration, a thought, an emotion, a dryness, a pulsing, a heat, a coolness—just a flow of ever-changing experience. The mind that can stay stable and steady with that experience also becomes quite concentrated. It's that stillness of mind that can meet the movement.

Philip was talking about stillness and movement last night. In the concentration practice we've been working with, it's a movement towards more and more stillness, letting go—from movement to stillness. With khaṇika samādhi, the moment-to-moment concentration, a stillness comes to the awareness and the awareness can open to a changing flow of experience.

This kind of concentration can be extremely powerful. The jhānic factors also come together in this kind of concentration. The five jhānic factors appear. They suppress the hindrances in this kind of concentration. Joy and happiness arise. The one-pointedness isn't one-pointedness on a single object; it's that unification of mind that can stay still and not be caught by any event, not start drifting out after it or being propelled to think about an emotion or a thought or a pressure or vibration—just the stream of experience coming through. In this kind of practice, we generally make the effort to sustain the mindfulness over time on changing experience.

These are the edges of the terrain, but in large measure, much of what we do is somewhere in the middle, in the vast terrain between them. We unify our mind to some extent on the breath, but we're noticing the changing experience of the breath. Or we bring our attention into the body and feel the breath through the body, and the breath infuses all of the experience. We're connected to the breath in a way that stabilizes the mind, and yet that breath includes the world.

I don't want to give you the sense that it's one or the other. There's a large terrain in the middle, and most people find their way, as we explore concentration practice, to some place where their mind feels at home in this terrain. That's a different place for different people. Some people move into very deep stillness. Other people move into much more of that open awareness. Neither one is better than the other, as long as we are pointing the concentration towards this understanding of suffering.

So whether we're cultivating one-pointed concentration or moment-to-moment concentration or somewhere in the middle, this unification of the mind—these three factors of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration coming together—gives a settling down of the jumpy mind, the distracted mind. It settles down the emotional reactivity. Rather than seeing the world through our normal state of habitual patterns and tendencies, we start to come into a place that is non-reactive.

This is again the stillness that Philip was talking about last night.

Right concentration, as I said earlier, is the last aspect of the Eightfold Path, but it is not the end of the path. We cultivate right concentration so that we can move towards an understanding of seeing things as they are. This is a revisitation of the wisdom aspect of the Eightfold Path—right understanding and right intention.

Beginning with an intellectual understanding, we explore the practices, and through the cultivation of this mentally unified mind, we can direct our attention towards our experience and begin to actually understand—directly understand—what the Buddha was talking about with respect to how suffering is created, how we react to experience.

We have a direct understanding of this core holding, this craving, and a letting go of that craving, even if for just a moment. And we have a taste of what it means to not suffer.

In the Buddhist understanding, one of the ways that suffering is expressed is that it results from greed, aversion, and delusion in our minds. And the most concise definition that I know of from the suttas of what enlightenment is, is the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion.

I'd like to read some of these passages to you. I find them quite inspiring.

"The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called Nibbana."

"Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed with mind ensnared, man aims at his own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and he experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, man aims at neither his own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and he experiences no mental pain and grief. This is Nibbana, immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise."

"And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and no more remains for her to do. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so, neither forms nor sounds nor odors nor tastes nor contacts of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is her mind, gained is deliverance."

"This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbana."

There are a couple of points here that I want to highlight. One is that in addition to being defined as the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion, Nibbana is described by its result: one experiences no mental pain or grief. Just imagine what life would be like with no mental pain or grief. There would be no problem.

The other piece that I find inspiring is that he says this is visible in this life. This is not some far-off future possibility. It is actually possible. The extinction of greed, aversion, and delusion to me sounds like something that can be experienced while walking around. It's not something that we have to be off in some mystical trance to experience. Visible in this life—that's at least how I like to hold it.

So the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion is essentially the direction that we are aiming our right concentration towards. Deep at the root of these three is the quality of ignorance. Normally, when we think of this word ignorance, we think of a passive state of not knowing. But the ignorance that underlies greed, aversion, and delusion is far more pernicious than that. It's actually an active misunderstanding that alters the way we perceive things, the way we view things. It's an active misunderstanding of what would make us happy.

Three of the primary misunderstandings—you'll probably recognize these—are taking what is impermanent to be permanent, what is unsatisfactory to be satisfactory, and what is not self to be self. I'd like to talk about this for a few moments.

Part of the reason we have this misunderstanding is that it's built into our whole perceptual process. That we take what is impermanent to be permanent—this is partly because the impermanent nature of experience is masked by the fact that change is happening so quickly. Last night, Philip talked about seeing that things are happening not five times faster, but hundreds of times faster than you can even comprehend. This rapidity of change actually masks the change. It makes it appear solid.

A very simple analogy: it doesn't work this way anymore in movie theaters, but they used to have projectors where every frame was a separate still image, and they would run that past the light quickly, creating the appearance of something continuous happening. So it doesn't appear to be these broken bits of experience—it just appears to be a flow that seems continuous. The rapidity of change in our experience is very much like that.

It masks the impermanent by the very quickness of its change. The coming into concentration, the settling of the mind with this sharp knife-edge of concentration, can begin to discern the rapidity of change. So this training in the mind starts to unmask these misunderstandings. It unmasks this misunderstanding about impermanence.

Taking what is unsatisfactory as being satisfactory, as a source of happiness—this again is the belief that we are happy when we get what we want, that that's how happiness comes about. We've learned this since we were babies: when we get what we want, it feels good. So we think that's the way to be happy, because we've learned over and over again that when we get what we want, it feels good, makes us feel happy. For just a moment, it makes us feel happy.

What we begin to see through this concentrated mind, the mind that can actually see into experience, is that a large part of the happiness that comes when we get something—some of it comes from getting the thing that we want. But most of that happiness ac-

tually comes because the wanting itself has stopped. And the mind that is willing to just meet the experience with this concentration, this concentrated mind that's willing to just observe wanting instead of acting on it, can start to see the deeper kind of happiness that comes not from getting what we want, but from watching the wanting go away. The mind that's willing to hang out with that wanting and watch it fade away as an impermanent phenomenon—if you can hang out with wanting and watch it go away, it feels like being released from a vice grip. Quite a startling experience, actually.

The impermanence of our experience is masked by the rapidity of change. The very fact that things are impermanent is one of the reasons why things are unsatisfactory as a lasting source of happiness. If we hold on to something, try to hold on to something, if we even get what we want and so manage to maneuver things for a little while to get what we want—even if we get that thing, inherently in that getting, that happiness is unsatisfactory because it's destined to fall apart. That thing which we're holding on to is impermanent and won't last.

This is another thing we can really begin to see: the unsatisfactoriness of experience as a place for lasting happiness. There's no experience that we can have that is going to do it for us. We think we can try to string them together, and that might do it for us. But we suffer because we hold on to things that are impermanent.

And what's even more amazing—as we really start to see things clearly with this mind of concentration and mindfulness—is that what we're holding on to, what we think we want, actually doesn't really exist. It's a construction of our own minds. What we want is just made up by our own minds.

I had an example of this on one retreat. I had heard about this insight called arising and passing, which is described as being a very lovely experience of just seeing things coming into being and vanishing. The mind is so stable that it just sees things very clearly coming into being and vanishing. Usually the initial taste of that is described as being quite a joyful occurrence. I really wanted this experience. I suffered a lot wanting that experience.

And I got to look at that suffering, watch that suffering, see what was going on. Finally what I realized was that I had no idea what this was that I wanted. I mean, no clue what arising and passing actually was. I had read something about it in a book, constructed some idea in my mind perhaps of what it might be like. But when I really looked at what I wanted, I saw myself telling my teacher in an interview that I had this experience—and that was what I wanted. I wanted to be able to tell someone I had had

that experience. That made me laugh. What I wanted was a construct in my own mind. This is much of how our minds work, and this is revealed to us through concentration and mindfulness.

Taking what is not self to be self—there are so many different habits and patterns that we have that we inherently assume to be who we are, ways that we've been for so long that we can't even imagine being without them. I myself had a strong pattern before I really moved into this practice of believing I was a miserable person. I was just miserable a lot of the time, but when I was happy, the belief that I was miserable was so strong that the thought in my mind was something like, "Well, yeah, I'm happy now, but I know I really am a miserable person." That is creating a self. There was evidence that I wasn't completely a miserable person, but I was seeing through this view of a miserable self. And that's how I saw my world.

These are misperceptions that we have. And gathering the mind together through effort, mindfulness, and concentration can begin to reveal these misperceptions.

With respect to not-self, we start to see our experience as just a flow, a process. We really begin to see the cause and effect nature of our experience—that there's no thing here really to call "I" or "me."

It's much like a seed that grows into a tree given the right conditions. There's no thing that is the tree. If you have a seed, there's not a tree there. As you plant it in the ground, there's not a tree there. That seed contains the potential for becoming a tree when the conditions are right, and the tree comes into being. It's a natural process by which that happens. There's no thing driving that process other than just this force of causes and conditions. Who we are is very like that. There's no one really guiding the process. It's just this flow of causes and conditions.

As we start to see into these misperceptions through concentration and mindfulness together, sometimes the insights we meet can be a little disturbing or unsettling. Seeing the rapidity of change can be quite unsettling. This is again where the concentration really supports us. The concentrated mind—we need that concentrated mind to be able to hold some of the deeper insights that happen on this path. The concentrated mind is stable, balanced, able to meet things as they are. The equanimity, the tranquility allows us to open our hearts to things as they are.

There are different ways to use concentration, different ways that concentration supports these insights. One of the ways is very much what we have been doing. We are learning about causes and conditions, cause and effect, as we practice to settle the mind. The very process of learning how to use these tools, learning how to balance the

energy and effort, learning how to aim and sustain the attention—we are learning about cause and effect. We learn how to say "not now" to the hindrances. We learn that this supports the settling of concentration. The whole practice of concentration gives us a really great education in cause and effect: how a concentrated mind is put together, what comes in to make it fall apart. This is an understanding that can support our deepening of insight into cause and effect.

One of the main ways to direct this concentrated mind towards experience, to begin to open to insight, is to turn the concentrated mind towards changing experience. We can settle the mind in a unified kind of concentration through stabilizing, settling the mind on the breath. After the mind has become quite stable—perhaps going through the jhānas, but not necessarily needing to go through the jhānas—we can take that power of concentration, which is like sharpening a knife, and turn that concentrated mind, changing the object of experience from the stable object towards changing experience.

This might be as simple as attuning towards the changing nature of the breath itself. Or it might be an opening to a broader range of experience. It might be beginning to open to the way the body moves a little bit with the breath. Or it might be opening to sound or other body sensations. It might be recognizing thoughts coming and going, like images in the mind just appearing and disappearing.

The main shift in moving from concentration into insight practice is this attunement to change. As we start to attune that mind to change, we begin to directly see much more clearly the impermanent nature of experience.

These insights into these misperceptions—the insight into impermanence, the insight into unsatisfactoriness, the insight into not-self—these are the insights that begin to free the mind, that begin to educate the mind in non-clinging. The mind that sees that things are impermanent doesn't particularly want to pick things up to hold on to them. The mind that understands that holding on to an experience will bring suffering doesn't particularly want to pick it up.

So this direct seeing, this ability to turn the mind to meet changing experience, begins to open our hearts, our minds to these deeper insights of wisdom that move us towards a letting go—or even towards a non-grasping.

We've been moving from movement to stillness. And this movement towards turning towards change is taking that stillness and opening to movement. That still mind meeting changing experiences.

Thank you for your attention to the Dhamma.

CHAPTER 41

Factors that Hinder and Support Concentration

Andrea Fella · 1h05

> *In this concentration retreat talk, Andrea Fella illuminates the relationship between the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa) and the five jhānic factors that support sammā samādhi (right concentration) as part of the Noble Eightfold Path. Using the Buddha's powerful analogy of the banyan tree—which strangles its host by competing for nourishment—she explains how hindrances of sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt can encircle and obstruct the mind's natural capacity for stillness.*
>
> *The talk offers a nuanced continuum for working with hindrances in concentration practice: from letting them remain in the background while maintaining attention on the breath, to breathing through stronger hindrances, to turning toward them directly with mindfulness when necessary. This differs from standard vipassanā approaches, emphasizing skillful setting aside rather than immediate investigation.*
>
> *Fella then presents the five jhānic factors—vitakka (aiming attention), vicāra (sustaining attention), pīti (rapture), sukha (happiness), and ekaggatā (one-pointedness)—explaining how each naturally counters a specific hindrance. She offers practical guidance on developing relaxed attention through gentle approaches: settling back to receive the breath, using requests rather than force, and learning to work with the natural resonance between aiming and sustaining attention. The teaching emphasizes that cultivating concentration and releasing hindrances are interconnected processes, each supporting the other on the path toward the deeper happiness of seclusion from unwholesome states.*

The concentration that we are cultivating here on retreat is the concentration of the Noble Eightfold Path, wise concentration, which is concentration that is supported by wise effort and wise mindfulness. This is actually quite important—that we know how we are aiming our minds, how we are cultivating our concentration.

Wise effort is crucial in that we are aiming our minds to let go of, to abandon the unwholesome, unskillful qualities of mind, those based in greed, aversion, and delusion. And we are cultivating and maintaining wholesome qualities of mind, those qualities that are based in non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—qualities such as love, kindness, generosity, and wisdom.

In talking about cultivating the wholesome and abandoning the unwholesome, the Buddha used an analogy of feeding and starving. He spoke of qualities of mind that we should nourish and encourage. These are the wholesome qualities of mind that we should feed. And there are qualities of mind that we should not feed, that we should denourish—that we should starve certain qualities of mind that lead to our suffering, that lead to our struggle, stress, and dissatisfaction.

Tonight I would like to talk about some of the qualities that we would like to let go of and abandon, and some of the factors that we would like to encourage in our practice of right concentration.

In particular, when discussing this feeding and starving analogy, the Buddha mentioned the list of the five hindrances as qualities that we should abandon, that we should actively find ways to denourish. These factors of mind lead not to our welfare and happiness, but to our struggle and suffering. Then there are several other lists that he encouraged us to cultivate and nourish: the qualities of the seven factors of awakening, the qualities of the five faculties, the four brahmavihāras—the qualities of kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Many, many qualities the Buddha mentioned that we should encourage and nourish.

Tonight I would like to contrast the five hindrances not with one of those familiar lists, but with another list that may not be as well known to you. If you have attended this retreat before, this list will be familiar, but it is not one we tend to discuss much on regular Vipassana retreats. It is the list of the five factors that support concentration, sometimes called the five jhānic factors. These factors actively counter the qualities of the hindrances, and so it is a good paired list to explore.

I would like to start first by exploring a little bit about the hindrances, though not in the usual detailed way of going through each one individually. I know that many of you, most of you, have probably heard quite a few talks on the hindrances, and some of you might even be able to give a talk on them yourselves.

The five hindrances are sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt. It sometimes sounds like seven, but sloth and torpor are paired together, and restlessness and anxiety are paired together as a single hindrance.

The Buddha described these states as states that particularly hinder concentration. They get in our way in terms of settling the mind. You can see this in just looking at a few of them. If you think about restlessness, how restlessness works—it keeps the mind scattered and distracted, which is the opposite of the unified mind. A mind filled with ill

will is not at peace, not at rest. A mind that is continually wanting things has a kind of unsettled quality to it. So we can see how these qualities actively obstruct the possibility of concentration.

It is useful to learn how to explore these hindrances and let go of them. In our mindfulness practice, we tend to turn towards them and explore them actively. In our concentration practice, we have a slightly different perspective. I would like to talk in general terms about how to work with difficult energies that obstruct and get in the way of concentration, rather than going through each one specifically.

First, I would like to offer an analogy that the Buddha used for the hindrances. He called the hindrances "encirclers of the mind," and he said they are like a banyan tree. Now, some of you may know what a banyan tree is, but most of us do not have daily encounters with banyan trees in our country. So I would like to describe to you what a banyan tree is, how it works, because the Buddha's analogies were very intuitive and very apt. They rely on your understanding something about the thing he is making an analogy about.

A banyan tree is a kind of fig tree that begins its life by having a seed deposited in the crook of another tree. What that seed does is send out roots—moisture-seeking roots that seek the ground. So it starts up in the top of a tree and sends out these roots. As those roots hit the ground, they begin to stiffen. They become firm. And they begin to create a kind of latticework of roots around this supporting tree.

And every place those roots cross, they get even stronger, until the point where the banyan tree has completely encircled its host tree and actually begins to compete with that tree for nourishment. It competes for light, for moisture. It begins to crowd out the area where the roots of the other tree could grow, and it essentially strangles the host tree, killing it. At some point, you end up with just this huge trunk—banyan trees can get quite large—that looks like a trunk because the roots fuse together. But instead of a regular trunk, there's this latticework of stiffened roots.

The hindrances are like this in our minds. There's this notion of competing for nourishment with wholesome qualities. As the hindrances get entrenched, they are taking our energy, they are obstructing and getting in the way of wholesome qualities. They are competing for the nourishment. And what I think is particularly apt about this analogy is the way the banyan tree sends out its shoots and the way that where the roots cross, they actually get stronger. The hindrances are self-reinforcing. They support each other. They encourage each other. These are very powerful energies in our minds.

In our concentration practice, as Sally mentioned this morning and as we've actually mentioned a couple of times already, the first approach to working with hindrances is that we have to recognize they are present. We do have to acknowledge them. We have to know that they're there. If we don't know they're there, they can be operating in the subconscious mind and may create a kind of agenda around how we're even doing our concentration practice. I'm sure you've seen this kind of thing happen where you're trying to stay with your breath and there's a striving or a holding or a pushing that's motivated by wanting. If that hindrance of desire is not seen, it is being strengthened. It's being cultivated. So we need to recognize when the hindrances are present.

When we see them present, typically in our Vipassana practice we tend to let go of what we've been paying attention to and turn our attention directly to the hindrance itself. That's not the first approach with concentration practice. With concentration practice, we acknowledge the hindrance, we recognize it, and in that recognition, we set it aside or let it be in the background. We see if we can keep our attention with the breath, letting the hindrance be present, acknowledging it, knowing it's there, but seeing if we can keep the attention to the breath in the foreground with the hindrance in the background—clearly knowing that the hindrance is in the background. There's a setting aside, a sense of "not now."

This takes some practice and skill, actually. At least for me, it wasn't something obvious about how to do. Having done a lot of Vipassana practice, I was very familiar with turning towards the hindrances and was a little afraid to let them be in the background, thinking they might rear their heads or get stronger somehow if I wasn't actively attending to them with mindfulness.

But I discovered on my first concentration retreat—a month-long metta retreat—that when I got this instruction to notice the hindrances arising but just see if I could stay with the metta phrases, something shifted. I would notice anger arise and try to let it be in the background. Over the course of that month of metta practice, I realized how much of a relief it was to just think, "Oh yeah, there it is. There's anger. I don't really have to do anything with it. I can just let it be and stay with the metta phrases."

What we can discover with this is that there's another way these hindrances can diminish. My understanding of how this works—why letting it be in the background is a skillful strategy for working with hindrances in concentration practice—is that our attention, what we are nourishing, what we are feeding as we attend to the breathing, are the wholesome qualities that cultivate concentration, the settled stability of mind with the breath. Knowing that the hindrance is in the background, it's as if that hindrance doesn't have any place to send its roots to get nourishment, because the mindfulness

and attention are with the breath. Hindrances tend to feed on non-awareness. When awareness is present and being attended to, even if the hindrance is left in the background, mindfulness does not allow much unawareness for that hindrance to tap into to nourish itself.

So we can see that when we have this setting aside, when we let the hindrance be in the background, the hindrance can essentially diminish on its own because it is an impermanent quality of mind. It is a factor that feeds on thoughts and energies. Ill will and sense desire, for instance, typically feed on thoughts and emotions. If we're taking our attention and placing it on the breath, there's not much room for the nourishing factors of thought and emotion to feed into that hindrance.

This is terrain we need to learn to navigate over time, this letting be in the background. But it is a very helpful tool to learn how to use. It takes some trust to do that. And we need to be honest with ourselves about whether we can let this hindrance be set aside.

This setting aside—or as Sally used the phrase this morning, "just not now"—that's one I use for myself: not now. And there's a way I explore how I'm saying "not now" to the hindrance. Is it, "Oh, there's anger... not now." Or "There's restlessness... not now." Or is it "*Not now*"—with a kind of energy of pushing it away?

We need to be really honest with ourselves about whether we can set the hindrance aside without an aversive quality, without a repressing quality. This is not about repressing the hindrance. It's not about that at all. It's more about letting it be, just not attending to it—what the Buddha might call a skillful ignoring of the hindrance.

At times, we can't just set it aside or let it be in the background. Hindrances have more energy than that. They're pushing themselves into our face. When that happens, we can approach from other directions, still trying to stay with the breath, but perhaps with half the attention on the hindrance and half on the breath. Maybe thinking of breathing through the hindrance—really consciously having the hindrance present in your mindfulness while allowing the breath to infuse it.

This is more of an approach you might take when the hindrance is a little stronger. I find it particularly helpful when hindrances are strong in the body, because the breath is an experience in the body. When restlessness gets strong in the body, you can think of allowing a spaciousness to breathe through the restlessness. Or perhaps with anger, having a sense of pressure and tightness and contraction around the heart—can you breathe through those sensations? This can apply also to working with pain. If you're finding pain in your body, you can have a sense of breathing through the pain.

Sometimes the hindrance is even stronger, where we can barely be in touch with the breath. Philip talked about this last night—the difficult mind state may be what's front and center. We're pretty much aware of and attending to the hindrance, but touching into the breath as we can. Just maybe every few seconds: ah, there's a breath, okay, and there's the anger, the desire, the wanting, the sleepiness. Every now and then we can touch into a breath, but more of our attention is on the hindrance. This is like the hindrance being in the foreground and the breath in the background—again, trying to stay connected with the breath as we can.

And of course, sometimes hindrances get strong enough that we simply cannot find the breath. I remember at one point, when I was doing metta practice as my concentration practice, the hindrances got so strong that I couldn't even remember the metta phrases. At that point it's like, okay, I need to turn towards this.

Learning how and when to apply these various levels is like navigating a continuum. We try to stay with the breath as we can, starting perhaps with the hindrance in the background and the breath in the foreground. If we find the hindrance is a little stronger, maybe we're trying to breathe with the hindrance. It might get stronger still, so the breath moves to the background and the hindrance to the foreground. And it might get so strong that the breath is just not possible to touch into, and we simply need to bring our practice of mindfulness to the hindrance. Many of you have had the teachings on turning towards the hindrance, observing it directly with mindfulness, so I'm not going to go into that tonight.

It takes skillful means, some discernment, to know when to apply the various tools along this continuum. One thing I'd suggest: let yourself notice whether, in working with one of these approaches, the hindrance is getting stronger. If you're being with the breath in the foreground and the hindrance in the background, and the hindrance doesn't seem to be getting stronger, just stay with the breath. That's fine. But keep your eye on it. Know that hindrance, know that it's present, and notice whether it's starting to creep up on you.

If we do need to turn towards the hindrance with mindfulness and let go of the breath, in that practice of cultivating mindfulness of the hindrance, we are still cultivating mindfulness. We're still cultivating the qualities of attending to our experience. So we are cultivating a form of concentration even as we attend to a hindrance. And we're also learning about our minds—cultivating the knowledge that helps us to let go.

This whole exploration of settling into concentration is not a week-long project. It's a long project of learning about your mind—learning how your mind struggles with itself, learning how your mind struggles with the practice. So as we come up against these things, it's not a failure, it's not a problem when we encounter the hindrances. It's our learning that needs to happen in this moment.

The learning that happens supports the cultivation of concentration because as concentration deepens, the hindrances fall away. And as the hindrances fall away, the concentration deepens. So the work on either side supports the work of concentration. The work of cultivating the deepening of concentration supports the letting go of the hindrances. The work of letting go of the hindrances supports the deepening of concentration. They're really interconnected.

You don't need to feel like you're somehow doing a lesser practice, or that you've taken a left turn and are no longer in the retreat because you're working with a hindrance. You're doing the work that needs to be done in the moment.

So as we cultivate concentration, there's the letting go of the hindrances that supports our cultivation of concentration, and then there's the cultivation of concentration itself. Five factors come together to support concentration and to create the concentrated mind. These are the five jhanic factors.

There is *vitakka*, the aspect of aiming the attention at experience. *Vicāra*, the aspect of sustaining the attention on experience. There is *pīti*—rapture, interest, joyful attention, rapt interest. Then there is *sukha*—sweetness, pleasure, comfort, happiness. And finally *ekaggatā*, which is one-pointedness or unification of mind.

These factors come together to support concentration. As Sally mentioned, there are only a couple of them that we have direct ability to engage with. That's the first two: aiming and sustaining the attention, the *vitakka* and *vicāra*. The others are more a result that comes together as we maintain and sustain our attention in a skillful way—not grasping or pushing away, without qualities of the hindrances involved. As *vitakka* and *vicāra* come together in a skillful way, these other qualities follow along.

Each of these five jhanic factors is said to naturally oppose one of the five hindrances. As these factors get strong, the hindrances naturally fall away. Now, it's a temporary falling away—it's not that they're gone for good. When these factors are present in the mind, the hindrances are not present. It's like a temporary removal or seclusion from the hindrances.

These are beautiful factors to cultivate. They create a state of mind in which we are free from the hindrances. Sometimes this is called the bliss of seclusion, because we are secluded from these unwholesome states of mind. It feels really good when the hindrances are not present. It has a beautiful feeling to it.

All five of these qualities come together to create what we can call neighborhood or access concentration. This is the basic concentration where the hindrances are at bay and the mind is very steady and stable. From this point in the teachings, it's said that we can choose to either move towards insight practice—where that concentrated and stable mind can be applied to recognizing the changing nature of experience and have insight into impermanence, suffering, and not-self—or we can choose to move into more absorption states of concentration.

These five factors are present in neighborhood concentration, and they're also present in the first jhāna. Later in the retreat we'll talk more about the jhānas, so I'm not going to go into detail about that this evening. I primarily want to explore these factors that come together to create the foundation for concentration and for jhāna.

Since these first two, *vitakka* and *vicāra*, are the ones we have the most ability to engage with, I'm going to spend more time talking about them and give a lighter touch to the other three.

Vitakka is the aiming of the attention, the initial application of mind. *Vicāra* is the sustaining of the attention. As an analogy, they're compared to the striking of a bell. *Vitakka* is like the striking of a bell, and *vicāra* is the sustaining, the resonant quality of the bell as it rings.

So vitaka is usually interpreted to mean aiming the attention towards experience—in this case, towards the breath. Directing the attention, placing the attention. This is something we can do with an act of will. We can choose where to place our attention.

Vichara, the sustaining of the attention, is usually interpreted as a kind of being with, sustaining—a rubbing is the way my teacher Sayadaw U Pandita talked about it. A rubbing, a connecting with the experience.

Thinking about the analogy of the bell, the vitaka is the striking of the bell. And the vichara, the way that the attention can sustain on experience, is going to be influenced by other conditions, much as the sustaining or the resounding of the bell is influenced by other conditions. If I hold onto the bell, it doesn't have that resonant quality. If there are other conditions, there may be changes to that resonance of the bell. So likewise, in our experience, there are conditions that will support that vichara to maintain.

And there are also different ways to strike, right? I can strike it like that, or like this. There are different ways to aim the attention that impact how the resonance happens. And so the aspects, the factors of vitaka and vichara—it's really important how we play with them, how we apply them.

We've been emphasizing relaxation. We've been emphasizing gentleness in the approach to being with the breath. And so I'd like to review this a little bit, because I talked about some of this yesterday in the guided meditation.

In terms of the aiming of the attention, the directing of the attention, we can forcefully aim our minds with a strong will—"I'm going to pay attention to that breath." Or there are some more gentle approaches. I mentioned a couple of these yesterday: the settling back and allowing the breath to come to you, having a sense of—rather than going out and looking for the breath—settling back and receiving the breath. This is a way of aiming the attention. It's just a little more settled back.

Using this approach is especially helpful as the breath gets more subtle. Rather than trying to look directly at it—you know, if you're paying attention to the breath at the nostrils or any place that's kind of a small place. I pay attention to a quarter-sized place at my sternum primarily. And sometimes the breath gets very subtle as we pay attention to it. When the breath starts getting really subtle, the inclination is to kind of force in and look harder. "Where is it? Where is it?" And what I find is actually helpful is to back off the effort at that point, to back off the intensity and almost see if, from a broader or almost peripheral perspective, the subtlety of the breath can pop into view.

I used the analogy yesterday of looking at stars. If you go out and look at stars at night, if you're looking at a dim star and try to look directly at it, it's hard to see. But if you look just off to the side, it pops into view. I've seen a similar kind of thing with the subtlety of the breath. Instead of trying to look directly at it, just let it come into the periphery. And then it can pop into view.

Another way to gently aim the attention is using what I call requests—rather than trying to do the aiming. For instance, right now, if I say to you, "See if you can attend to the experience of the breath at the nostrils. Just let yourself feel an in-breath at the nostrils"—often that's not too hard because I've pointed you in that direction, I've inclined you in that direction. And the mind, in hearing that, just naturally moves in that direction.

So we can do the same thing for ourselves. I will at times, if I'm finding that the effort is a little too forceful, settle back and just say to myself, "May the attention rest with the breathing"—and then see what happens. Not try to do it, not try to find the breath, but

allow the mind to find the breath, having made that request. I've found this to be remarkably helpful. Not always—it doesn't always work, for sure. It doesn't always work, but it works more often than I would imagine. And so this can be a really helpful way to begin understanding how the mind can pay attention, aim the attention in a gentle way, as opposed to a forceful way.

So this gentle aiming is like the skillful tapping of a bell, which begins to allow a more full sustaining of the attention. In the sustaining of the attention, this is an area again where I think we tend to over-effort. We tend to use a lot of force in sustaining the attention, because sustaining the attention is not easy. And what I've learned to explore here is the natural resonance that happens as we make an aiming of the attention.

There's a natural resonance that follows. As you begin to get familiar with this, aiming the attention to the breath, there often is a natural length of time that the mind can stay with the breath in that moment based on the way you've aimed the attention. There's a kind of natural sustaining that follows. It may last half a second, it may last two seconds.

As we become familiar with this quality of sustaining, this resonance that happens as we aim, we begin to learn how to make vitakka and vicāra work together. As we aim the attention, there's a little bit of resonance that sustains. And as we get familiar with that sustaining, we begin to see when it gets a little wobbly, when it starts to fade, and then we need to aim the attention again. We sit with that resonance for a while, and then we aim again.

In this way of playing with vitakka and vicāra, we learn how frequently we need to aim the attention. As we do this practice, a momentum builds and the sustaining naturally lasts a little bit longer. It's like we're getting really skilled at hitting that bell, so the resonance lasts a long time. We begin to learn that we don't need to keep aiming the attention—we can hang out in that space of sustaining. These two factors work together, and we learn how to skillfully navigate them in relationship to each other.

It's really helpful to use a light touch with the sustaining. Just enough energy at the beginning to stay with half a breath—don't try to sustain the attention for much longer than that. Just half a breath, and then reconnect with the aiming to the in-breath. Sustain for the in-breath, reconnect to the out-breath, sustain for the out-breath. In this way, half a breath at a time, the momentum begins to build. Then we become familiar with the sustaining and realize, "I don't need to keep aiming. I can be with two breaths." And then touch in again.

For me, this has been a really helpful exploration around working these two together. I find it's very helpful to take the time to allow this container of skillful use of these two qualities to settle in, to set up—to take the time to establish the relaxed attention. That's how I'm describing this here: vitakka and vicāra are the qualities of attention, and learning how to use them skillfully supports a relaxed attention.

Part of the way I've navigated this is starting from a place of relaxation, which is why I emphasize relaxation at the beginning of a guided meditation or sitting. I usually start with relaxation, and then from that place of relaxation, I incline the mind to connect with the breath. "May the breath be present. May the mind connect with the breath"—as a gentle way to establish that connection.

If I find in connecting with the breath that there's any tightness or tension, I go back to relaxation. It may be I only get half a breath that's not tight or tense. As soon as I start to see the mind clamp down, I'll just go back to that place of relaxation and try again. I'll go back and forth like this for quite a while at the beginning of a sitting until the mind begins to rest skillfully in a relaxed way with the breath.

It's well worth that time to find the way to be relaxed and attentive. It's not so helpful to just say, "Okay, I can hang on to the breath for long enough that I'll break into concentration." We can do that. We can push through that way. But it generally results in a brittle form of concentration, one that's not very stable.

That's the way I used to do it. I used to think, "Okay, I'm just going to hold on to this breath. I'm going to do it." And I could get pretty concentrated, but it was not very stable. I learned the hard way that it's really helpful to just take your time and find the way into relaxed attention. It will be different for each of you how that unfolds.

So explore. This is really a playground. We're playing with our minds here, learning how to be relaxed and attentive.

So the factor of vitakka, that aiming of the attention, is understood to counter sloth and torpor—that dullness of mind. As we consciously connect to the breath, aiming the attention, it brings an energy and a freshness into the mind and counters that quality of dullness and sleepiness.

Just to acknowledge, this is only the second full day of retreat. Many of you are probably experiencing dullness and sleepiness. This is typical for the first two or three days. There's a lot of swamp out there, I know. And it's okay. Just know that's okay. You can take naps, take short naps, rest. And also, just try to stay with the breath, work with it.

The resistance to sloth and torpor, as Philip so beautifully mentioned last night—that resistance actually takes so much energy. The resistance to the sloth and torpor is binding up energy that could be used to attend to the breath with the sloth and torpor in the background. So there's no need to resist it. Just let it be and see if you can stay with the breath. Aiming the attention, perhaps being a little more precise, knowing that that aiming of the attention counters that dullness of mind. Noticing the beginning of the in-breath. In the guided meditation that Sally offered, it was very much that aiming of the attention—really helpful. Noticing the beginning of the out-breath, that regular aiming of the attention, connecting, will counter that sloth and torpor.

Then the factor of vicāra, the sustaining of the attention, is understood to be the antidote to doubt. Doubt we experience in terms of doubt in ourselves, our ability to practice, doubt in the teachings, doubt in the teachers. Often when doubt is present, we're lost in thought and not connecting at all—completely lost in thought. So it's really helpful to begin to recognize doubt. For me, the main key is: if I'm thinking about the practice, doubt may be present.

If you find yourself waking up into thinking about the practice—what kind of practice should I do? How should I engage? This practice isn't right. Maybe I should do this—doubt is probably present. When doubt is present, the antidote is connecting with experience and sustaining that attention on experience. Doubt can't get its roots in the ground when the attention is sustained on an experience. So we just need to be willing, when we notice doubt is present, to find an experience—find the breath. Find the breath and see if you can stay with it. See if you can practice that sustaining of the attention.

Be willing to try this and see whether it supports you. It does take a willingness, a little bit of faith, that this will support me to let go of the doubt. And the seed of faith actually also helps to counter the doubt. So that trust, that willingness—try it and see. Run the experiment. Does this work?

The third jhānic factor of rapture is delight and joy accompanied with interest in our experience. This comes about—again, this is not something that we do—as a result of maintaining our attention, the practice of vitakka-vicāra, the aiming and sustaining of the attention. As that becomes more continuous, this quality of rapture begins to naturally arise. This quality of interest in the breath begins to arise.

Now, we can't actively do this. We cultivate rapture by cultivating the conditions for rapture. And the main conditions for rapture are the aiming and the sustaining of the attention. Then there's another aspect we can support, another condition for rapture, which is the comfortableness of the breath that we can play with. Allowing the breath

to be comfortable. Finding the pleasure in the breath. Sometimes this is actually quite easily present if we're just open to it, if we just check in: Is there any pleasurable experience to be found as I'm exploring the breath? Sometimes it's quite obvious. This connection with the pleasurable quality of the breath can also support the development of this third factor of rapture. The comfortable breath is something we can actively play with.

We can approach this from two angles. We can come at it from the side of the body, actually exploring whether there are different ways we might breathe that would support the breathing becoming a little more comfortable. For some people, this is very helpful. I found this to work at times, but what was more helpful for me was to come at it from the side of the mind—basically to look at the breath and recognize that if the breath doesn't feel comfortable, something is going on. Often it meant there was a little bit of aversion or a little bit of wanting in the mind that was obstructing the pleasurable qualities of the breath. So for me, exploring it from the side of the mind proved more fruitful. Is there a way I can be comfortable with the breath? Is there a way that this breath can be comfortable?

Another way to explore this is again through the use of requests. "May the breath become comfortable." This can be surprising. This is a way I found in for myself, using these requests—the mind can be quite amenable to this. Again, it's not that we're doing it. We're simply dropping this request into the mind and body and seeing what results. It's like dropping a pebble into a pond and watching the ripples. Drop this request in: "May the breathing become comfortable," and see if the breathing shifts a little, or if the comfortable experience around the breathing shifts.

Rapture can be a very beautiful experience. It can have many physical manifestations accompanied by pleasant body sensation—tingling, goosebumps, flashes of energy, showering sensations, waves of pleasure, lightness in the body. It can also involve energetic experiences. It sounds wonderful, and people say, "Oh yes, I want that." But be careful what you wish for. The energy can become really strong at times, and it can get a little edgy or agitating as well.

Rapture often has a physical component to it. It often feels quite nice and has this aspect of interest. There's a quality of feeling nourished—the mind and body feel like they're getting what they've been asking for in a certain way. The way it's felt for me is that all my cells seem to be just drinking it up.

Because rapture can be such a strong experience, there can be a tendency for us to get pulled toward it. Someone asked a question this morning about working with pleasant experiences in meditation and how to navigate them. The sensations of rapture can

be really interesting. You're experiencing waves of pleasurable, almost orgasmic feelings through the body, and it's like, "Wow, that feels really good." The breath just recedes because it feels so good to be sitting in these waves.

A couple of things are important to understand here. First, the rapture comes about because of sustaining and maintaining attention on the breath. That attention was the nourishment, the cause for rapture arising. If we take that nourishment away, we're removing the conditions that support the rapture. So one of the most helpful things to do is—much like working with the hindrances—to let the rapture be in the background and let the breath be in the foreground. Or perhaps breathe with the experience of rapture when it's very strong. Sometimes there's a sense of breathing with or breathing through the feelings of rapture, allowing them without pushing them away.

There's an interesting distinction between what happens when we allow rapture to be in the background versus allowing a hindrance to be in the background. When we bring our attention to the breath in the foreground and allow a hindrance to be in the background, generally the hindrance dissipates. When we bring the breath to the foreground and allow rapture to be in the background, generally it creates conditions for the rapture to strengthen. Maintaining attention with the breathing actually supports the rapture.

Rapture counters the hindrance of ill will. When the mind is in a state of rapt interest, it is simply not in the terrain of finding fault with things, of discovering what's wrong. The state of being happy and interested naturally opposes ill will. Now again, this is not something we can do directly, but as concentration is cultivated, as we work with vitakka and vicāra and attention is sustained, as rapture arises, ill will will start to fade. This is how we abandon the hindrance of ill will through the cultivation of concentration.

The fourth factor is sukha—happiness, contentment, sweetness. It's a mental pleasure. This quality of sukha is present with rapture, but often it's a little obscured because the energy of rapture is so much stronger. Sukha is a much more tranquil kind of experience, and so it can be overshadowed by rapture's presence. As the mind settles more, becoming a little more tranquil, the quality of sukha becomes more apparent to us.

It's a refined kind of happiness. There's an analogy in the texts that describes the distinction between rapture and happiness. It says that rapture is like the state of someone who has been walking in a desert and comes upon an oasis. Just imagine, if you've been walking in a desert for a long time, the kind of joy that would arise for you, the happiness that would come up with the idea that relief from thirst is near. That's the comparison to rapture.

The comparison for sukha is somebody who has taken a drink of the water from that oasis and is already resting in the shade of the trees. There's more of a sense that the thirst has been slaked. The mind is more at ease—there's a contentment, a relaxation and ease, a tranquility with the happiness of sukha.

Sukha is understood to counter restlessness and anxiety. As the mind becomes more tranquil and settled, more content, there's no room for that agitated energy of restlessness. Restlessness, both physical and mental, is an excess of energy, and this quality of sukha settles our energy.

We also will have a tendency to grasp at sukha because it too is very pleasant. My own expression for sukha is "oh yes." It's the "oh yes" state—like, oh, this feels really good. So we can grasp at it. Again, see if you can let it be in the background. Stay with the breath. Stay with the supports that allow these qualities to be nourished.

Then there is the fifth aspect: ekaggatā, one-pointedness or unification of mind. These two translations offer two ways of exploring and understanding this factor. One-pointedness points us to the kind of concentration that is cultivated on a single object, where the mind grows more still based on attending to one thing. Unification of mind can be understood as a broader kind of concentration where the mind is settled and stable, not whipped around by the hindrances, able to meet whatever is arising. This understanding allows us to appreciate the broader concentration, the moment-to-moment concentration.

This quality of one-pointedness or unification of mind is present whether the concentration is on a single object or whether it is stable on changing objects. I wanted to make that clear. The translation of one-pointedness sometimes makes us think this only happens when we're paying attention to one object, but this quality of mind arises in both kinds of concentration.

Ekaggatā is sometimes used as a synonym for samādhi. It's this unification of mind, this balance of mind. It contains a mind that is more stable, not reactive. Again, it's a result of sustaining the attention. Vitakka and vicāra are the ground out of which all of these other factors grow. The continuity of our mindfulness, either on one object or on changing objects, supports this quality of one-pointedness, of unification of mind, to become strong.

The mind feels balanced. It feels contented. There's no problem, nothing that we need to change. And this points to the hindrance that this factor of mind opposes, which is sense desire. When we're in this state of unification of mind, the mind is completely contented with whatever is happening. There's no need to want anything. The desire to want things falls away with that state.

As this factor begins to grow strong, as all the factors come together, we begin to get a sense of how concentration helps us to overcome all of the hindrances. It points toward a happiness that is deeper and more satisfying than our normal way of operating in the world—the normal way that we go after sense desire, trying to construct the world as we'd like it to be, finding the next hit of pleasure, getting rid of the next thing we don't want in our environment.

In the Dhammapada, the Buddha says, "If by renouncing a lesser happiness one may realize a greater happiness, let the wise one renounce the lesser, having regard for the greater."

This is what we begin to see with concentration when these factors come into balance together. As they come into balance, the hindrances fall away. We experience a kind of happiness that is much more satisfying than the happiness of getting what we want.

And we begin to realize that renouncing the happiness of sense desire helps us to move towards this deeper kind of happiness.

So this practice of exploring our minds, getting to know the hindrances, allowing them to fall away, practicing concentration, cultivating these factors—we are exploring our minds here. We're learning about our minds.

However you are engaged in this moment, whatever's happening now, that's where we start. We've said that a few times: we start where we are. If that's with a restless mind, we bring the breath through the restlessness. If we need to, we turn to the restlessness itself. If we're starting with a mind that's a little more settled, stable, and satisfied with just being with the breath—that's where we start.

There's no right or wrong. However you are engaging is supporting the practice. It's actually supporting both directions at once. Whenever we're cultivating letting go of the hindrances, we're already cultivating qualities that support the factors of jhāna. Whenever we're cultivating the factors of jhāna, we're already cultivating things that help us let go of the hindrances.

Wherever you are, however you're engaging—that is the practice.

Let's just sit for a moment and allow the words to drift away.

CHAPTER 42

Using Concentration to See Things as They Are

Andrea Fella · 1h06

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella traces the Buddha's spiritual journey to illuminate how concentration serves as a tool for liberation rather than an end in itself. She recounts how the young Siddhattha first mastered deep absorption states with his teachers, then pursued severe ascetic practices, before finally recognizing that wholesome pleasure combined with wise investigation could lead to freedom. The key insight was turning the concentrated mind toward changing experience rather than remaining absorbed in stillness.*
>
> *Fella distinguishes between one-pointed concentration (where mind stabilizes on a single object) and moment-to-moment concentration (where awareness remains stable while observing changing phenomena). While absorption concentration produces blissful, refined states, it is the latter form—vipassanā practice—that penetrates into the three characteristics: anicca (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), and anattā (not-self). She explains how ignorance actively distorts our perception, causing us to take what is impermanent as permanent, what is unreliable as a source of happiness, and what is not-self as self.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance for transitioning from concentration to insight practice, whether by opening awareness to the six sense doors or by attending to the changing nature of the breath itself, as taught in the Ānāpānasati Sutta. Fella emphasizes that wisdom typically develops gradually—like rope weathering on a beach—rather than through dramatic breakthrough experiences. She concludes with the Buddha's teaching that the extinction of greed, hatred, and delusion constitutes nibbāna, offering freedom from mental pain and grief visible in this very life.*

Tonight I'd like to talk about how concentration fits into the overall path of Buddhist practice and how we explore turning our concentration towards insight, towards understanding, towards wisdom.

To explore this, I'd like to start by talking a little bit about the Buddha's own journey. When he was a young man, he had this sense of: why am I looking for happiness in places where it doesn't seem very reliable? Here I am, a human being, subject to aging, sickness, and death. And the ways I'm searching for happiness is in searching for connections with things that are also subject to aging, sickness, and death. So how far is that going to get me?

This was a motivating question for him. When he was about twenty-nine years old, he left his home and went in search of an answer to this question. He explored various teachings that were available in the day. There was a very vibrant spiritual scene in India at the time that the Buddha lived—many teachers teaching a lot of different tools for what they were hoping to be a form of liberation. Various teachers were proclaiming that they had found ways towards liberation, ways towards freedom. And the Buddha went in search of these people and studied with them.

The first two teachers that he met taught very deep states of concentration as a way towards freedom—freedom from the suffering that was present in the here and now. The Buddha explored these and learned very deeply these teachings of how to concentrate the mind and become very blissful, very refined states of bliss, of peace, of ease.

Given that his motivation was how to be completely free of suffering, he saw that seeking happiness in things that were subject to aging, sickness, and death—or impermanence—that wasn't the way. In his exploration of these concentration states, he found that after he emerged from them, these states themselves were subject to impermanence. And so they weren't the answer to his question. Having learned what he could learn from these teachers, he decided this is not the way.

Then he went off to practice some very severe ascetic practices, another set of practices that were available in his day. He practiced a form of concentration of breathing practice where he basically stopped the breathing. He said he stopped the breathing in his nose, his mouth, and his ears. By doing that, he experienced what he called racking pains—pains in his head, pains in his belly. He described it as if somebody with a knife was carving up his belly, or a strap being bound around his head. This was an extremely painful experience.

So he went from the bliss of the concentration to this racking pain trying to do this practice of stopping up his breathing. This is an indication for you: don't try to make your breathing stop. It doesn't lead to bliss.

The Buddha decided this doesn't seem to work very well, so maybe he'd try some other practices. He decided to stop eating, that maybe if he stopped eating, he would liberate himself from suffering. He reduced the food that he took in. He got down to one grain of rice a day. He lost a tremendous amount of weight. His description of himself is that his hair began to fall off his body—when he rubbed his limbs, his hair would come off. His backbone was like beads sticking out. When he touched his belly, he could touch his spine. Very emaciated. Here he is on the door of death, basically about ready to die, and he's like, this doesn't seem to be the way either.

At that point, just about on death's door, he seems to have a kind of reflection: what might be the way? This question comes into his mind. And what appears to him is a memory—a memory of a time when he was younger, when he was a boy, watching his father do a ritual plowing festival. His father was the local king in the area, and he was watching his father do this ritual festival. As he was observing this, sitting under the shade of a tree, he spontaneously fell into a blissful state of concentration, basically in the terrain of the first jhāna, an embodied blissful state. As he remembered that, he thought to himself: is this the way?

Then he had this recognition: yes, this is the way. Why should I be afraid of pleasure that is wholesome?

This is interesting, I think, because the very first practices he did were heading in this direction of bliss—the concentration practices he engaged in. And so this has been an interesting question for me: What did he see in that moment as the difference? Because he had been practicing with these teachers, practicing very deep states of concentration, and had decided that's not the way. And then in reflecting back, he thought, maybe this is the way. This is the way. It came to him with some certainty. This is the way.

Reading further in what happened, he nourished himself so he became healthy again. And then he began exploring the four jhana states, concentrating his mind to these states—to the depth of peace, tranquility, equanimity. And then the key here, I think, that helps us to understand what he learned or what he found or what he intuited, is this: The description in the suttas is, "I purified my mind, concentrated my mind until it was malleable, bright. And then I turned that mind to the destruction of the causes of suffering."

So he basically—I think the key piece that he recognized is that the early teachers he went to were teaching the concentration states as an end in themselves. That the states that were attained, the very deep states of concentration in which the body completely falls away, where there's no experience of body, very refined states of mental stillness and tranquility—those states themselves were not the freedom that he was looking for. But he found, or thought of, a different way of using that. Rather than using it as an end in itself, he chose to use the concentration as a tool to explore this question of: What is suffering? How is it caused? Is it possible for it to come to an end?

And so he turned his concentrated mind towards this question. This is, I think, the real key—the shift that he found, the shift that he contributed: that this concentrated mind can be used as a tool. It's not the end, but it is a very powerful tool. He said to his followers, "Cultivate concentration. One who cultivates concentration sees things as they actually are."

So concentration in our practice, in our path, in the Buddhist path, is developed and cultivated in the service of liberation, in the service of freedom. This is the direction I'd like to explore: How do we turn this concentration towards freedom? How do we use this concentration in the service of liberation?

And this for me can be very inspiring at times when I'm practicing concentration. I can get into some very beautiful states and it's kind of like, well, why am I doing this? What's this about? Why do this? What is the point? I remind myself: the point is that this supports liberation. It is in the service of liberation, and that can give me the inspiration to continue with the concentration.

So to talk about how concentration is used in the service of liberation, I'd like to review something that we've already explored a little bit. This will just be a quick review of the different kinds of concentration.

The concentration that we've been mostly encouraging and cultivating these past days has been one-pointed concentration—the concentration where we're stabilizing our mind on one object. The object becomes more and more still as we do this, and that stillness stills the mind. So the emphasis in this kind of concentration practice is in stilling the mind.

Then there is the kind of concentration that we talk about with respect to insight practice—the kind of concentration in which the mind is stable, the awareness is stable and non-reactive, but there's changing experience. The mind is non-reactive to the flow of changing experience. So there's a stability of the mind, but the objects are no longer still.

This kind of concentration, this moment-to-moment concentration, can also get very, very strong. All the jhanic factors that we've talked about are cultivated in the process of attending to experience moment after moment after moment. The continuity of awareness is what cultivates the stability of mind, rather than continuity on one object. So the mind recognizes moment after moment: seeing, body sensation, a sound, an emotion, a thought, a sight, another body sensation. It's just an endless flow, but the mind is picking up moment after moment on the changing nature of experience.

This also creates the stability of mind where the jhanic factors are all strong and the hindrances fall away. So there is that bliss of seclusion in this kind of concentration as well.

The factor of *ekagata*—the one-pointedness, the unification of mind—in moment-to-moment concentration is not one-pointed on a single object. Rather, the one-pointedness or stability resides in the awareness itself. The awareness is stable in that it doesn't pick up on any object and then go following it out, following with thoughts and ideas and views and opinions about it. Something arises, it arises and it's known. It passes. Another thing arises, it arises and it's known. That stability, the *ekagata,* is the stability of awareness itself.

This second form of concentration—the concentration that can be attentive to changing experience—is the kind of concentration that allows us to penetrate into things as they are. The Buddha made this statement: cultivate concentration, for one who cultivates concentration sees things as they are. This second kind of concentration begins to penetrate into how experience is ever-changing, ever-flowing. How that ever-flowing experience is completely unreliable as a place where we can find happiness. There's nothing we can hang onto in that flow of experience that will be the thing that will do it for us—the unreliability of experience. We see that everything happening is simply a process of change, of causes and conditions. There's no abiding, lasting anything. Nothing that we can call self, me, or mine. This kind of concentration, this moment-to-moment concentration, is the kind that can see these truths.

Absorption concentration—the concentration of stillness where the mind settles into one-pointedness—produces very blissful states, produces great stillness, and very much sharpens the mind, refining its ability to meet subtler and subtler experience. And yet the stillness that we come to in that state... the change is not so obvious there. Change is not what's happening. And so that kind of absorption concentration, while it leads to very blissful states, doesn't lead to the kind of insight that will free us.

The key thing that begins to liberate us is turning the mind towards change. As we employ concentration as a tool, we turn the concentrated mind towards changing experience. This is actually the key distinction between what we would call concentration practice and vipassana practice. In concentration practice, we are inclining the mind towards stillness. We're not inclining it towards change; we're not inclining it to see all the subtlety of the changing nature of the breath. We're inclining towards stillness, more and more stillness. In vipassana practice, we turn our attention towards change.

So this is the key distinction between concentration practice and mindfulness practice. With the concentrated mind, we can use that concentration to turn towards change. The more concentrated the mind becomes, the more refined the concentration becomes, the more clearly it can see change—if we choose to turn that concentrated mind towards change.

This is the turning that we are exploring at this point in the retreat. We've been cultivating concentration for these number of days, and in the instructions tomorrow we will offer the suggestion to begin turning this concentration we've been cultivating towards changing experience.

There are a couple of ways to explore this, which I'll mention briefly here; we'll go into them more over the coming days. One way is this: you've been cultivating your attention on the breath, staying with the breath, inclining the mind more and more towards stillness. One way to explore this turning towards change is to open up—essentially to let go of the focus on the breath and open to the six sense doors. Open to the fact that seeing is happening, hearing is happening, body sensations are happening, smelling, tasting, and all the events happening in the mind. We can open to the changing flow of experience.

This can sometimes feel a little jarring after you've been really still—to just say, well, let me let go of the breath and open to changing experience. So we can take an intermediate step if you wish. And actually, it's sufficient: the practice of mindfulness of breathing is the practice of turning the attention, the concentrated mind, from the stillness around the breathing to the changing experience of the breathing. The Buddha said this practice of mindfulness of breathing can take you all the way to liberation. But it's not going to take you all the way if you just settle into more and more and more stillness, into absorbed states of concentration. You need to turn to the changing nature of the breath, the changing nature of the mind as it meets the breath—the instructions that Temple was talking about the other day in the Anapanasati Sutta.

So we can turn and open to the flow of broad experience, or we can also open to the change of the breath and the change in the mind, how the mind changes as the breath moves, noticing how various factors arise in the mind and are cultivated. We turn towards change, allowing ourselves to begin exploring experience—whether the flow of experience across all our senses or the changing nature of the breath. And in that turning towards the changing nature of experience, the concentrated mind has the capacity to simply be with this change, to not be reactive to the change, to just witness this flow.

So it allows us to open to insight. Insight into what? What is the insight that we are exploring?

Vipassana, the term usually translated as insight, means something along the lines of —the *vi* part, the first syllable, Sayadaw U Pandita says means something along the lines of "various things." And the *passana* part means "to see clearly into." So the term vipassana means to see clearly into various things. And the various things, Sayadaw U Pandita said, that that first syllable refers to are impermanence, suffering, unreliability, and not-self. This is the terrain of insight.

To come back to the perspective from which the Buddha was asking his question—I think that's always helpful, to return to what was the Buddha's motivation, what was his aspiration, what was the direction he was coming from. His quest was: Is there an end to suffering? Is there an end to distress, dissatisfaction, unease?

He found through his exploration that the core cause of this suffering is basically wanting things to be some other way than they are. He found that this wanting things to be some other way than they are is based in three basic factors of mind: greed, aversion, and delusion.

In his exploration, studying what's happening and what's the cause of that, he reasoned: Well, if there's suffering and the cause of that is greed, aversion, and delusion, how might I bring greed, aversion, and delusion to an end? If I can bring the cause of suffering to an end, then suffering should come to an end. It was very logical.

So he began that exploration, and he found that possibility. He found the possibility for freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion. And that is enlightenment.

Maybe it doesn't sound so glorious. We think of enlightenment as floating blissful on clouds somewhere. I don't know what we think of it as—blinding flashes of light and showers of bliss, something along those lines. But no greed, no aversion, no delusion sounds pretty mundane in a way.

But here are some of the descriptions from the suttas: "The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called nibbana." Nibbana being the term for liberation, extinction of suffering.

"Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain or grief."

Imagine that. Just imagine that. No mental pain or grief. That sounds pretty good.

"This is nibbana immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise."

To me, that's very inspiring. Enlightenment maybe seems like some far-off thing, distant. But the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion—the possibility that this is visible in this life—that is inspiring.

So the insight into suffering, the insight into the cause of suffering, the insight into ignorance—these are the insights that we explore. Deep at the root of greed, aversion, and delusion is this ignorance.

What is this ignorance? Our usual definition of ignorance is something like not really being aware of something, not knowing something, not having some kind of information—just a kind of passive not knowing. We sometimes think about ignorance as being a passive not having some kind of information.

The ignorance that's at the root of greed, aversion, and delusion is far more insidious than a passive form of not knowing. It actually is an active way that our minds engage with the world, misunderstanding things, misinterpreting things. We walk through life confused. Because of that confusion, we think that having things will make us happy. We think that getting rid of things that we don't like will make us happy.

So this ignorance, this fundamental ignorance, distorts the way we maneuver through our lives. There are three primary distortions.

These three distortions will be familiar, as I've been mentioning them throughout. The Buddha speaks of three primary distortions, three fundamental misunderstandings that shape the way we move through life: we take what is impermanent to be permanent, we take what is unreliable as a source of happiness to be reliable, and we take what is not self to be self.

This is simply human. It's not individual or personal—it's the way we are set up as human beings. These misunderstandings are wired into our nervous system in a certain way. But fortunately, they are not hardwired. It is possible to see through them.

Taking what is impermanent to be permanent—there are several ways this happens for us. One of the most innocuous ways is that things are changing so rapidly that the very speed of change masks its presence. In our experience, in all of reality, the level of change is happening so fast that it becomes invisible.

There's an analogy given somewhere, either in the suttas or in the commentary, about impermanence. Someone holds a fire stick—a stick with fire on the end—and whirls it around in a circle. I used to do this as a child with sparklers, just whirling around in a circle. The illusion created is that a circle exists in the air, because you're moving the fire so fast that the mind creates the appearance of a continuous ring. The rapidity of movement actually generates this illusion that something solid is there, something permanent. This is one way impermanence is masked—things are changing so rapidly we don't perceive the change.

Another way impermanence is masked operates more in our psyches: we overlay concept onto experience and relate to things through those concepts. For example, place your attention in your hand for a moment. Feel your hand, feel the sensations there. Close your eyes and don't look at your hand—just feel the vibration, the pulsing, the tingling. There's a variety of changing experience. Now open your eyes and look at your hand. Think about it as a hand, what hands do. What happens to the immediacy of that sensation?

For me, the concept removes me from it. The idea of "hand" overlaid on experience distances me from its dynamic, changing nature. This is another way impermanence is masked—we place concepts onto experience and relate to the world through them.

This is very useful. We couldn't live without concepts. If we lived only in raw experience—particles of sight—and had to construct people and chairs and floors and walls every time we walked into a room, marveling at all this change, we wouldn't get very far. Concept is remarkably useful, but we need to see it for what it is. It's not solid. It is a fleeting idea. The concept itself is impermanent, unsubstantial, unreliable.

And then there's taking what is unsatisfactory to be satisfactory. Until we truly meet a spiritual practice, we go about our lives mostly trying to construct a world that suits our desires. We arrange circumstances so that we have more of what we like, less of what we don't like. Our culture has trained us to believe that having what we want, getting rid of what we don't want, is happiness.

While we see at some level that this isn't very reliable, our sense of happiness still depends on maneuvering our environment. We think, "This will keep me happy for a while. I can live with that, but then it's going to start falling apart. So what's the next thing? What can I construct next to maintain the happiness?" We believe that arranging our lives—stringing together moments of getting what we want, moments of avoiding what we don't want—is the best it gets.

That's as good as it gets.

So we are seeking happiness in inherently unreliable things. And at some level we know that. At some level we know that the happiness we're creating is unreliable. This is why we're on this hamster wheel of "what's the next thing? What's the next thing? What's the next thing?"

The Buddha discovered that this form of happiness actually keeps us tied to endless dissatisfaction. As we are constructing this world of "what's the next thing?" we're in a state of dissatisfaction. At the moment that we want something, dissatisfaction springs up. The moment there is a sense of wanting, there's an inherent sense of lack. And so we're living in a continual state of lack.

The Buddha found a different way.

Taking what is not self to be self—I'll just give an example from my own experience. Before I started practicing, I was a pretty miserable person. And I knew I was a miserable person. There would be moments when happiness would come through, but the mind would go something like, "Well, yeah, I'm happy now, but I know what I really am is miserable." I was completely identified with this miserable person. Complete belief in its reality. It was a full-blown self. That's who I was. Miserable.

Through the practice, I began to understand that this miserable person was a construct, and that miserableness was a state with causes and conditions. It comes, it goes. There's nothing inherent about that miserableness. So taking what is not self to be self—for me, that's what I was doing. I was taking this miserableness, creating a whole construct out of it, and then saying, "That's me."

We do this a lot. We do this kind of thing a lot. We take what is not self to be self.

These misunderstandings actively impact how we relate to experience. We go around believing that we can find happiness by holding onto things.

As we begin to explore our experience with a concentrated mind, as we turn towards our experience, we're basically noticing change. Turning that concentrated mind towards change, we begin to deeply, deeply understand the impermanence of experience. Nothing lasts very long. Nothing lasts for even more than a split second. Experience is ever flowing and ever changing when we drop below the level of concept.

We see this in our experience. It's a truth that we witness. We see that it's our own minds constructing this belief in permanence, this sense of permanence. We see it as a fiction—a useful fiction perhaps at times, but it is a fiction.

The concentration begins to reveal this to us. It reveals the unsatisfactory nature of experience. Because we see the changing nature of experience, we see that there's nothing we can really hold onto. There's nothing out there that would be reliable. It's all just slipping away, slipping out of our grasp. The attempt to hold onto things that are impermanent creates this dukkha, this suffering.

And we also discover—actually, one of the things we discover in terms of what we hold onto as we turn our concentration towards experience—we discover that we are holding on not to things themselves, because there's no way to hold onto things that are just changing. There's no way to hold onto them. But what we are holding onto are concepts. We are suffering over clinging to something that our own minds have created.

This is quite a revelation when we see it.

Not only is our suffering created by clinging—our own minds construct what we cling to.

Seeing into the not-self nature of experience is essentially revealed through beginning to see that things are a process. Again, it's all related back to the impermanent nature of experience. Because of impermanence, things are unreliable. In that impermanent, flowing, changing experience, there are causes and conditions. Things arise, they create causes, there are effects. The effects then create more causes, and it's just this flow. It's kind of like dominoes—you set up dominoes in a series, then tap the end one, and they just collapse. It's like that. There's a process happening in our experience, a process of cause and effect, a very lawful process of cause and effect.

The very lawfulness of that process is part of what obscures this truth of not-self. Because the lawfulness of the unfolding of experience makes us believe that there's something here, someone here that's deciding and choosing and doing.

If we explore this through the analogy of a seed growing into a tree: you plant a seed and water it. There are conditions—the water that nourishes the seed, the soil from which it can draw nutrients, the warmth of the sun. All of these conditions come together for the seed to sprout. Then more conditions have to come into play. That little sprout needs to not be walked on or trampled over or eaten by animals. More conditions need to come together for this seed to turn into a tree. If the tree is in favorable conditions, it will grow, it will age, it will unfold into a full tree. But there's no being there directing that process. It is simply a lawful unfolding based on causes and conditions. That tree comes into being or it doesn't come into being.

It's very similar with this process that we call "me." We are an unfolding of process. There's a stream of unfolding cause and condition. There's no abiding entity. And as we turn our concentrated mind to our experience, we begin to see this. We begin to see the cause-and-effect nature of our experience. We start to see how, as I turn my mind to attending to the breathing, it supports a cultivation of various conditions. So there is some kind of agency—but there's not a being there that has that agency. That agency is itself a product of causes and conditions.

We see how intention leads to results. We see something creating the arising of an intention. An example that might illustrate this: as you observe your experience, you may find you're sitting in the hall for a long period of time and there begins to be a feeling of pressure in your bladder. That feeling of pressure produces some discomfort. That discomfort produces the intention to move. The intention to move produces a movement to stand. And we're off to the bathroom. There's this unfolding. We would typically think, "Oh, I need to get up and go to the bathroom. I've decided to do this." And we impute a self to that. We impute a "me" to that—"I need to get up and go to the bathroom." But when we start to observe our experience in this way, just noticing what happens, what is arising now, what does it condition—we see it's like dominoes falling. The pressure in the bladder conditions the intention to relieve that pressure, which further conditions the intention to move, which further conditions the intention to stand. It's just cause and effect. We start to see this.

So the concentrated mind starts to reveal the truth of our experience, and this inclines us to not cling to our experience. This undermines greed, aversion, and delusion.

It undermines ignorance, because we see in direct experience the futility of trying to hold on to things—the futility of trying to arrange things to be the way we'd like them all the time.

There's a beautiful quote from a Tibetan poem: "Grasping the ungraspable, we exhaust ourselves in vain." That is what we see. We see the fact that these things are ungraspable, and we see the exhaustion that results from trying to grasp. The mind learns this very deeply and starts to let go of the greed, of the aversion. The ignorance begins to be swept clear.

These insights, in my own experience, are revealed to us gradually. I remember in some of my early retreats, I was sitting there waiting for the mind-blowing insight after which I would be liberated. And I've had a few pretty amazing insights—I could probably count them on a few fingers. But mostly my experience has been that the unfolding of this practice is gradual. Gradually beginning to see into the changing nature of

experience. Gradually beginning to understand how I'm holding on to things. Wisdom develops gradually. This understanding, this sweeping away of ignorance, usually doesn't happen in one mind-blowing insight.

There's an analogy that the Buddha offers about the path of practice that I love. I love this analogy because it really speaks to how my practice feels like it's unfolded. He talks about the process of the unraveling of the way we grasp things, the way we cling to things, as being kind of like a shipwreck. There's a ship that's crashed, and all the parts of the ship are strewn on the beach—the rope, the rigging, the wood, all the various parts lying on the sand. He says the sun, the sand, the wind are like our mindfulness, our effort, our concentration, gradually wearing away at those parts of the ship.

Thinking about this analogy, I consider the rope lying on the beach. Each day, if you went out to that beach and looked at that rope, you wouldn't see much change. But come back a year later, pick up that rope, and it falls apart in your hand—because gradually, over the course of the year, it has been worn away by the water, the sun, the sand, the wind.

Our practice unfolds in a similar gradual way. We may not see how it's changing. But at some point we begin to understand, and often we can see it by looking back. Sometimes we're in a situation with a co-worker or a partner, and we've been practicing meditation for five years, and we recognize: they just said something that I know five years ago I would have flown into a rage about. And it's okay. There's not a problem here. I see that my partner is motivated by their own struggles. I don't need to take this personally. We start to see small ways in which our minds have shifted.

For me, a lot of these insights are revealed when I see that certain patterns aren't happening anymore—when the clinging and grasping simply isn't arising. I didn't actually see things fall away. It wasn't a blinding flash after which suddenly that anger was never going to happen because I had this profound insight into it. It's just a gradual letting go. And one day it's like, "Where's that anger? I can't find it."

As we cultivate concentration, I want to talk a little about how the practice of concentration supports us with insight. As we practice concentration, the mind learns a great deal. The whole process of moving into concentration—how we learn that our minds can be relaxed and attentive—involves a lot of letting go. We see how we grasp onto the breath. We learn that grasping doesn't work very well. We learn how to let go of that. There's a lot of learning around craving and clinging that happens as we work our way towards the state of concentration. We learn about what we cling to and how to release it.

A lot of you have been talking about clinging to a great sitting, wanting it back. Yes, we do that. That's part of our work here. It's not a mistake that this happens—it's very natural. And we can't simply say, "Oh, I'm not supposed to do that. Just be with the breath without clinging to that state."

We can't do that. We need to learn how to be with that grasping. Learn how to let it be. Learn how to let it go. Those tools that Sally mentioned—allowing, avoiding, accepting, attending.

We also learn from the purification process that Temple so beautifully described. As we open—and we've been talking about this in the practice discussions—as our hearts open, we move into a place where the heart is not grasping for a few moments. A place where the hindrances fall away, and it feels like everything is okay. That opening allows things that have been held, things that have been tight underneath—it gives them room to start to move. And they come up to the surface.

So this is also not a mistake. This is part of the process. One of my teachers, Michelle McDonald, talked about this rhythm of purity and purification. Purity and purification. We have moments of purity, maybe even minutes of purity. And then often the rhythm is hours of purification. Learning how to be at ease with that process is another big letting go—letting go of wanting it to be this way, letting go of our agendas, our plans, what we wanted our retreat to be. This is my retreat. This purification.

So there's a lot of letting go that happens as we move towards concentration. Then, as the mind becomes more stable, as it stabilizes and we get more of the feeling of minutes or even a whole sitting of concentration, that stability of mind can then be turned towards changing experience. This is the shift from concentration to insight. We turn our minds towards changing experience, begin to witness the flow of experience directly—inclining the mind to see into impermanence, unreliability, not-self.

I'm covering this so briefly, and we'll probably talk about it more over the coming days. So this is just the first pointing towards how we turn towards insight from concentration.

As some of us might start to move into actually deeper states of concentration, into the deeper states of jhāna, there's another way to explore. In the state of jhāna itself, there's very little change happening. That's the place where the mind really comes to stillness. So there's not a lot of change happening in the state of jhāna itself, but the state of jhāna, being an impermanent phenomenon, will fall apart at some point. And as that state falls apart, the mind is in such a state of concentration that it can turn towards looking at the impermanent phenomena that are disintegrating around the state

of concentration. So essentially, we're looking at the dissolution, the disintegration, the impermanent nature of concentration itself. This is one of the ways the Buddha taught about using concentration.

My teacher Tānissaro Bhikkhu says that the concentrated mind is one of the beautiful places from which to practice insight, because the mind itself is concentrated enough and the state itself has enough conditions that have come together that we get to see, in the dissolution of that experience, how it all dissipates, how it all falls apart. We watch the way the mind lets go, deconstructs the state of concentration. So we begin to understand the ephemeral, the unreliable, the impermanent, the not-self nature of that state itself.

Mostly, our insights are impermanent. When concentration and mindfulness become balanced, we move into a place where the mind is seeing clearly. Wisdom begins to be cultivated and nourished. The mind can see into something so clearly. I'm sure many of you have had this experience of being in a state where it's just so clear—like, how can I not see this? How can I not see how impermanent things are? It's so obvious. And then an hour later, you see it's not that obvious, because the mind has changed state. The mind has moved out of that place where concentration and mindfulness are balanced and clear.

The wisdom strong.

So the balanced state itself is a result of causes and conditions. It is also impermanent. But the key thing that happens—even though we can't live in that space of insight—when you see into something so clearly, you see: "Oh my gosh, that thought, 'You're a failure'—it's just a thought. It has no meaning, no bearing on anything. It's just an arising blip of neurons." You see into that. No belief arises around that thought. And there's a sense of wonder: "Wow, I really understand something here. This thought is just a thought. It doesn't have any reality to it."

And yet, a few days later, the thought comes up: "You're a failure." And you believe it. "Oh, I'm a failure." It's not so clear anymore.

But what has happened is that we have, for a moment, seen through those misperceptions. For a moment, in our own experience, we've seen through these distortions. In a moment we've seen the impermanence, the unreliability, the not-self nature of experience. That seeing through in direct experience is something that doesn't go away. We can't necessarily live from that space and know it continuously in direct experience, but we can remind ourselves. We can use that knowledge we have gained to remind

ourselves: "Okay, yes, here's this thought, 'You're a failure.' It's just a thought." That doesn't necessarily put us into the space of seeing it as just a thought, but it can offer some space, allow us to not be quite so jerked around by it.

Through these small insights, we see into how our perceptions are distorted. And that's a fundamental shift—that we have seen this. These are distortions. So even if we're looking through this lens and seeing things as distorted, we at least know: "Yes, I'm seeing things as distorted."

These insights turn our minds in the direction of non-clinging. I'll finish with a few more quotes from the Buddha—these insights toward non-clinging, freeing ourselves from ignorance, letting go of greed, aversion, and delusion. This is the perspective the sutta is pointing to:

"The extinction of greed, the extinction of hatred, the extinction of delusion. And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing remains to do."

"Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither forms nor sounds nor odors nor tastes nor contacts of any kind—neither the desired nor the undesired—can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is the mind, gained is deliverance."

"This is peace. This is exquisite. The resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna."

CHAPTER 43

Comfortable Breath, Comfortable Mind

Andrea Fella · 1h02

> *In this guided exploration of concentration practice, Andrea Fella traces the Buddha's spiritual journey from palace luxuries through severe asceticism to his pivotal memory of spontaneously entering jhāna as a child—a state of embodied ease that became the foundation for his awakening. This teaching offers a profound reframing of samādhi practice: rather than striving or transcending the body, we create conditions for concentration to arise naturally through relaxation, connection, and comfort.*
>
> *Fella presents the Buddha's teaching on the natural unfolding of the path, where virtue leads to non-regret, which leads to joy, rapture, tranquility, sukha (pleasure/happiness), and finally concentration—each arising without forced volition when conditions are right. She emphasizes that sukha is the proximate cause for samādhi, offering the memorable analogy of catching a slippery eel by giving it something it likes: the mind naturally inclines toward pleasure.*
>
> *The practical heart of the talk guides practitioners through three steps: relaxing body and mind, connecting with the breath, and inclining toward comfortable breathing. Fella offers both directed attention approaches and intention-based methods using gentle requests like "May the breathing become comfortable." She explores the intimate relationship between comfortable breath and comfortable mind—how each supports the other—and addresses common challenges like the breath becoming too subtle to track. Throughout, she emphasizes patience and allowing over striving, reminding us that concentration practice is about creating conditions rather than forcing states to arise.*

I'd like to begin tonight by repeating something Philip said last night around listening to dharma talks and how helpful it is, particularly on a concentration retreat, to listen with the body, being in the body as you listen, and not necessarily trying to get every last little point. Having a sense of trust that you will hear that which is helpful for you in the moment. You may actually hear some things that you don't know that you hear, and you'll remember them a year later. So, not having to hold on to the talk. As Philip said, it's fine to take notes if you wish about a particular point. But a good portion of this particular talk will be almost like a guided meditation, and so I'll actually point that part out to you so that you can move into that and just follow along with the suggestions I'm asking you to explore.

The Buddha had his own journey, much as we have our journey, and his journey has something to teach us. I'd like to remind you of his story, the story of his quest, and point to some of the pieces that are particularly relevant for this retreat.

As most of you know, the Buddha was a prince and lived a life of luxury. His father was a king, and he lived in very nice conditions, had the best food, the best clothes, had a lot of sense pleasures around him. He had palaces in the hills for the hot season and basically had the best conditions for someone living in India at that time. And yet he had this question. He had an innate sense of search about his life. One of the questions was framed something like: Why am I, who am subject to aging, illness, and death, seeking happiness in what is subject to aging, illness, and death? Surely that can't be the right way to find happiness. And so he left the palace to go in search of a solution to the problem that he saw was at the core of human existence—the problem of suffering. Why do we suffer? His quest was motivated by that question: Why do we suffer, and is it possible to find an end to that suffering?

The first teachers he encountered were teaching a very deep kind of concentration practice, a kind of concentration practice in which the body disappears and you're in very refined states of quiet and still mind. He got very skilled at those practices, and both of the first two teachers he met actually invited him to be a teacher in their communities. But his quest was motivated by this question of freedom from suffering. What he saw as he explored these practices was that he could be in very blissful states of non-suffering while doing the practices, but then when he stopped, the suffering was still right there. So it wasn't answering his question. The practices they were teaching weren't answering his question, and so he left those teachers and went on to search for other teachers, other practices.

He began doing some very severe ascetic practices, mortifying the body. There was a belief among some of the people practicing at the time that if you mortified the body enough, then the soul would become free of the body, that it would essentially leave the body and be free. And so he practiced very deep ascetic practices, practices where he stopped his breathing. He said that when he stopped his breathing, he experienced deep, piercing, racking sensations throughout his body. He thought, well, let me try another way, and he kept experiencing these piercing, racking, painful sensations throughout his body. Then he decided to try not eating, thought that might be a better approach. He said he got down to one grain of rice a week. At that point, through that practice, his body got so weak—it's said that his skin became black, people were saying Gautama is dead, and he said when he touched his belly he could feel his backbone. That gives a very visceral sense of how much mortification he was undertaking with his body.

Again he found—I'll read this part to you because it's really quite a striking passage. He said: "Whatever recluses and brahmins in the past, in the present, in the future have or will experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to striving, this that I've experienced is the utmost. There's none beyond this. But by this racking practice of austerities, I've not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Might there be another way?"

So he had the experience through the life in the palace, the life of sense pleasure, and realized that's not the way. Then he had the exploration of the deep practices of letting go of the body and hanging out in bliss for hours or even—I understand that with those practices, Philip was saying you could hang out in these deep states of concentration for three days; my understanding is that you can hang out in those states for a week. He was doing that, hanging out in those states, and yet coming out of it, he realized this isn't the way either. The austerities weren't the way.

And so he had essentially exhausted the teachings and practices of his day.

Being so undernourished and weak from his ascetic practices, he decided he needed to nourish himself again. In this process, he had a memory of being a child, a boy, watching his father in the fields performing a plowing ceremony in the spring. The story goes that he was sitting under a rose apple tree. In that time, watching his father plow the fields, the breeze was cool, he was in the shade, very relaxed and at ease—and he spontaneously entered into a deep state of concentration. Not a state of concentration beyond the body, but a state of concentration *in* the body, one that included pleasure in the body.

Having that memory, the thought came to him: Is that the way? Is that the path? Is that the direction to go? And it occurred to him: yes, this is the direction to go.

I'll read this part of the reflection to you also. He thought, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?" And he thought, "I'm not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasure and unwholesome states."

And so he began nourishing his body again, getting back to a state of health, and then began exploring the practice in a new way, seeing if he could find his own way. The basis, as he saw it, was a state of concentration in the body, through the body, with pleasure in the body. Not pleasure of the senses—not coming from having things, not coming from nice food and nice clothes and having palaces on the hillside—but rather

a pleasure that connects body and mind. A pleasure of the mind that resonates through the body is the way I experience it. The pleasure of mind that ripples through the body and is very pleasurable in the body.

With this teaching, I first want to explore a little about this memory he had. What are some of the key components? He's sitting under this tree, relaxing, watching his father. It's a kind of state of grace. He didn't try to enter into that state of concentration—it happened almost spontaneously. It was a state of ease, of comfort, of relaxation that allowed the arising of that state. A different approach than the striving approach he'd been using with the austerities, and a different approach than transcending the body that he had done with the other deep states of concentration.

The other piece about the use of concentration as part of the path: he asks, "Is this the way?"—this state of concentration, is this the way? He doesn't ask, "Is this the goal?" His goal, his exploration, his quest was the ending of suffering. My understanding of this reflection—"Is this the way?"—is: Is this a tool that can be used in the service of liberation? And his answer was yes. This is a tool that can be used in the service of liberation. So it's okay to cultivate happiness, pleasure, comfort, joy, and delight through this exploration of concentration. It will support us in the service of liberation.

There's a beautiful teaching that describes the natural unfolding of the path. I think this resonates quite well with his entering spontaneously into that state of concentration, so I'll read some of this to you as well.

The Buddha speaking: "For a virtuous person, one whose behavior is virtuous, no volition need be exerted: 'Let non-regret arise in me.' It is natural that non-regret arises in a virtuous person, one whose behavior is virtuous."

This non-remorse, and the happiness that comes from non-remorse, is sometimes called the bliss of blamelessness.

"For one who is without regret, no volition need be exerted: 'Let joy arise in me.' It is natural that joy arises in one without regret."

Again, this bliss of blamelessness.

"For one who is joyful, no volition need be exerted: 'Let rapture arise in me.' It is natural that rapture arises in one who is joyful. For one with a rapturous mind, no volition need be exerted: 'Let my body be tranquil.' It is natural that the body of one with a rapturous mind is tranquil. For one tranquil in body, no volition need be exerted: 'Let me feel pleasure.' It is natural that one tranquil in body feels pleasure."

Again, this pleasure of mind that impacts the body, that resonates through the body.

"For one feeling pleasure, no volition need be exerted."

Let my mind be concentrated. It is natural that the mind of one feeling pleasure is concentrated.

Now, this term for pleasure here—the Pali term is *sukha*, often translated as happiness. What the Buddha is saying here is essentially that happiness is the natural or proximate cause for concentration. Happiness is the proximate cause for concentration. *Sukha*.

When I first experienced this *sukha* in a really deep way, it was amazing—like the best, sweetest experience. I like the word sweet. It reminds me of *sukha*. *Sukha* sounds kind of like sugar, you know. It was just so sweet, so tranquil and sweet, both.

As I came out of that state—because while I was in the state, I was simply in the state—but in coming out of it, the mind really went, "Wow, that was amazing." And it was like, "Oh yes, I want more of that." I gave it the name in my mind: the "oh yes" state. Because that was the sense of it.

So this happiness, this sweetness and tranquility, are the proximate cause for concentration. And as the Buddha points to—I'll just read one more of these:

For one who is concentrated, no volition need be exerted. Let me know and see things as they really are. It is natural that one who is concentrated knows and sees things as they really are.

This is moving towards insight, and this is the direction the Buddha was looking: how to know and see suffering as it really is, how to know and see the cause of suffering as it really is, and the freedom that comes from that. The concentration developed in this way leads naturally to this doorway of insight.

Now, it's my understanding that when the text says "it is natural that this state follows that one," the expression is one of becoming much easier to cultivate. There's a kind of natural inclining of the mind towards concentration in one who's happy. It doesn't mean you don't have to do any work. It doesn't mean you just sit there and it happens automatically. But it is like the supporting condition. The way I see it is that with the state of happiness, concentration begins to arise, and we can then begin to support that concentration with our mindfulness and wise effort—in an easeful way, not in a way of grasping or clinging or craving.

So the supporting conditions for concentration are tranquility and happiness. How can we, in exploring our breath, find our way to calm, comfortable, happy breath? That's really the exploration I'd like to make with you tonight.

In my own practice, I talked about setting up the container of the meditation. There's the container of the center, the container of our conduct together, and then the container within our hearts and minds that allows the concentration to unfold. For me, this really includes relaxed attention. I think probably for all of us it includes this relaxed attention.

There are three steps that I explore in creating this container for concentration to deepen naturally. There is the relaxation of body and mind. There's connecting to the breath, knowing the experience of breathing. And there's an inclining or encouraging that experience of breathing to become comfortable.

What I'd like to explore with you now are some ways that I've approached these three steps. I invite you into your own experience as I continue the talk.

Setting up the container of this relaxed, connected, comfortable breath, there are a couple of different approaches. One has to do with using directed attention and conscious action, conscious choice.

Beginning with step one: consciously relaxing the body, consciously relaxing the mind. Using a body scan, for example, noticing areas where there may be tension, releasing, relaxing that tension. The relaxation of body begins to support a relaxation of mind, so as you explore that relaxation of body, you may also check in and see how it impacts your mental experience to relax the body. Particularly relaxing in areas that you may not necessarily consciously think of—sometimes areas we don't check into, like hips and buttocks. There can be tension held there.

Also inside the body—relaxing in the area of the throat, inside the throat, relaxing the heart, the organs inside the body, relaxing the stomach and the intestines. For me, as I relax inside the body, I feel a kind of softening in the mind as well.

And then, inclining perhaps to relaxing the mind, letting go of mental tension, thoughts of the past or future. As much as possible, just allowing the mind to relax.

From that place, that container of relaxed body and relaxed mind, notice that within that container of body there's breathing happening. It's already been happening. Breathing is one of those great experiences that we don't have to create—it happens. And we can begin to tune in to the breath.

Allow a connecting with the inner experience of the breath where it's clear to you, wherever it's most clear for you. There's no right place. Sometimes it can be helpful, especially early on, to have a sense of more of the body breathing, not necessarily narrowing it down. So wherever the breath, the sensations of breathing, are clear, allow the attention to connect and rest with those sensations. An inner experience of the breath. The felt sense of the breath. The breath from the inside.

Now, this is bringing a focusing quality into the mind. We are choosing an object out of the field of attention, out of the field of objects. We're choosing an object on which to connect with experience. And sometimes that choosing an object, that focusing, we can lose the relaxation a little bit. I've found a couple of ways for myself that have been particularly helpful in allowing relaxation with focusing. So play with this a little bit in your experience.

Wherever you're noticing the breath, wherever you're feeling the sensations of the breath, rather than having the sense of narrowing down the field of awareness to find the breath, see if you might be able to allow the experience of breathing to expand, to fill the awareness. So rather than having that notion of narrowing the attention, let the object, let the experience of breathing—even if it's a little centimeter of place on your physical body—let that get really big. Let the experience of breathing get big.

Because I find often with focusing, we narrow and tighten the mind. But the focusing can be allowing the experience to get big. The relief, the sense of the object, becomes quite heightened. There's a kind of sense of really seeing the texture or the relief of that experience as it gets big. It's like using the zoom lens on your camera, being able to see something closer. So that's one approach—allowing the experience to get big.

Another approach I've found helpful in terms of focusing or connecting with the experience of breathing in a smaller area is this: sometimes, especially when the breathing gets really quiet and delicate, that narrowed attention almost obliterates the actual experience or sensations in the body. It's kind of hard to touch in. So sometimes I have a sense of, okay, there's this little area I'm paying attention to. Often for me it's right at the sternum, about the size of a quarter, where the sensations are felt. But rather than narrowing the attention down to that little space, it's like I look at a bigger space. I take in the whole of my torso, only the attention is kind of still settled in the middle. So it's like having the peripheral attention allow the subtlety of that delicate experience to come into perspective.

It's kind of like looking at a faint star in the night sky. Some of you may be familiar with this experience—or if not, you can check it out. At night, if you're looking up at the stars and there's a particularly dim star in the sky, sometimes if you look right at it you

can't see it. If you look just off to the side, it pops right into view. So it's that kind of exploration—not looking directly at the area that you're exploring, but just off to the side. And sometimes, oh, there's the breath. There's the experience. Explore that in your experience.

Finding yourself relaxed, the attention connecting with the sensations of breathing, the next step is exploring comfort, ease, pleasant experience in the breath—inclining towards pleasant experience in the breath.

So again, we're right now exploring the kind of conscious action, conscious intent, conscious directed attention and conscious action way into this comfortable breathing. One of the ways to explore this is to actually adjust the breathing. Experiment with the breath, connected with the breathing. Does it feel more comfortable to have the breath be long and slow right now? Perhaps extending the breath, playing with that—a long in-breath and a long out-breath. Or play with shortening the in-breath or the out-breath. Perhaps a long in-breath—

and just allowing the out-breath to release.

So you can play with it, exploring what makes the breath feel more comfortable. It's okay in concentration practice to play with the breath, to alter the breath for comfort.

Typically in our mindfulness practice, we don't go this direction. With mindfulness practice, we're looking at meeting experience as it is—not altering experience for any reason or any purpose or any goal in mind. With concentration, we are trying to cultivate the pleasure. Remember, the pleasure, the sukha, supports concentration.

One of my concentration teachers, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, gives an analogy. It's kind of a funny analogy, but I think his teacher gave it to him, his Thai teacher. The analogy was: if you want to catch an eel, eels are pretty slippery—eels that run around in the rivers in Thailand. If you want to catch an eel, it's kind of hard to just reach your hand in the river and grab an eel out. It's going to slip right out of your hand. But, he said, you give the eel something it likes, and it'll go right to it. You take a jar and put some raw meat in the jar, and then the eels will go right into the jar because they like raw meat. And then you'll have your eel. So you can catch a very slippery eel by giving it something it likes.

And he said, likewise, you can catch the slippery mind by giving the slippery mind something it likes. And the slippery mind likes pleasure. So if you can find a way towards comfort in the body with the breathing, the mind will more naturally incline there. It'll be happy to go there.

In exploring this in my own concentration practice, there was a time during one particular retreat—it didn't happen on every retreat—but on one particular retreat, exploring this comfortable breath, getting to the place where the mind naturally gravitated to this comfortable breath, it ended up feeling like I had this secret relationship with the breath. It was a secret lover. It really had that feeling of being that intimate and connected. A very lovely meeting of the mind and the breath.

What we do with a lover, I think with true love, is that we love that person for their own sake, not for what they give us necessarily. This is the true mettā. And this is another exploration with the breath: can we be with the breath for the sake of the breath, rather than for a goal or anything we think we're going to get from being with the breath? That notion of breath as lover supports that.

Another way into this container: we've been exploring the tools of conscious action, directed attention. Another way in is through using intention, which we have talked about quite a bit here—using intention, inclining the mind. And this inclining of the mind can happen at each step, each of these three stages.

So again, I invite you into your experience while we go through each of these steps from another perspective.

Allow yourself to find a posture that feels alert. And in terms of connecting with the relaxation of the body, rather than consciously doing it, consciously checking in and trying to relax the body, drop in the request: *May the body relax.* And see what happens. Not trying to do it.

With requests, as we've talked about—I'm just restating something we've said here, but the Buddha restated himself a lot. I think we can hear these things over and over again. We're not trying to do it. We're kind of just dropping a request into the mind and body and seeing: are the mind and body willing to do this right now?

So check that out for yourself right now. *May the body relax.* What happens in the body with that request? *May the body relax. May the mind relax.*

Sometimes that actually, for me, is easier. It's like I have no idea consciously what it means to relax the mind, but when I make that request, the mind knows how to relax itself. I couldn't tell you how to do it. Sometimes the mind and body know how to accomplish things

from places that we don't have conscious access to.

These requests are a way in to see: does the body and mind have some wisdom it can offer us? It won't always manifest, and you don't need to beat yourself up if it doesn't. It's just like making a request. Let's see. Let's see what happens. It's out of your control, in effect, whether it works or not. So just seeing what happens.

May the body relax. May the mind relax.

And then, rather than consciously choosing the breath, again a request: May the attention rest with the breathing. What happens if you make that request? Again, sometimes it allows a more easeful connection to the experience of breathing. If it doesn't work, you can go back to directing the attention consciously. But again, sometimes there's some wisdom in the body and mind of how to do this easefully that our conscious mind doesn't have access to.

May the attention rest with the breath. May the breathing become comfortable. Again, seeing if there's a way that the body and mind intuitively know the comfortable breath in this moment. May the breathing become comfortable, or may the breathing become easeful. May the breathing be pleasurable. Using language that resonates with you. It's important with these requests that you find language your mind is comfortable with—so exploring that piece as well.

Images can also be used in this connecting, allowing a connection more intuitively. An image I've used at times is the image of very gentle waves on the surface of water. The rising and falling of the breath being like the rising and falling of the waves. And the attention being like a float sitting on the surface of the water—neither not connected with the water floating above it, nor pushing down into it. It's just resting and very naturally riding the rhythm of the waves. You may find your own images that support you in connecting with the experience of breathing.

As we find our way to a relaxed, connected, comfortable breath, the practice of concentration begins to unfold very naturally. Essentially, concentration practice isn't about doing the concentration. It's about creating the conditions in which concentration can appear. We're watering the seeds, nourishing the soil, and allowing concentration to grow naturally. With a tree, we can't make the tree grow, but we can support the conditions by pulling the weeds, by nourishing the soil, by offering it moisture—and the tree will grow. Likewise with concentration, we nourish the conditions. And the main conditions are relaxed attention, how we connect with the breath in a relaxed way, and encouraging this sense of comfort with the breath.

As we find our way to a comfortable breath, we also find that the mind begins to get really happy, delighted, easeful. The mind gets comfortable too. The mind and body are really intimately connected, and as the body and the attention connect with a comfortable breath, the mind naturally becomes very comfortable. Likewise, if the mind becomes comfortable, easeful, at ease with experience, the breathing also naturally gravitates to comfort as well.

This was a startling recognition I had on one retreat. In one set of practices that I do, it's very much an open awareness practice where I'm cultivating a comfortable mind, able to be with whatever's happening in the moment. The main practice there, in my insight practice, is cultivating a mind that is balanced and at ease with whatever's happening—a comfortable mind. And in my concentration practice, I was cultivating a comfortable breath. At one point on a concentration retreat, I began to see how these two interweave. With a comfortable breath, it's like the mind is automatically comfortable. And I could also approach it from the side of a comfortable mind, and the breath would become comfortable. Comfortable mind, comfortable breath; comfortable breath, comfortable mind.

So we can approach this practice of concentration, this practice of creating this container, not only from the side of creating comfort in the body, but also in exploring: how can the mind be comfortable? Minds can be very different in this respect, how they find their way towards that sense of ease with what's happening in the present moment. For myself, the easiest way to approach this is through that practice of open awareness.

And at some point in my concentration retreats, I began realizing that the most skillful way for me to move into concentration was to start from that comfortable mind. I had done enough open awareness practice to find it fairly easy to move into that place where experience is simply slipping through and there's an ease in the mind with that.

From that place of a comfortable mind, at some point there would be a breath in that experience. There's a breath, and that breath was comfortable. Then I began the process of inclining the mind towards the breath. The intention in the practice was towards gathering the mind on one experience, but for me it was helpful to start with a really broad container—let the mind be comfortable and then slowly try to find my way towards a comfortable breath.

It's as though my mind was able to be relaxed when I wasn't choosing a focus, but when I chose the focus, that was when tension began to creep in. So this exploration of comfortable mind led me to investigate: How can I choose an object and still have that comfortable mind? For me, this was a back-and-forth exploration, and a huge part of it was patience.

Very often I would start with a comfortable mind, pick up on a breath, a second breath, a third breath, and by the third breath the attention was all tight again. Rather than having the agenda of "I have to stay with the breath," I was working with the comfortable mind. I would let go, go back to the place where the mind was comfortable, and try again. This going back and forth would take some time to find the way. The mind educated itself on how to be comfortable and be focused.

This exploration of how to be focused and relaxed is one we all have to make for ourselves. It may be really natural for some. I had one friend—she died a few years ago—for whom deep concentration was the most natural thing. She could put her attention on something and just rest very deeply, very relaxed. For her, the practice was being able to open up into meeting a changing flow of experience. Minds are really different along these lines, but we all need to find our way towards this ability to focus and be relaxed. For some it may be easy; for some it may take more patience.

For me, having the aspiration towards a comfortable mind—a mind with an attitude of curiosity, of interest, of kindness, of happiness, of comfort—that was how I was navigating through my experience. If I found the mind beginning to contract, I went back to where the mind could be comfortable.

You can explore this from either direction. You can explore it from comfortable mind or from comfortable breath. Both ways have worked for me. I find them useful at different times. Sometimes the mind is more willing to choose an object and hang out with that object than other times. Having a wide variety of tools at our disposal and having the discernment to know which ones are helpful at a particular time is really valuable.

As we find ourselves in this container where there is a sense of relaxed focus, we need to track that we stay in that container. Too much effort and we agitate ourselves out of the container. Too little effort and we kind of slop out of the container. It's easy to slip back into old habits of paying attention, and so that is something to keep track of—in a gentle way, in a light way. For me, it was keeping track of this ease in the body and mind, letting that be the guide for the concentration practice. Whether starting from ease of mind or starting from ease of body, that was the guide. If it got tight in the body, I wouldn't try to force the mind to stay with the breath. It's more important to find our way to that relaxed focus than it is to actually be with the breath.

We can be with the breath through an act of will, and it creates a very brittle kind of concentration. It's not very stable; it's easily broken. The concentration that comes from this relaxed meeting—that hand-on-hand quality Philip was describing—is much more stable. It's like you've got a really broad base. The concentration of will, an act of will, feels like a very narrow post, very easy to topple over.

Another way we sometimes slip out of the container happens as the practice deepens. We may find that we've been able to be present with the breath with a lot of ease and relaxation.

So really kind of easily able to stay with the breath for stretches of time, minutes or even hours. I had one time at a retreat at IMS where pretty much every time I sat down, it was really easy to be with the breath. And then one morning I sat down and the mind was all over the place. I was like, what happened to the concentration?

At that point I'd had enough experience to be curious about the wandering mind rather than judging about it. So I was like, well, when is the mind wandering? What's happening here? What's going on in the mind that it can't stay with the breath? I would start, I'd be like, yep, there's a breath, and then—poof—the mind would be gone, off into thought. And a few seconds later I'd be like, whoa, wait a minute. What happened? It just felt like the mind was slipping out all over the place.

What I noticed when I looked back at the breath was that within the space of a breath, the breath was getting so subtle that I couldn't experience the sensations anymore. That's when the mind was wandering.

My understanding of this is that as we practice, as we attend to the experience of breathing in this relaxed way, it naturally happens—and some of you have talked about this—that the experience of body falls away, the experience of breathing gets more subtle. Sometimes the breathing gets really short, just like a little wisp. And that's kind of counterintuitive when you first start to do concentration practice. We intuitively think, you know, relaxed, settled breath is a really long, deep, slow breath. But that's not what happens when the mind settles down. The breath can get really short. Almost non-existent. Very long gaps between in-breath and out-breath, between out-breath and in-breath. Very subtle.

The experience of breathing can get very subtle. And what happens at times is that we've been paying attention to our breath—this is the breath, this hand here, and this is the mind paying attention to the breath—and it's been happily meeting the experience of breathing for a while, knowing what to look for, hanging out there. And then at some point, the experience of breathing gets more subtle, more quiet. The breathing settles down. And our mindfulness, our agenda—we have a kind of agenda of mindfulness—is still looking for the sensations of breath up here. It's not seeing that the experience of breath has gotten quieter. And so the mind doesn't have anything to connect to. It can wander off. It can wander into thought. It can wander into spacing out. It can go into a kind of zoned-out place.

Part of the way that the practice of concentration, mindfulness of breathing works—and it's a beautiful practice this way—is that as the mind settles, the sensations of breathing get more subtle, which means that the mindfulness that connects to those sensations also has to get more refined. So the settling of the breath draws in and refines the ability of the mind to meet it.

I say this because that falling out of the container can sometimes happen when we've been able to connect in that container for quite a while and suddenly we see, wow, it seems like nothing's going very well. Suddenly our mind is wandering all over the place. And we may think we need to double down, make more effort, try harder. Actually, what we may need to do is relax the attention more. Because as the breathing gets more subtle, again it's that narrowing and pushing in that obliterates the experience. Relaxing and settling back, the experience of breathing can pop into view.

So sometimes paradoxically, as the sensations get more subtle, backing off and not trying as hard to find them—there they will be. In being in that container and seeing the mind wandering, don't necessarily assume anything has gone wrong. It actually may be that the breathing is settling, the practice is deepening through the breathing settling and becoming more subtle. And it's just a matter of finding a way to have the mind meet that more subtle experience.

At one point I was reporting to my teacher in Burma, "The breath is too subtle, I can't meet it." He said, "What? Just notice that it's subtle." I was like, oh, that's a thought. And so I just began using a kind of note: subtle breath is happening.

And I could stay right with it.

So patience as we go through this journey. We're not creating the concentration—we're supporting the conditions. We all have our own way through this journey. Patience, allowing, accepting where we are, accepting how that journey is for us. And being with the breath for the sake of the breath.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 44

Mettā Practice Day 4

Andrea Fella · 38 min

> *In this fourth day of mettā practice during a concentration retreat, Andrea Fella continues teaching a radiating form of loving-kindness meditation learned from Bhikkhu Anālayo. This approach differs from traditional mettā by beginning with radiation rather than specific recipients, and emphasizes allowing the feeling to flow naturally rather than trying to push or expand it outward.*
>
> *The practice begins with relaxation and connecting to the heart center, perhaps using an image of a being that brings a smile. From there, practitioners are guided to open metaphorical 'doors' of the heart in each direction—front, right, left, back, down, and up—allowing mettā to flow through the body and beyond as far as it naturally wishes to go. Andrea emphasizes that when the mind feels tired or tense, this signals an attempt to force the expansion rather than allowing it.*
>
> *This form of mettā practice integrates well with breath meditation, as the field of loving-kindness can expand and contract naturally with breathing. The guided meditation concludes with all directions open simultaneously, inviting practitioners to recognize themselves as both generators and recipients of mettā within the community of meditators. This allowing quality is identified as inherent to mettā itself—an acceptance of things just as they are.*

Today we'll continue the radiating metta practice that we've been exploring this retreat.

Just a couple of comments to start. As we've been saying with respect to the concentration practice, there are so many different ways into settling the mind, and each person will find their own way in that. So we offer a number of ways to explore. Likewise for the metta practice, different minds will respond to certain teachings. Some of you may find this form of the radiating metta—starting with the radiating metta—to be very natural and easeful. Others may find it challenging. This is quite natural; different ones of you would have different responses to this practice. If you have a form of metta practice that works well for you, you don't need to feel like you have to do this form that we're teaching this retreat.

Both Philip and I learned this particular form from Bhikkhu Anālayo earlier this year. We both found it to be quite interesting and a different alternative for metta. We felt we'd like to offer it during this retreat as a form that might blend more easily with

the breath practice, as Philip did yesterday in the guided meditation, blending the metta with the breath. So we're exploring that this retreat. But again, if you have a different form that works for you, it's fine to use that form.

In the practice of doing this radiating metta, one of the pieces that really supported me, as Bhikkhu Anālayo described it, was not that we were trying to expand the metta outwards, but rather allowing it to flow out as far as it wishes to go. As I guide it, I will be reminding you of that. As I practice this form of metta, I find that if I'm trying to push the metta out or trying to expand it, my mind gets tired. That's a kind of reminder for me: oh right, just let it go as far as it wants to.

Finding a comfortable posture for yourself, begin with relaxation as we've been doing with the mindfulness of breathing practice. Allow the body to relax. Allow the mind to relax. Allow yourself to be just as you are in this moment.

The very allowing of yourself to be as you are is right in the field of metta. It's in the terrain of metta to have that sense of allowing yourself to be just as you are. Metta is inherently an allowing quality. It's a quality of "it's okay just the way it is."

Allow the body to relax. The mind to relax. Allow your attention to rest in the area of your heart. Just notice how it is there for you in this moment. No need for it to be any different. Allow your heart to be just as it is.

Exploring this practice of metta, it's helpful to connect with something that may support a generation of that feeling for you in a small way. It doesn't have to be major. It might help to put your hand on your heart, for instance, and have the sense of your heart held in your hands. It might be supportive to call up an image or think of a person or a being that makes you smile. Bhikkhu Anālayo said that to start this practice, he remembers these very cute squirrels in Germany. Anything that makes you smile—allow that feeling to be there.

We'll go in each direction, much as Philip did yesterday. The image I like to use: if we connect to that sense in the area of the heart, whatever is there—a feeling of allowing or friendliness, okayness, kindness—have a sense perhaps of opening the door of your heart and seeing how far that feeling in the heart wants to move to the front. No need to try to push it out. Allow it to flow if it wishes to.

In that allowing it to flow from your heart, with your heart being in the middle of your body, allow the feeling to flow first through your body, through your chest, all of the muscles and spaces and tissue in your chest and abdomen towards the front of your body. It may go out just partway through your body; let it go as far as it wants to go, allowing it to flow in whatever direction or form it wants to flow in. At some point it may

find the surface of your body and begin to almost have the sense of breaking through the skin, evaporating off the surface of your body, perhaps spreading outwards into space a little bit. Just allow it to go as far as it wants to go. It may expand and contract. It may go in and out. Just be aware of how that feeling flows and moves.

Now letting go of the frontward direction for now, allow the door on the right side of the heart to open. Let the feeling of kindness, caring, friendliness, allowing, flow outwards from the heart through the right side of the body, flowing through and around the spaces, through the air element, the water element, the earth element, the fire element, flowing through the body. There may be places where it feels like the feeling flows around instead of through, and that's okay. Again, as it reaches—if it reaches—the edge of your body, notice how it moves.

ripples through the surface of the skin—perhaps a sense of it evaporating off the skin on the right side of the body, out into space, if it wants to flow out into space.

And if it ever feels tight or tense, check in and see if you're trying to push it outwards. See if you can relax and allow it to do whatever it feels like doing, this sense, this feeling of caring. Again, you may notice a pulsing quality to the field expanding outwards on the right side of your body.

If the mind wanders, just come back to that connection in the heart. You may need to recall a being that makes you smile, or something to support the quality. And then simply allow a relaxation and a flowing.

Letting go now of directing to the right. Today we'll have the next direction be allowing the doorway of the heart to open to the left, allowing the feeling to flow out from the heart through the left side of the body—all of the tissues and muscles and liquid and space on the left side of your body. Allow it to flow however, in whatever direction or form it wishes to. You might notice some directions are easier than others, and that's natural also. Allowing the metta to expand outwards past the body if it wishes to, however far it wishes to expand.

Relax. This is much more of an allowing practice than a doing practice. Honor and respect how it wishes to flow, whether it has a sense of pulsing, expanding and contracting. We don't need to have any agenda for what this field of metta does.

Letting go now of the leftward direction, envisioning allowing the door at the back of the heart to open and expand outwards through the back of the chest, through the back of the body. Allowing it to bubble off of the surface of the body if it wants to do that,

flow out of the surface of the body if it wants to do that. If it helps you to use imagery of certain beings that make you smile, that's also fine as we continue allowing the metta to flow as it wishes.

Letting go of the direction to the back for the moment, allowing the door at the bottom of the heart to open and let the metta flow down through the body as it wishes to flow. No need to be in a rush in its flow. Let it take its own time, allowing the quality of friendliness, caring, allowing kindness to flow from the heart down the body. And if it wishes to flow out of the skin, allow it to do that and reach down into the earth, however far it wants to go through earth's element. Love and earth connected.

Letting go for the moment of the downwards direction. Allowing the door at the top of the heart to open and allowing whatever feeling of kindness or friendliness is present for you to flow upwards through the body, through the neck and head, if it wishes to. Allowing the flow to happen in whatever way. And if that reaches the edge of your body, allowing it to soak through the skin and release into the air, letting it flow upwards as far as it wants to—maybe a few inches, maybe quite expansive. Allowing rather than pushing.

And letting go of the upwards direction for just a moment. Allowing the doorway to the front to open. To the right, to open. To the left, to open. To the back, to open. To the bottom, to open. And to the top, to open. Allowing the metta to flow from the heart outwards through the body in all directions, however it wishes to flow, however far it wishes to flow.

Relax. Allowing yourself to abide in the middle of this field. Allowing yourself to connect with the breathing with this field. The body breathing in this field of metta. Just noticing how far outwards this field of metta wants to flow. With the breath there may be a sense of expanding and contracting of the field, and that's okay too.

And while sitting in this field, recognize that not only are you a participant in creating a field of metta, allowing it to flow outwards as far as it wishes to go—you are sitting in a field receiving metta from everyone else in the room. A community of metta. Breathing with friendliness, caring, and kindness.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 45

Concentration in the Service of Liberation

Andrea Fella · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella illuminates the Buddha's teaching that wise concentration (sammā samādhi)—concentration equipped with all factors of the Noble Eightfold Path—serves as the foundation for seeing things as they truly are. She begins with the Buddha's definition of Nibbāna as the extinction of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha), offering this as an inspiring and accessible vision of freedom available in this very life.*
>
> *Fella explores three layers of delusion that obscure our perception of reality. The first is simple non-awareness—being lost in thought bubbles where the mind creates and believes constructed realities. The second involves personal and societal conditioning that creates filters through which we see experience, including views about who we are and what we're capable of. The third and most fundamental layer comprises the universal human distortions: perceiving what is impermanent as permanent, what is unreliable as a source of lasting happiness, and what is not-self as self. She explains how concepts mask the rapidly changing nature of experience, making investigation beneath conceptual thinking essential.*
>
> *Through vivid personal examples—including watching wanting arise and vanish during walking meditation—Fella demonstrates how bringing wise concentration to unwholesome states allows the mind to recognize that greed and aversion themselves create suffering, not the absence of what they seek. This understanding naturally leads to letting go. She emphasizes that while we cannot force non-delusion, we can witness delusion's operation and its falling away, gradually developing clearer recognition of how our minds deceive themselves.*

One of the most wonderful things about teaching retreat is getting to sit up here and look out at you over the course of the week—how you become transformed. Your faces soften, and it's really beautiful. It's really a joy.

As we've said since the very first night of this retreat, we are cultivating concentration for a purpose. I think Adrian quoted the Buddha: "Cultivate wise concentration. One who cultivates wise concentration sees things as they are." This seeing things as they are ties back to the purpose, the motivation that the Buddha had in undertaking his own journey.

The question of what the Buddha essentially saw was the basic problem of the human condition: that we struggle, that we suffer. And he wondered if it was possible to be free from that. His own journey gave him the understanding and the amazing wisdom. I think he had the most amazing mind—to be able not only to see the truth, but to understand a way to articulate it so that we could hear it. Not only to articulate it, but to describe how he explored his own mind to free his mind.

So we cultivate wise concentration, which is, as was defined a couple of times, concentration equipped with its seven requisites: wise understanding, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, and wise mindfulness. This wise concentration is essentially the interweaving of the factors of the Eightfold Path—they are present together. When wise concentration is in place, all of these factors are in place. And it supports us being able to see into this question of suffering for ourselves: to understand suffering, to understand how our minds get caught, to let go of the cause of suffering, and to realize for ourselves the freedom.

As I said this morning, the understanding of dukkha—the suffering we are looking at—is not just unpleasant experience. It's the way we resist the deep truths of things as they are. We cultivate concentration so we can see things as they are, yet we resist the truth of things as they are. We resist the truths of impermanence, unreliability, not-self. Cultivating this path, cultivating wise concentration—which in this very definition contains the path—we cultivate it to realize freedom from this resistance to things as they are. We come to think of it as coming into alignment with truth.

There are some definitions of what this freedom is in the texts. Nibbana, the Pali term for awakening, literally means something like "cooling"—which is perhaps evocative on a day like today. But this definition of freedom, of enlightenment—I would have thought it would be something really mystical. Before I really began studying, I heard this word "enlightenment" when I was a teenager. This word was in the air, and I thought, "Well, that sounds good," but I had this image or idea of what I thought it meant. And it basically didn't have anything to do with reality.

The Buddha's description of Nibbana: the extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this is called Nibbana. Now, when I read that definition, it doesn't conjure up images of floating in some mystical space. It connects me with something I can envision happening here and now: the possibility of living a life free from greed, free from hatred, free from delusion. To me, that's an inspiring definition. It doesn't sound like too many bells and whistles, but at least it sounds like it might be possible to live that.

There's a little bit more that the Buddha describes about these three—greed, hatred, delusion, sometimes called greed, aversion, delusion. The Pali terms are lobha, dosa, moha, and they're translated in different ways in the texts. Just understand they're referring to the same three terms:

"Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed, with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is Nibbana—immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise."

Here he adds a little bit more to the description of the experience of this freedom. Not just greed, aversion, and delusion given up, but experiencing no mental pain or grief. Again, a definition that could be envisioned in this very life. And as he says, this is Nibbana—immediate, visible in this life.

That's inspiring to me—that possibility of freedom in this life.

The unified and collected mind, wise concentration, essentially creates the conditions for us to find our way to this possibility. The tools of the Eightfold Path could be considered the instruments that support us in learning how to give up greed, aversion, and delusion.

Perhaps it may seem paradoxical that the path to giving up greed, aversion, and delusion lies in using this concentrated mind to witness greed arising in the mind, aversion arising in the mind, and to learn how to unmask delusion arising in the mind. The path goes through the exploration of dukkha. I think it was Joseph who said something like, "We want insight into dukkha without experiencing dukkha." And it doesn't happen that way.

So I'd like to explore these three themes of greed, aversion, and delusion, and hopefully spend most of my time exploring what it might mean to unmask delusion. Greed and aversion are more easy to understand in a way, but often I get the question: How on earth do we see delusion? I'd like to spend quite a bit of time on that particular question.

But to begin with greed and aversion: we use the concentrated mind to purify these through cultivating wholesome qualities, through abandoning unwholesome qualities, through observing greed and aversion in our minds. The very act of bringing wise concentration—which includes wise effort and wise mindfulness gathered together in this

samadhi factor—bringing that quality of mind to greed or aversion has this amazing capacity to help the mind see very clearly that this state of mind of greed leads to unhappiness, leads to struggle, unease, dissatisfaction.

And the very seeing of that—because the mind also sees, as concentration is brought to the arising of greed and aversion—the mind also sees that it is doing that greed and aversion. It is actively participating in wanting things, holding on, getting rid of things we don't like. Pleasant things we want to hold on to; unpleasant things we want to get rid of. That's an activity in our minds, that greed and aversion.

The mind infused with wise concentration, when it sees that the mind itself is contributing to its own struggle, finds its way to letting go of that greed or aversion in some seemingly magical way—although it's not magical. When we bring that unified and collected mind with wise mindfulness and concentration together, when we bring that mind to unwholesome qualities arising, it leads to the conditions for those qualities of mind to appear less frequently. It's as if those unwholesome states of mind wither and shrink and can't hold up in the light of that beautiful mind filled with wise concentration.

And beautiful qualities of mind—metta, compassion, joy, equanimity, mindfulness, concentration, patience, generosity, a whole host of beautiful qualities—as we turn our mind with wise concentration towards those qualities, it tends to create the conditions for them to appear more frequently. So it's an amazing property, this unified and collected mind gathered with wise effort and wise mindfulness.

The wise concentration that we've been cultivating, the one-pointed concentration—that very practice tends to make the more obvious forms of greed and aversion fall away. Those forms based in wanting pleasant things around us, the greed and aversion based in the sense world essentially. The mind that settles in wise concentration is secluded from the hindrances of sense desire and ill will—those hindrances Adrienne talked about the other night. Secluded from all the hindrances, but in particular sense desire and ill will, which are the grosser forms of greed and aversion, the more obvious forms.

And yet as we practice concentration, subtler forms of greed and aversion will arise. You've all seen this—how the states of concentration, the peace, the ease that you have all tasted, even if only for moments here and there, how the mind wants them, wants to reach out and hold on to them, find them again. This is just part of the purification. Greed arises in the mind around this very state of mind. It's in a sense a more worthy

object for desire, and yet the greed still creates suffering. This is what our mindfulness and concentration, that unified wise concentration, shows us: that as we observe greed, as we observe aversion, we see inherently that these states do not lead to well-being.

I had a demonstration of this on one early retreat—just how much the mind gets educated by witnessing greed and aversion, and how the mind begins to let go. I was doing walking meditation, and in this particular instance I was experiencing a lot of wanting while walking. I was doing the walking with my eyes really down, secluded—this is what I had been told to do. So I was being a good yogi, doing what I was told, and I was wanting to see the other people who were around me. I really, really wanted to look up every time somebody walked by. And yet I was being a good yogi, so I kept thinking, "I'm not going to look, I'm not going to look."

At some point after weeks of this—because this was on a three-month course—I thought, "Duh, maybe I should notice that there's wanting here." It took me a long time to recognize: oh, this is wanting.

This should be known. The mind, the concentration, should be applied to know that. And so I began observing the wanting. I began observing it with curiosity.

It was very interesting to watch. I still kept my eyes down, so I didn't give in to the wanting. This is really a description of the middle way—that we neither repress something nor act on it. I didn't repress the wanting, as I had been doing when I said to myself, "I'm not going to look, I'm not going to look." Nor did I act on it by actually looking up and seeing people. I kept my eyes down but began noticing the wanting. Rather than repressing it, I began to feel: How does this wanting arise? What happens?

I was doing walking meditation, often in fairly secluded places where not too many people were around. Probably I did that intentionally. And I began to notice that the wanting arose as soon as somebody came into my peripheral vision. Someone pops into my peripheral vision and—boom—there it is, the wanting. So I watched it, I felt it. It felt like a magnet. It felt like I was being pulled. It was actually quite hard not to act on it, but I just felt that feeling of being pulled toward looking at somebody.

I watched this process, and the one I particularly remember: the person walked up next to me and I was really pulled. It was like almost having to resist following through on the magnet of the eyes. It would have taken just the smallest flick of the eyes to look up. Then the person walked right in front of me—really tempting. Then they walked up the stairs, into the building, through the door. The wanting vanished as soon as the person disappeared into the building.

That was amazing to see—the wanting vanish. And in seeing the wanting vanish, the mind understood that the wanting itself was the struggle, the suffering. It wasn't not having what the wanting was asking for that was the problem. That's what wanting tries to make us believe. Aversion tries to make us believe something similar—that if we can only get rid of the thing, then that's where our happiness will lie. But what the mind deeply understood in that moment, actually the moment when the wanting vanished, it felt like my mind had been released from a vice grip. Such a feeling of release. The mind in that moment deeply understood: happiness comes from the letting go, not from the having. A very, very deep lesson.

There's quite a lot we could explore around greed and aversion in terms of observing them, but I do want to explore delusion with you. Delusion can actually arise out of greed and aversion in an interesting cycle. An aversive mind state, for instance, can create a filter through which we see experience. I'm sure many of you know what I'm talking about—when we get angry or frustrated, we start seeing the world from that perspective.

I particularly recognize this around the flavor of aversion that is impatience. If my mind experiences something and impatience arises around some situation, very frequently, in moving into other situations, that impatience carries along with me. And there starts being impatience around other experiences. Aversion and greed can create this filter on our experience so that we're seeing things through that lens—essentially seeing things from a certain perspective and not seeing things clearly, because we have this filter on.

This is a manifestation of delusion. Delusion is inherently that having a veil, having something obscuring the truth of things as they are. Greed and aversion can create those veils. And yet delusion is more fundamental than greed and aversion. While greed and aversion can create a filter that results in this veil of obscuration between reality and the mind, delusion is more fundamental. Because without delusion, greed and aversion wouldn't exist. Delusion can exist in the absence of greed and aversion, but greed and aversion always come with delusion. I'll come back to that as we go through this exploration of delusion.

So there are kind of layers of delusion, layers of obscurations that cloud or filter our meeting with reality. The most obvious layer—well, I'll just name the three layers first and then go through them from the most gross to the more subtle.

The first is a kind of not knowing, a being disconnected—mind states like uncertainty, confusion, disconnection, that kind of state of mind. Spaced out, where the mind is disconnected from experience.

Then there is delusion that comes from views, these filters that come into play, how we look at our world based on views, opinions, agendas, concepts. I would call this the kind of personal delusion. These are delusions that we have based on our personal conditioning, based on societal conditioning.

And then there's the deeper form of delusion, which is, across the board, a human phenomenon. The deeper delusions, fundamental ways that as humans we distort reality.

So those are the three levels that I'll go through.

The first: not connecting, lack of awareness. This is basically the non-mindful state. When we are not mindful, not present, there's a cloud of delusion. We may be lost in thought, lost in a thought bubble.

I had an experience of the kind of bursting of that bubble at one point that was so clear. I had been in a relationship with somebody and we had broken up years before, and I had worked through much of the—well, actually by that point I think pretty much all of the anger around the breakup of the relationship. And one day I was walking down the street and woke up into the thought bubble of being back in relationship with that person. And there was confusion in the mind. It's like, "What? Wait a minute. Am I in relationship with that person? No, no, I'm not in relationship. That was years ago."

But for the moment in that thought bubble, the mind believed it was back in that relationship. And it was easy to see in that particular instance because the anger and the disappointment and the betrayal and the resentment had all gone away. And so that world of thought that I had been born into and living in, believing its reality, didn't have the emotional charge when I woke up into it. And so I could just clearly see that the mind had created this reality that had nothing to do with truth.

This happens all the time. Our minds do this a lot. And often what happens in that moment when we wake up into that reality is that we are living in the emotional reality of that mental creation. Delusion has created a reality and our minds have bought it hook, line, and sinker and are going through the emotions of it. This is some of the power of delusion—living in an unreal world.

Shakespeare actually seemed to understand delusion. In *The Tempest*, there was a character that had been enchanted and he was doing some very strange things. And one of the other characters was watching him and kind of just in awe and curiosity about, "Wow, look at that guy, look at what he's doing." And he said, "This is a strange repose, to be asleep with eyes wide open, standing, speaking, moving, and yet so fast asleep."

This is a large part of our waking reality.

We can get familiar with this kind of delusion in just this very way that I described—seeing the moment of waking up, noticing that moment when the mindfulness returns. In that moment when, poof, mindfulness comes back, if concentration is fairly strong—which it can be, even if mindfulness disappears at times, the concentration can have a momentum—so we get lost in thought and mindfulness and concentration return. And if mindfulness and concentration are fairly strong, we can see the arising of that moment of awareness and recognize what a moment ago the mind was lost in, confused about. So we can see the contrast between the mind that was deluded and confused and the mind that is awake in this moment.

Often what we do in that moment when the mind wakes up, when the mind comes out of delusion, is we judge ourselves for it. Or maybe the concentration isn't quite strong enough to actually catch that moment. But it is possible to begin to cultivate an interest in that moment of mindfulness and concentration returning, and begin to learn something about that state of delusion, that state of lost, constructed reality.

And as we get familiar with even the lingering scent of that experience of being lost in a thought world, it seems to give the mind a little bit of a toehold to be able to recognize it more quickly.

It's actually even possible to wake up into certain states that we would consider inherently non-mindful. Like the state of spaced out, for instance. We might inherently consider that to be a place where mindfulness could not go. But actually we can wake up in the middle of spaced out and know it fully. What tends to happen in that moment is that it vanishes or evaporates, kind of like the fog does when the sun comes out. But we can wake up into that state and know it fully.

This is something I encourage people in—to not assume that mindfulness and concentration can't go somewhere. The mindfulness and concentration can go places, meet experiences that you would be surprised, you would be surprised how much mindfulness can see that you would think it couldn't see.

Falling asleep, watching the mind fall asleep, watching the mind go to sleep, watching the mind from waking consciousness falling asleep into a dream—into a lucid dream. It's amazing how much the mind can wake up to.

So if you're sitting in sleepiness or dullness or a spaced-out state, rather than feeling like you have to change that, this is part of the exploration of bringing concentrated mind to our experience, opening to experience. Can we open into spaced out, dull, foggy, sleepy? It is possible. It is possible.

These are the areas of lack of awareness—states of mind that tend to have lack of awareness but don't necessarily have to have lack of awareness.

Then there's the second layer of delusion: the delusion based in views, in personal conditioning. These are personal kinds of views, filters, delusions, beliefs about who we are and what we're capable of—views based in our personal conditioning, our societal conditioning. We all have views about who we are and what we're capable of. We walk around with those views, believing them, and those views limit us. We recognize this kind of limitation when it's imposed on us by other people. But we don't recognize it as easily when we impose it on ourselves. There are so many different ways this kind of thing happens.

Societal conditioning is another example. When we're told something repeatedly, we tend to believe it. For instance: "America is the land of opportunity. Anyone who works hard enough can achieve their goals." We're told that and we believe it, and many of us don't see that it's perhaps variably true for a certain population who have economic, racial, and gender privilege. This leads to a kind of delusion in our cultural realm—not seeing the privileges we're swimming in. And this is a manifestation of how delusion works: we don't see the views we're swimming in.

So it takes some education sometimes. It takes willingness to meet what's happening in our experience, and it takes willingness to confront suffering. Because suffering results from delusion.

This kind of delusion also happens based not just on being told things—not just being told, "Oh yes, this is the way it is"—which is, you know, a lot of how our neuroses get built. We're told things are this way from the time we're young and we believe them. But views and delusions also get constructed based on our own personal experience. We experience something and we create an idea about it, and then believe the idea.

The classic teaching story from the time of the Buddha is the story of the blind people and the elephant. A king asks his minister to bring some blind people and bring an elephant, and then says, "Please show the blind people the elephant." Some of the blind people are asked to touch the side of the elephant, some the legs, some the tail, some the tusks, some the ears—and each forms different views about what an elephant is. That's not terribly surprising given it came from direct experience.

The power of delusion in this story is that as the teaching goes on, when they were asked to tell each other what an elephant is like, they described it differently. One said, "The elephant is like a storeroom"—that one had touched the side of the elephant. "An elephant is like a broom"—that one had touched the tail. "An elephant is like a winnow-

ing basket"—that one had touched the ears. "Like a rope"—that one had touched the trunk. And the story goes on that they came to blows quarreling: "An elephant is like this! An elephant is not like that!"

Based on their own experience, what they had experienced had some measure of truth, some descriptiveness—we can see how they got their descriptions. But it was based on partial experience. We create many, many views like this, and then see our reality through those views, denying that other realities could be true.

Views are going to happen. The lesson here for us is to begin to recognize when we're holding views. The Buddha said something very beautiful about truth. He said, "How do we preserve the truth?" He said we can preserve the truth when we have a certain faith by saying, "My faith is thus." We can preserve the truth by saying when we have a certain view, "My view is thus." That preserves the truth—because it acknowledges that what's happening is that there is a view arising in the mind.

But what tends to happen is that we take our views to be truth—not as a view. Views are very useful. Thoughts are useful. What we need to recognize is that they are phenomena arising in the mind. The content of those thoughts has no inherent truth to them. The truth of a view is simply that it is a phenomenon arising in the present moment. All else is speculation.

And so the exploration around this aspect of delusion is really to begin investigating our views, to look and see: Do I really know something? What do I truly know?

There is a most fundamental kind of delusion, this human delusion that we all share. The delusions based on views and opinions we form—based on who we've met, who we've talked to, what we've studied—those are personal. If you ask any ten people about climate change, you'll get different responses. Those views are constructed based on conditioning from how we've lived our life, what we've learned, who we've talked to.

But these more fundamental human delusions seem to be embedded in our psyche from the moment of birth. And these are really insidious because they cloud our perception. They fundamentally obscure reality in a very profound way.

There are three fundamental delusions like this, and these will be familiar to you—basic distortions of the way we tend to meet experience as human beings. We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. We tend to take what is unreliable in terms of lasting happiness as being reliable. And we tend to take what is not self as self.

These are the three core insights of insight practice that Donald spoke about last night. The insights around impermanence, suffering or unreliability, and not-self essentially counter these fundamental delusions.

One of my teachers said this kind of delusion doesn't mask our experience—it doesn't create a veil that keeps us from seeing experience, much as the first kind of delusion did. That first kind of delusion creates a veil where we're not even seeing things; we're living in a completely constructed reality. My teacher said this kind of delusion doesn't mask the object—it masks the true nature of the object.

Shakespeare put it this way. Two characters talking about another character: "He misses not much." "No, he doth but mistake the truth totally."

This is this kind of delusion. We mistake the truth totally. So we see what is impermanent as permanent.

A lot of this, as Donald mentioned last night, partly comes just from the rapidity of change. Things are changing so rapidly that our sense apparatus puts things together to make them look solid. And then we believe that solidity. It's like the movie example he talked about—the rapidity of change masks the change. Certainly particle physicists would tell you that the rapidity of particle movement means everything in reality is just rapidly moving particles, nothing stable anywhere for any split second. But things appear solid just because they're moving so fast.

Another way that impermanence is masked is through concept. Concept masks change. We create an idea in our minds and we live experience through that idea.

Some of you may have noticed this with pain—the idea of pain. And then beginning to explore what pain actually is. When we have the idea of pain, for instance a pain in our knee, it feels like a solid block. Yet when we begin to explore it, it's a lively, dynamic, changing experience where there's no one place where the pain can be pinned down. Concepts are a huge way in which our minds mask impermanence—a very powerful way that our minds mask impermanence.

Now again, concepts are really helpful. It's not easy to live in a world without concepts. I mean, if I had to come into this room each time and figure out anew that there are people out here, that this is a floor, those are walls—our minds have created this shortcut of concept to serve us in getting through our lives. But it is a shortcut, and the concept itself is not the reality.

This is part of our exploration in mindfulness practice, in wise concentration. We begin to explore experience underneath the level of concept, and we start to see the dynamic, radically changing nature of experience. This is the direction of vipassana practice—we incline toward noticing experience under the level of concept and seeing the change. Inclining toward change helps us get under the level of concept. It helps us meet this truth of impermanence. And it really helps us see that trying to hold on to anything is an exercise in futility. Clinging to anything is going to create that rope burn I talked about this morning.

So investigating what appears solid, what appears unchanging—that is worthy of investigation, worthy of bringing your wise concentration to. When something feels solid, don't take for granted that it is solid. Investigate it. Wise concentration will begin to reveal its changing nature.

Because things are impermanent, they are inherently unreliable—this is the second characteristic. The mistake we make here, believing things to be satisfactory, believing things to be reliable, is a lot of how we get ourselves stuck in trouble. We live our lives so much with this delusion that there's something out there that's going to do it for us—some sense experience, some opinion of somebody. We seek not only material things but having ideas, views, opinions. We want emotions coming from other people. We want somebody to have a certain opinion of us.

You've looked at your own minds. How reliable are your opinions and your emotions? And we want them from others. What an exercise in suffering! Oh my goodness, it's so sad.

We have this fundamental mistake—we think we know how to find happiness. We mistake completely where happiness can be found. The Buddha suggested: look at where you find happiness. Yes, having a piece of chocolate may bring happiness. I just bought a new car, and I'm exploring this happiness around the new car. I've noticed one interesting piece about this. Mostly the happiness of the new car isn't there—mostly. I've been particularly noticing this because I'm not driving it around these days. I'm mostly here. But when I walk down the hill, I walk past my new car, and there's a little moment of "Ooh, I have a new car." A little happiness there. The happiness around that seems to have to do with control—a feeling that I could create a situation, that there was the possibility of having arranged my world here for a moment. But a delivery truck could come up the hill and demolish my new car. So I don't have any control.

This illusion around happiness—the Buddha asked us to look at that happiness. He acknowledged that yes, there is happiness to be found in sense pleasure. But he said: look at it. His instruction to us was, how far does that happiness extend? How satisfying is it really? And what happens when we make that investigation is we see it's fleeting.

There's not much depth to that happiness. And yet we live our lives constructing, thinking that happiness lies in constructing the surface level of getting what I want and feeling like I have control—even for just a few moments. And then we do it again so we feel like we have control for another few moments.

So we explore this delusion by looking at the unreliability of our happiness. But we can explore it from where we are. I appreciate that this teaching invites us to start from acknowledging that yes, happiness is here. Acknowledge that, and then really see it. How satisfying is that happiness really?

The Buddha's teaching for us on cultivating wise concentration is essentially that by relying on wise concentration—he uses this phrase, "by relying on this, abandon that"—wise concentration creates a much more stable kind of happiness. It's not permanent. It is not reliable either. But it is a more reliable kind of happiness. And it helps us to let go of that really unreliable kind of happiness.

And then we bring our mindful attention—we bring our concentration and mindfulness together—to bear on that state itself, the happiness of concentration itself. And we begin to investigate. That too is impermanent. That too is unreliable. And much as I described with the letting go of the wanting, when we see the release of the wanting for the happiness of even concentration, it feels like being released from a vice grip.

I'm not going to get to the third one today—seeing what is not self as self. But I want to come back to this exploration of non-delusion. We're looking at our minds with wise concentration, beginning to explore how our minds deceive ourselves. But this opening to the truth isn't something that we can do.

Non-delusion—it's like the Buddha said: the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion is nibbāna. We can't do non-delusion. We can investigate experience, begin to see how our mind creates these filters. We can begin to recognize we're seeing through these filters. But we can't seem to say, "Oh, there's a filter there. Be gone, filter." Our minds don't let go of things quite that easily.

But we can watch it, we can witness it, and watch it perhaps at times vanish—much as I described that wanting vanishing. We see a filter vanishing and we see experience in a new way. We've seen the falling away of a delusion. In that moment, there's a moment of clarity, even if it's just partial clarity. And in that moment of seeing that release

from that filter, we understand the filter a little bit. We understand how it functions in our minds, and we maybe begin to be able to recognize it more clearly the next time it comes back.

Because they do tend to come back, even after they've fallen away. Because insights are impermanent. Mostly. Insights are impermanent. They seem so obvious to us when they're there—how can I not see this? And yet delusion is so compelling and so deeply embedded in our minds that an hour later, we think, "Wow, I guess it wasn't so obvious."

But having seen experience without that delusion, there's a way in which we know we're seeing through delusion now. And that very knowledge supports us in investigating our confusion, our delusion.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 46

Ordinary

Andrea Fella · 46 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella challenges the common expectation that meditation should produce extraordinary experiences like bliss or golden light. Instead, she points to the profound value of the ordinary—both the ordinary quality of mindfulness itself and the ordinary experiences it meets. Mindfulness, she explains, is simply the mind's natural capacity to know what's happening while it's happening, a familiar quality we often overlook until someone points it out.*
>
> *Fella offers practical guidance for recognizing "unprompted mindfulness"—those spontaneous moments when awareness returns after being lost in thought. These moments, she suggests, provide a direct taste of effortless awareness and reveal the contrast between being awake and being lost. She references the Abhidhamma teaching that mindfulness is the proximate cause of mindfulness, explaining how unprompted moments can spark prompted, continuous awareness. Drawing from teachings by Sayadaw U Tejaniya, she explores the knowing quality of consciousness itself—how every experience contains both the object known and the knowing of it, and how inclining toward this knowing can reveal its inherent neutrality and non-judgment.*
>
> *The talk includes the Buddha's teaching from the Mūlaka Sutta that "all things merge in the deathless," emphasizing that liberation is available through any experience at the six sense doors. Fella shares how recognizing experience as "empty phenomena rolling on" brought unexpected relief rather than the fear she had anticipated. She concludes with a beloved Tibetan poem celebrating how happiness is already present in open relaxation, inviting practitioners to trust the ordinary unfolding of experience as the very path to freedom.*

When we come to meditation, sometimes we're looking for something special—bliss, joy, lovely light, golden experiences. And those things happen from time to time. But what I'd like to talk about today is kind of the opposite side of things: the ordinary, and how that ordinary can be the ground of our freedom.

I'd like to start by talking about mindfulness, which is itself a pretty ordinary quality of mind. As we've defined it, it's basically the ability of the mind to know what's happening while it's happening. It's just a basic quality of our minds. It's nothing esoteric, nothing particularly special. And it's actually recognized—it can be recognized when it's pointed out to us—but we don't consciously recognize it that often. It's like it hap-

pens to us and it's not something we've noted or paid attention to too much. So we've kind of missed it. But then when somebody points it out to us, it's like, oh yeah, I know what that is.

As an analogy around this: there are things that we experience a lot that we don't really necessarily connect with. I was having a conversation with a friend of mine one morning and I was saying, you know the sound of the mourning doves when they fly away? And she said, no, I don't know that sound. I said, oh no, you know that sound. You've heard it a hundred times. The next time you ride your bike down the road and you see mourning doves there, listen to the sound and see if you recognize it. The next day she came back to me and she said, I do know that sound. I've heard it hundreds of times. She just really hadn't connected it with the experience or with the mourning doves.

So mindfulness can be like that for us. It's actually pretty familiar to us once we start recognizing it. It actually happens to us a lot throughout the day—little small moments of it. For little split seconds we come into mindfulness and we know what's happening while it's happening. But what we typically do with that moment, when mindfulness comes into being for a split second, is that we do something with it. We act on what we've known in that moment. And we lose the possibility then of recognizing that mindfulness has come into being. Because we immediately—that's what we've actually been trained to do in our lives. You notice something, you do something with it. Or you think about it. Or you figure it out. As opposed to recognizing that the quality of mindfulness has appeared.

And why would we bother with that? It's far more important to know that we've seen a bug on the floor and to pick it up and take it out of the hall. Why would we notice that we've become mindful? So we rarely actually notice this quality of mindfulness until someone points it out and says, hey, this is important. This is a useful quality.

The Buddha did that for us. He really recognized the value of this quality of mindfulness—this ordinary quality of mind, just a natural part of how our minds work, a natural function of our consciousness. That it has this capacity to know what's happening while it's happening. I really think it was brilliant of the Buddha to recognize the value of this quality. It's such an unassuming quality. And when it just functions in the way we normally function with it, it doesn't seem very important at all, really. It was the brilliance of the Buddha to recognize that this quality, when cultivated and developed, is really powerful.

So it's worth getting to know what it feels like to be mindful. It's worth getting to know the quality of mindfulness really well.

There's an interesting teaching about mindfulness that when I first heard it I thought, how does that work? This doesn't make any sense. And this teaching is that the proximate cause of mindfulness is mindfulness. So how does that work? Partly it works because there are kind of two different ways mindfulness happens. There's one kind that's called unprompted mindfulness. And this is the kind of mindfulness that arises spontaneously when you're lost in thought and you return to mindfulness.

That moment when you return to mindfulness—that moment is unprompted mindfulness. Prompted mindfulness, on the other hand, is when you are already mindful and reminding yourself to be mindful.

So you can perhaps see how mindfulness is the proximate cause of mindfulness: it takes that unprompted mindfulness, and then, recognizing it, prompts additional moments of mindfulness. From this perspective, getting familiar with what these unprompted moments feel like, really appreciating these unprompted moments of mindfulness, is immensely helpful. It's really valuable, because that's where it begins. That's where our practice begins.

I'd like to speak for a while about what it feels like to be mindful. I'd like to propose that it's really useful to get familiar with this feeling, because when we do, those spontaneous moments of mindfulness that just happen to us—those unprompted moments—start to point themselves out to us, instead of us immediately slipping past them in order to do something with what we've noticed. As we get familiar with this feeling of mindfulness, we actually start to recognize that it happens to us far more than we thought it did.

In my own experience, I found that one of the best places to explore what mindfulness feels like was this very moment of returning. When I first started meditating, teachers would get up on the podium and say, "Feel a sense of presence. Feel a sense of presence in your experience." And I thought, what are they talking about? I had no clue what it meant to feel a sense of presence. This knowing of presence, having a sense of what it's like to be aware, was pretty obscure to me.

But then one time Joseph Goldstein said, "Get familiar with the difference between what it's like to be aware and what it's like to not be aware." And I thought, well, how do you do that? How do you know what it's like to not be aware? But then I started looking at my experience, and I discovered this moment of remembering—the moment when we remember about mindfulness, when mindfulness returns spontaneously, the unprompted moments of mindfulness. In that moment, the awareness that has come

into being and the unawareness are in pretty close proximity. The mind, as it comes into awareness, has a kind of memory. It remembers. There's a lingering flavor of what it felt like to not be aware.

So I began exploring that moment. I began exploring that moment of coming back into awareness, which I have mentioned as being an important moment to recognize. And here's another reason why it's so important: first of all, because you're mindful—you're already mindful in that moment that you've remembered. Whatever you've woken up into, you're already mindful. It's important because it can begin to give you a sense of the difference between being awake and aware versus being lost in thought. In that moment, there can be the beginning of a recognition of what mindfulness feels like. At least for me, this was a very important exploration—starting to get familiar with that moment, seeing if I could kind of contrast it. And this wasn't a lot of doing; it's more like simply asking, what does it feel like now to be aware? And at the same time, within that awareness, there is a kind of automatic lingering memory of what it was like before, when the mind was dull, foggy, lost in thought.

In this way, by exploring that moment, my mind began to educate itself around what awareness feels like, what it feels like to be present, what it feels like to be awake. This can happen not only in our sitting practice, although sitting is a great place to explore this.

Another reason why this moment is so important is because it is unprompted mindfulness. It takes no effort whatsoever for that moment of mindfulness to appear. Prompted mindfulness, on the other hand, requires some effort. But that moment of unprompted mindfulness, just arising spontaneously—it's effortless. You didn't have to do a thing to have it happen. And as you begin to touch into that moment, you get a sense of the natural quality, the possibility of a very natural awareness that doesn't take any effort at all. So again, that's another reason why this moment is so helpful to get familiar with: it reveals the natural quality of awareness, of mindfulness, and the possibility for natural awareness.

When we start prompting mindfulness—and it is necessary to prompt it, necessary to remind ourselves to be mindful in order to cultivate mindfulness—our agendas start getting in the way. And so this moment when we spontaneously come into mindfulness from being lost in thought is a real pointer to what mindfulness can feel like, what a very natural mindfulness can feel like.

Unfortunately, in that moment, we usually immediately start beating ourselves up because we have been lost in thought, and we lose our opportunity for these explorations. For myself, when I really started inquiring into this moment, it really cut into that judging mind. Anytime my mind got lost in thought and I woke up again: "Oh good, here's another opportunity to see this effortless mindfulness."

I offer this to you as an exploration.

We can also notice this phenomenon in the midst of our daily activities—just walking around, in the dining hall. This falls more into the informal areas of meditation. We have our formal practice time of sitting and walking, and our informal practice times. During the informal times, our goal is to be mindful all day long, but it seems to me, in my own experience and in talking to people, that when we're at meals, when we're going to our rooms, when we're putting on our shoes, we tend to be a little less intentional around the practice. It can be a little less fruitful in a way.

This is why we suggest the bells at two o'clock and at six-thirty, to kind of delineate these informal times from the formal times. It's not that we're really taking a break during the informal times, but something about the intentionality of formal practice supports the cultivation of these qualities.

Yet in our informal practice times, we actually get more opportunity to recognize this moment of waking up, precisely because we're not being so intentional about putting the effort in. So use that time as a time to explore this moment of remembering. This moment of, "Oh, I'm reaching for a glass and I'm noticing my arm just kind of magically moving through the air." You don't have to stop. You don't have to do a thing. You just notice mindfulness has arisen and you're noticing what's happening, kind of without missing a beat. The mindfulness just automatically lands on what's happening. It's like a light comes on.

See if you can get familiar with what this feels like.

Now I do have to say that in the initial explorations, it's not going to feel like a light comes on—not quite like that, probably. There seems to be this lag between mindfulness returning and our recognizing consciously that mindfulness has returned. It's kind of like coming out of the mud.

The way I understand it from the Abhidhamma perspective, in terms of how the mind functions, the mind is set to function in all these very small moments of experience. A mind moment can either be mindful or not mindful. And mind moments are really, really tiny—like seventeen trillion mind moments in the blink of an eye, or some fantastic number like that. Really, really tiny, these mind moments.

In any single mind moment, you can be mindful or not mindful. So it's kind of like mindfulness returns for a mind moment or two, and then it's not there for fifty mind moments, and then it's there for a moment or two, and then it's not there. It takes enough mind moments of mindfulness before we recognize it consciously. Something like that—it's my own model of it.

So it feels like we're coming out of the mud, and initially it may be that it's not quite such a clear distinction between awareness and non-awareness. But just keep playing with it. My exploration around this was: What's the earliest I can recognize that I'm back?

When we leap on and start judging, that's when you've become mindful—you've become mindful enough to know that you're back—but then you start judging, and so you've lost the mindfulness again. Part of the exploration is around really letting go of that judgment so you can just meet that moment of effortless mindfulness as it returns. This moment happens to all of us all the time. It's a great place to explore.

As we get familiar with what it feels like—what this ordinary quality of mindfulness feels like, what it feels like to be awake—we begin to appreciate the value of mindfulness. Its value becomes more clear to us. Partly because in the moment of mindfulness coming back, when there's enough of it, mindfulness naturally opposes greed, aversion, and delusion. As we start to see that, we really recognize clearly how valuable it is to be mindful.

That's something about the ordinariness of mindfulness, and yet how amazing it is when we recognize it, how valuable it is. It's ordinary but really valuable. It's ordinary, but the key to our liberation.

And then there's the experience that mindfulness meets. There's seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, things going through the mind, emotions, thoughts. All of our experience can be understood as coming through what are called the six sense doors—which include the five usual sense bases of seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, and the sense base of the mind. Everything we experience comes through one of these sense doors. That's all that's happening. All that's happening to us all day long. Pretty ordinary.

We happen to like certain configurations of those six things better than other configurations of those six things.

We like the configuration that contains bliss far better than we like the configuration that contains pain. And we tend to think that the configuration containing ordinary seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching is somehow unimportant.

But for the purposes of mindfulness, for the purposes of waking up, for the purposes of liberation, it makes no difference what's going on in those six sense spaces. The important quality is to be aware of what is going on in those six sense spaces. It does not matter what we are paying attention to. It really does not matter.

So from this perspective, ordinary experience—the ordinariness of walking through the woods or going to the grocery store—is the ground for our waking up.

This reminds me of a story from sitting with Sayadaw U Tejaniya. There was one time in one of our group interviews where one of the people in our group was a monk, and he had gone off to the Shwedagon Pagoda one day to circumambulate and meditate there. It's a beautiful place in Rangoon. He came back and was saying how great it was: "I really recommend going to Shwedagon. It was fabulous—such wonderful mindfulness I had there. My mindfulness was clear and I was meditating all day. It was just so clear."

Sayadaw U Tejaniya's response was: "Shwedagon is a good place to be mindful. So is the supermarket."

No difference. Doesn't matter.

The Buddha pointed to this. There's a sutta I'll read to you called "The Roots of Everything." He says: "All things are rooted in desire. They come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings. The foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness, their peak is wisdom, their essence liberation. All things merge in the deathless and Nibbana is their culmination."

Nibbana meaning freedom, liberation. That's all things he's talking about. It's not just states of bliss that merge in liberation—all things. There's no part of our normal everyday experience that is not worth paying attention to. The very ordinariness of our experience can be the place where we wake up.

Meeting these experiences at the six sense bases—seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching—we start to see, with mindfulness becoming continuous, that the whole show is a process. It's just a flow of changing causes and conditions. Seeing appears and disappears, hearing appears and disappears. It's just a flow of phenomena.

Munindra, one of our teacher's teachers, had this phrase: "Empty phenomena rolling on." Just seeing, just hearing, just smelling, just tasting, just things in the mind rolling on. We see the impersonal nature of this. It doesn't have to be special seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching. Any seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching will do to point out this impersonal nature of our experience.

And this recognition of the impersonal nature of our experience—that it is just a process, that there's no one particularly here doing anything—this recognition really begins to free us. Because our suffering, the way that we struggle, is all bound up with there being someone who suffers.

This teaching on not-self, which I'm not going to talk about much today—one could talk about it for weeks—but I will say one thing. When I first heard about it, it felt like a foreign concept. It sounded strange, and it sounded kind of scary. No self? Who's doing anything? It felt threatening, in a way, to hear about this teaching.

And then on one three-month retreat, I began to have my first taste of seeing just the process of life unfolding—touching into that sense that there's no one here doing anything, it's just happening. That experience was a relief.

It was not threatening. It was not scary. It was a huge relief. It came as a kind of surprise to me that this thing, this idea I had in my mind—this "not self" thing that sounded like it was going to be so scary to meet—turned out to be such a relief. I came back and reported this to one of my teachers, and he quoted what I think is a Zen saying: "No self, no problem."

Through our sense doors, every experience we have has two sides to it. There's the thing that we know—the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste, the touch, the thought, the emotion. And there's the knowing quality. There's the thing and the knowing of it. The sight and the knowing of it. The smell and the knowing of it. Every experience has that. Whether or not we're mindful, there is this knowing quality. It's called consciousness in the Buddhist psychology. So every sense experience has this consciousness to it.

It's usually easier for us to be mindful of the thing—the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste, the touch—than it is to be aware of or familiar with the knowing aspect. But it can be helpful to start getting familiar with this knowing aspect. Because this knowing quality, basically one of its functions, one of the functions of the mind, is just to know things. That's its job. It just takes things in and it knows them. It doesn't care what it knows. It doesn't have any opinions or views about what it knows. It just knows. That's

its job. And so, kind of inherently embedded in this quality of knowing is non-judgment, acceptance, clarity. Starting to get familiar with this knowing aspect of our experience begins to connect us with some of these qualities that it embodies.

So how do we learn to touch into this knowing quality? It's not obvious. It's even less obvious than mindfulness, than being aware of mindfulness. There are a few things I can say about this. It's kind of indirect in a way. We know the knowing because it knows something.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya said one day, "I've been trying to think of a good analogy about knowing, how we see the knowing." He said it's kind of like wearing glasses and looking through glasses. Those of you who wear glasses—this will perhaps be a visceral experience. Usually when we have our glasses on, we're looking at the world. We're not so aware of the glasses; we're aware of what we're seeing. But the whole way we're able to see is because of the glasses. And we can kind of get a sense that the glasses are there. We take them off and we see, "Wow, can't see a thing." Then we can see. So we can begin to infer what the glasses are through how they function. It's kind of like that with the knowing. We get familiar with it through what it does, through the process that it engages with.

So here are a few ways to start teasing your way through those two pieces—the thing and the knowing of it. For me, the first place I began to be aware of this difference between these two was when I was experiencing something difficult. This happened on one self-retreat I did, and I was experiencing aversion. I was hanging out, paying attention to the aversion, noticing the unpleasantness of the aversion. At some point I realized that there were two things going on in my mind. There was the aversion and there was the knowing of the aversion. I began kind of exploring through using the noting practice—this was using the noting practice—"Aversion is known. Knowing aversion." When I inclined my mind in that way, toward the knowing of the aversion, the experience became neutral. It was no longer unpleasant, because knowing is neutral.

It is inherently neutral.

For me, this exploration has been particularly valuable when something is difficult or challenging—when there's a difficult state of mind. If you can be with it, if you can hang out with it without too much resistance, just hanging out with aversion or hanging out with unpleasant pain, if you can remain without reactivity, just being present with that... In that space, if you can incline your mind towards what does it mean to know aversion, you might get a flavor of the neutrality of the knowing. It was quite interesting—like flipping a switch. I could go back and forth: aversion, unpleasant; knowing aversion, neutral.

So that's one way to explore this quality of knowing.

Another approach is through the question "Am I aware?"—the question that Sayadaw U Tejaniya recommends. He suggests, "Am I aware? What am I aware of?" Those two questions reflect the knowing and the object. The orientation toward asking "Am I aware?" orients us toward recognizing what awareness actually is. So in asking that question, don't just jump over it. Hang out for a moment. Am I aware? What is the obvious experience there? Don't try to figure it out. This is not something to think through. But with this exploration over time, it may start to become clear to you what the difference is between "Am I aware?" and "What am I aware of?"

Sayadaw U Tejaniya suggested something helpful when I was saying I had trouble distinguishing between the knowing and the object. It wasn't clear to me; it was hard to place my mind in just knowing any experience. He said, "Well, you don't try to do that." This is again something he says over and over: the things I tell you aren't something to do. We hear what he says, we go off and try to do them. He said, "Just notice when your mind is paying attention to the object and when it's paying attention to the knowing."

Now, until you start to get familiar with the knowing a little bit, that's going to be not so easy to recognize. But the mind kind of naturally does both. From time to time it lands on the object and knows the qualities of the object—it knows the hardness, the pressure, the heat, the tension, the coolness. It knows the pitch and tone of sound. It knows the color and form of seeing. And from time to time, it becomes aware of the knowing of the object. The mind will do that. So it's really about attuning yourself to what the mind is already recognizing.

That's a little more subtle.

Another place to check into this is when your experience is really, really ordinary. You're brushing your teeth, you're putting your shoes on. It's like, what is there to pay attention to here? We can dive into trying to feel the pressure and tension and tightness; we can dive into the objects. But in times when experience is pretty neutral, that's actually an interesting moment to ask yourself, "What does it feel like to be aware of this?" When we're caught in something difficult, sometimes it can be hard to ask that question. When things are really blissful, we don't want to ask that question. But when things are neutral—just walking through the woods, or scooping out your rice, or brushing your teeth, or lying down in your bed—what does it feel like to be aware of this?

Now, don't try to figure out what that knowing feels like. This is just a question to prompt the mind to explore a little bit, but it's not something to think about. The use of questions is kind of an art form in a way—just dropping that question into the pool and seeing what the ripple effects are. Drop the question: What is it like to be aware of this? It may be that your experience points out to you what awareness is. Maybe not. But you can explore that.

A kind of state of mind that I stumbled into on one three-month retreat some years ago.

In my previous retreats, I had been really focusing on very detailed mindfulness in the Mahasi style, which tends to create certain mind states. It tends to create very precise awareness of arising and passing, of just little particles of experience. And I thought that's what mindfulness was—that's what it meant to be mindful, to get down to where you could see every single moment of reticulated experience as you move your hand.

On this particular retreat, I couldn't do sitting meditation anymore because of a problem with my back, and I couldn't do slow walking anymore for the same reason. So I was walking fast and doing lying meditation, and the Mahasi style didn't work very well. I found myself doing a completely different style, a much more open, relaxed style of practice. I hadn't met Tejaniya yet, but I was doing a style very much like what he teaches.

I began stumbling into this state of mind that was just present, alert, clear—but completely ordinary consciousness. It was quite interesting to me. I didn't know I could be completely mindful and have perception and consciousness feel just ordinary. It was completely ordinary, and yet it felt extraordinary.

The reason it felt extraordinary is because there's a continuity of mindfulness happening, a continuity that allows the clarity of connecting with just whatever you're paying attention to. In that case, it was simply walking through the woods or going up the stairs—completely ordinary perception. Just knowing I'm walking up the stairs, walking up the stairs, knowing I'm walking up the stairs. Walking in the woods, knowing I'm walking in the woods. It wasn't a detailed, precise mindfulness. It was completely clear. Just ordinary. Very ordinary.

I began calling it "ordinary mind" for myself, and have since learned that this is how the Tibetans describe a state of very clear mindful awareness—ordinary mind. I think the reason it feels extraordinary is because there is that continuity of mindfulness. Con-

tinuity of mindfulness means that greed, aversion, and delusion have fallen away. In that state, there's a kind of concentration called the bliss of seclusion—the bliss of being secluded from the hindrances, from reactivity. It feels quite good.

This ordinary state of mind is a place where we can live from. That reticulated mindfulness—you can't live in that space. You can't drive down the freeway with things breaking into bits. But this state of ordinary clear awareness you can engage in the world with. And the qualities of knowing become apparent in that state: non-judgmental, accepting, clear, brilliant. The Buddha used words like radiant and luminous to describe the mind.

There's a Tibetan poet I'd like to share with you. He really celebrates this—a lot of what I've been talking about. He celebrates the ordinariness, the spontaneity, the ease with which we can connect with experience. Many of you have heard this, I'm sure. I've heard it hundreds of times, and I never get tired of hearing it.

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower, but is already present in open relaxation and letting go.

Don't strain yourself. There's nothing to do or undo. Whatever momentarily arises in the body-mind has no real importance at all, has little reality whatsoever. Why identify with and become attached to it, passing judgment upon it and ourselves?

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

Only our searching for happiness prevents us from seeing it. It's like a vivid rainbow which you pursue without ever catching, or a dog chasing its own tail.

Although peace and happiness do not exist as an actual thing or place, it is always available and accompanies you every instant.

Don't believe in the reality of good and bad experiences. They're like today's ephemeral weather, like rainbows in the sky.

Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain. As soon as you open and relax this tight fist of grasping, infinite space is there—open, inviting, and comfortable.

Make use of this spaciousness, this freedom and natural ease. Don't search any further looking for the great awakened elephant who's already resting quietly at home in front of your own hearth.

Nothing to do or undo, nothing to force, nothing to want, and nothing missing.

Marvelous. Everything happens by itself.

Let's sit for just a moment.

CHAPTER 47

The Present Moment

Andrea Fella · 59 min

> *In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of why present-moment awareness is so central to Buddhist practice. She begins with a verse repeated four times in the suttas, emphasizing that the past has been left behind and the future has not been reached—only the presently arisen state can be known with insight.*
>
> *Fella illuminates how our suffering is actually created in the present moment through reactive patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion. She explains that memories of the past and projections of the future are themselves thoughts arising now, and our reactions to these thoughts generate unnecessary dukkha. Through mindfulness, we can witness this process directly and discover that the reactivity is optional—that a memory need not automatically trigger embarrassment, nor does physical pain require the "second dart" of mental resistance.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance on working with difficult emotions, comparing the process to taking one's foot off the gas pedal—by turning attention to the feeling itself rather than feeding thoughts, we allow impermanence to naturally dissolve what seemed solid. Fella describes how mindfulness simultaneously weakens unwholesome states while strengthening wholesome qualities like mettā and compassion. She also explores how sustained present-moment awareness leads to concentration (samādhi), which brings well-being and creates conditions for insight into impermanence. The present moment, she concludes, is the only place where choice is possible—where we can notice intention before action and potentially choose a more skillful response.*

So tonight I want to talk about the present moment and why we spend so much time talking about it and trying to pay attention to it.

Sometimes it seems like we endlessly talk about the present moment, and after a day of coming back to the body, coming back to the breath over and over again—even when we've done it for a while—we can start to wonder, why am I doing this? What does this have to do with anything anyway?

To start this exploration of the present moment, I'd like to begin by reading a poem from the Buddha. I find this an interesting poem to look at and reflect on because it's repeated four times in the suttas. In a couple of those instances, the discourse where this poem appears begins with a monk and a deity having a conversation that goes some-

thing like, "Do you remember that poem the Buddha told us to reflect on?" And the other one says, "No, do you remember that poem?" "No." "Well, maybe we should go ask about it." So you kind of get the sense that this is a poem they were encouraged to memorize, to reflect on:

Let not one revive the past
or on the future build one's hopes.
For the past has been left behind
and the future has not been reached.
Instead, with insight let one see
each presently arisen state.
Let one know that and be sure of it,
invincibly, unshakably.
Today the effort must be made.
Tomorrow, death may come, who knows.
No bargain with mortality
can keep him and his hordes away.
But one who dwells thus ardently,
relentlessly by day, by night,
is one, the peaceful sage has said,
who has had a single excellent night.

So he's stressing here coming into the present, letting go of the past, letting go of the future, and coming into the present. I'll talk about that in some more detail, but first I want to share something I found—a Peanuts cartoon that to me is kind of like a commentary on this poem.

Lucy and Charlie Brown are sitting at the wall, hanging out in the afternoon, looking over the wall. And Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "Do you realize how many great moments in life are wasted? Take, for instance, the great moment that's coming up right now. Bang, it's gone, you've just wasted it." And Charlie Brown responds, "Well, you're a lot of fun to be around."

Like any good humor, there's truth on both sides of that. We do waste our moments by not being present for them. We waste so many of our moments by being lost in the past and being caught up fantasizing, thinking about the future. And yet on the other hand, Lucy's idea of what wasting a moment is seems to imply that there's something special that needs to be happening—whereas Charlie Brown is content hanging out and looking over the wall. Not a problem to hang out and look over the wall.

We tend to revive the past and project into the future. We do this endlessly. What is the past when we actually look at it? The past is thoughts that are arising now in the present moment. And we are in a kind of thought world, a thought bubble around that past. So we're lost, we're not connected to what's actually happening here and now. We are reflecting back and living in that world of the past.

Or the future. Even more of an exercise in futility in a way is spending our time projecting forward into what the future might be. Not to say that we can't plan and think about what we're going to do, but we spend an inordinate amount of time actually going over scenarios. What's going to happen if they say that? Well, then I'll respond this way. What's going to happen if they say that other thing? Well, then I'll respond that way.

I've spent so much of my life thinking about the future that never appeared. Even when I had planned out every possible scenario and thought, okay, that's what's going to happen, that's what I'm going to do—if that situation actually did happen, I rarely could do the thing that I thought I was going to do. We just cannot really predict how we're going to respond in a moment when we actually get there.

So these activities of mind, these thoughts, they're all just thoughts arising in the present moment. But we don't see them as that. We see them somehow as actually being the past and actually being the future—if not the actual future, possible futures.

If we're not actually here, present, we miss our lives. I spent so much time both looking back with regret, thinking back on the past, wishing I'd done this or said that, trying to revive the past and live it over again differently so that I wouldn't be experiencing something painful here and now. Or projecting, often with fear, into the future.

I remember one time I was having some struggle with my boyfriend. I came up with this whole scenario: well, he's going to do that, and then I'm going to get really mad at him. He never did that. It was all just fantasy, all just projection. And so much of our suffering actually happens over reviving the past and projecting into the future. I suffered a lot over that fantasy. I didn't need to suffer over that. It never happened.

So if we're not mindful of what's happening here and now, we're actually missing our lives. There's that sense of—bang, it's gone, you've wasted it. Never again is this moment going to be here. Every moment is new, every moment is fresh. And if we're lost in the past or lost in the future, we miss our lives.

That's one reason to be in the present moment: it's the only place anything ever happens. Including the past and the future. The past and the future happen here and now in our thoughts, in our minds. What we think of as past happens here and now. What we think of as future happens here and now.

Another helpful understanding about the present moment is that it's actually in the present moment that our struggles are created. We react to our experience. A thought arises now, and we may react to that thought. We think of something we wish we'd done or hadn't done. There's regret arising. What's actually happening is that there's a thought arising in the present moment, and then there's a reaction to that thought. Often that thought has a kind of unpleasantness associated with it—I wish I hadn't been the kind of person who said that thing. And so we regret that. There's the arising of that memory, the construction of that identity: I'm the person who said that, and I didn't like that person. And then we suffer over that. That regret arises now. It's arising here and now.

We sometimes think about our suffering over the past as something we carry around with us, like baggage that's always weighing us down. There is a kind of baggage there. The memory is there, and there's a tendency to have reactions around that memory—a memory of something that happened and a feeling of embarrassment. Often it feels as if these things are inextricably intertwined, that there's no way that memory can arise without embarrassment arising. It feels as if the embarrassment is lurking underneath the surface, just waiting to pop up.

But actually, when we start to explore in the present moment what happens, we see that the memory arises, the reaction to that memory arises, and then the embarrassment arises. It actually happens in sequence. And it's not necessarily the case that those two are inextricably intertwined. There's a habit of going from that memory to embarrassment—a very strong pattern, a strong habit.

And yet, it does not have to be that way. That memory can arise and we can simply see it as an arising memory. "Oh, there's that memory." When we see it arising, when we see the memory coming up as just a thought and don't create the identity around the person who did that in the past or was in that situation in the past—when we just notice, "Oh, there's a thought"—then there's the possibility of seeing that it is just a thought, and there doesn't need to be the follow-on reaction to it.

So much of our suffering is created like this. Thoughts arising about the past, thoughts arising about the future, and we react to those thoughts. And then there are things happening in the present moment that we react to as well. Physical pain, for instance, is one way that we often get reactive. Unpleasant experience in the body—we

often react to this. And again, this is a very habitual kind of experience. When there's pain in the body, we don't like it, we don't want it, we want to get rid of it. We may feel like we don't have control over it, and there's a struggle, a feeling of being combative with that physical unpleasantness.

From the Buddha's perspective in the teachings around this, he talks about how it's as if we, having been struck by a dart—an arrow—then pick up another arrow and strike ourselves again. Because we have this initial sense of physical pain, that first arrow. But then we get reactive to it. We don't like it, we don't want it, we want to get rid of it, we want to fix it, change it, control it. That's the second dart, and it becomes a feedback loop whereby that pain just escalates—the mental pain compounding the physical pain.

These things happen in the present moment. This process happens in the present moment. And by being mindful, being present in the present moment, we have an opportunity not only to witness this process, but through witnessing it with mindfulness, we can sometimes choose differently.

The reactive mind basically wants things to be other than they are right now. Our reactive mind is essentially out of alignment with the way things are here and now in this moment. And if you reflect on this a little bit, you know, this is the situation we're in right now. Things have happened in the past; causes and conditions have come together to put us into whatever situation we're in right now. It is here. Whatever situation it is—pleasant, unpleasant, whatever experience we're having—is already happening. And so often we fight against that experience that's already happening. We hate it, we have aversion to it. Or we really like it and we want to hold on to it, and we experience fear around the thought of it going away.

So that situation here and now is just what's happening. And I'm not saying that all we do is sit here and not try to take action. But the aversion, the wanting to hold on—those are extra. And they create a mental stress, a mental suffering, a sense of dissatisfaction that's extra in our experience. It's not necessary. We can experience something unpleasant and take action. We cut our finger with a knife and we can bind it up without feeling angry at ourselves for having cut ourselves. That's just a simple example, but that's the kind of thing we do over and over again. We rail against things as they are. And that very railing against is the suffering, is the stress, is the dissatisfaction.

There's another way of relating to our experience. The Buddha suggests mindfulness as another way to relate to our experience in the present moment. When we notice that we are battling with things as they are, battling with the present moment, the Buddha

said, "This is suffering, this battling with the present moment." And what we need to do with that suffering is understand it. Not understand it intellectually—he's not talking about thinking about it—but a direct experiencing of that suffering. How does it come to be? What does it feel like? It may sound counterintuitive, but I'll talk a little bit about how this works, how being mindful of our suffering actually helps to free us from it.

I'll share first a poem by one of my favorite poets, Rainer Maria Rilke. This is a kind of celebration, an acknowledgment of this truth that suffering is our teacher—it's what helps to wake us up. Rilke says, in the Tenth Duino Elegy: "Someday, emerging at last from the violent insight, let me sing out jubilation and praise to assenting angels."

Let not even one of the clearly struck hammers of my heart fail to sound because of a slack, a doubtful, or a broken string. Let my joyfully streaming face make me more radiant. Let my hidden weeping arise and blossom. How dear will you be to me then, you nights of anguish? Why didn't I kneel more deeply to accept you, inconsolable sisters, and surrendering lose myself in your loosened hair? How we squander our hours of pain. How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration to see if they have an end. Though they are really our winter enduring foliage, our dark evergreen, one season in our inner year. Not only season and time, but our place and settlement, foundation and soil and home.

Mindfulness of this phenomenon of suffering, of unsatisfactoriness, of stress—there are so many different translations for this term *dukkha*. The Buddha used this term, often translated as "suffering," but *dukkha* is much broader and deeper than that word usually conveys. Others have translated it as stress, or unreliability, or unsatisfactoriness. These translations give you more of a sense of what we're talking about here. There's just this rub, this feeling that things maybe aren't quite the way we'd like them to be.

Being in the present moment offers us ways to learn about this reactive mind and learn to free ourselves from it, to let go of it a little bit. One of these ways is simply through the process of being present—the mind begins to settle down, it gets concentrated, it gets still. And in that process of the mind settling and getting concentrated, the reactivity toward and away from things begins to fall away. Concentration through mindfulness brings us to a place where we can meet the present moment without reactivity. Through this process, we begin to see that the reactivity is extra.

We can be with our breath through pain in our body, and then it's actually okay. We can sit through an emotional storm. Sometimes, as the mind settles even further, the emotional storms even fall away. We see a thought arise and it's not a problem—that memory that might have led to embarrassment. The embarrassment just doesn't come

up because the mind is right there to see that thought arise. It sees, "Oh, it's just a thought," and the thought passes away. So the mind settling in concentration begins to help us understand how all this reactivity is extra.

Also, as we settle into the present moment, often through concentration, there is a kind of peacefulness, a settling that happens. The mind gets more comfortable and more at ease in this process. Through that, it's as if the mind starts to get an education in peacefulness and ease, and it begins to gravitate more toward that. It sees, "Yes, okay, so this reactivity is happening, and I remember what that peace felt like." The mind can almost begin to let go of the state of reactivity and gravitate toward something that has become more familiar and feels more grounded and settled. So the process of being in the present moment begins to educate our minds in another way of being. This helps us let go of some of this reactivity.

Then there's a letting go that happens as we start, through being mindful of something—being mindful of the arising of a very habitual pattern of self-hatred, for instance. That was one of my favorite habitual patterns that I worked with over the years. Through the practice of mindfulness, through being with things as they are and not resisting things as they are, there seems to be a little shift that can happen as we bring mindfulness to our experience. It's as if things don't have to be other than they are. "Oh, there's an arising thought of self-hatred. That's the way it is. It doesn't have to be any different." So mindfulness begins to create a little space around our experience.

There's a fun poem by Billy Collins—some of you might have heard me offer this before—that conveys this sense of a shift in perspective that can happen as we pay attention. When we come into the present moment and we are paying attention, something's happening and we just hate this thing that's happening. But we keep bringing our mindfulness back over and over again, and suddenly there's a shift. Things change. This Billy Collins poem is called—

Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in My House:

The neighbor's dog will not stop barking. He's barking the same high, rhythmic bark that he barks every time they leave the house. They must switch him on on their way out.

The neighbor's dog will not stop barking. I close all the windows in the house and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast, but I can still hear him muffled under the music, barking, barking, barking.

And now I can see him sitting in the orchestra, his head raised confidently as if Beethoven had included a part for a barking dog.

When the record finally ends, he is still barking, sitting there in the elbow section, barking, his eyes fixed on the conductor who is entreating him with his baton, while the other musicians listen in respectful silence to the famous barking dog solo, that endless coda that first established Beethoven as an innovative genius.

So something that we just assume is a problem can shift, and our minds can take it in in a different way.

Then there's the letting go that happens as we are willing to hang out with things that are difficult—the mindfulness of simply watching our emotions rise and pass, watching our bodily sensations arise and pass. With emotions, this is a particularly good place to notice this. If we are able to simply allow a challenging emotion without either resisting it and trying to push it away, or without trying to manipulate it or fix it or change it, or without holding on to it—sometimes we can hold on to a feeling of self-righteous anger, whipping ourselves up into even more anger through that feeling of self-righteousness, holding on to it because it somehow makes us feel justified.

Instead of relating to our experience in one of those ways—either pushing away or holding on—we can simply be with it. That's a shift of perspective, to just be with something. Allow a feeling of anger, not trying to change it, but just riding it out. The law of impermanence will take over, and that thing will eventually end.

We can watch this process. We can see how being mindful of something, particularly with difficult emotions, creates space. Emotions tend to be fed by our thoughts. When we're in a depressive state, we tend to keep talking ourselves into that depression: "Oh, I'm no good, I'm a failure, I've really blown it this time, nobody's ever going to like me again." We can go on and on like that, and those thoughts simply perpetuate the feeling of depression. Likewise with anger—we can perpetuate it through our thoughts.

Through mindfulness, instead of putting our attention out in the world on the thing we are focused on, or inside ourselves in terms of how we think we've failed or what we've done wrong, we turn instead to the feeling of the emotion itself. What we do is cut the mental juice that's keeping that emotion going.

It's kind of like a car. Those emotions are like a car going down the freeway at a hundred miles an hour. Pumping those thoughts is like putting your foot on the gas pedal. If you can turn your attention to the feeling of the emotion itself and let go of the thoughts, it's like you've taken your foot off the gas pedal and put the car into neutral. It's not going to stop immediately, but it will come to a stop because you're no longer giving it the gas.

Mindfulness works in this way. We turn our attention to the feeling, and that's like putting our minds into neutral around that feeling. It gives the opportunity for the feeling to live its life and come to an end. We can realize the letting go of our reactivity by being willing to be mindful of it until it dissipates through impermanence.

Mindfulness in the present moment is truly the key—mindfulness along with some sense of understanding about what's helpful for us to pay attention to, what leads us away from suffering. The Buddha really focused on this. He said, "This is all I teach: I teach about suffering and I teach about the ending of suffering. Everything I teach is leading in that direction." Keep your eye on the suffering. Keep your eye on that and understand it. This will help lead to the ending of suffering.

He said there are three main underlying tendencies of mind that lead us into suffering, into unsatisfactoriness and distress, over and over again: greed, aversion, and delusion. These qualities—acting out of greed, trying to hold onto something that inevitably, because everything is impermanent, will eventually go away—cause us to suffer. Or we suffer from the holding on itself, because we're afraid it's going to go away, knowing something about how things go. So we experience fear. In that very greed, there's a contraction, a stress, a suffering.

Aversion is really obviously suffering. Even the feeling of aversion is unpleasant in the body.

A sense that this is not acceptable, that this has got to change—that is suffering. Now again, it's not to say that when something is happening we don't take action to change it. But that sense of aversion around it is optional. The aversion itself is suffering. And we can take action instead out of compassion, out of kindness, rather than out of aversion—some more wholesome motivation for action.

The Buddha pointed to action taken out of greed, aversion, and delusion. He said if you act out of greed, aversion, and delusion, you're essentially deepening the ruts of greed, aversion, and delusion in your mind, and that will lead you into more suffering. If your actions are motivated by non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion, that will lead you away from suffering and towards happiness. And so in this teaching he said: keep your eye on your mind. If you're going to be acting out of greed, aversion, or delusion, if you can choose to not take those actions, that's going to lead you towards more happiness.

There's this interesting quality of mindfulness: as we turn our attention to those unskillful states of mind, those unskillful motivations—greed, aversion, and delusion are the three roots, but so many difficult, unwholesome, unskillful states of mind result

from these. Anger, rage, cruelty, hostility, frustration, depression, wanting, avarice—all arise out of these three roots. And the amazing thing about mindfulness is that if you turn with mindful attention to those states of mind, letting go of the thoughts associated with them in favor of just being with the feeling, then mindfulness creates the conditions for those difficult states, those unhelpful states, to appear less frequently in our minds.

Partly this is because when we're caught by those difficult states, when we're caught by anger, we don't actually recognize how it's impacting us here and now. I know in my life, when I've been caught by anger, I've been so focused on that other person—I really hope that they suffer—so focused on the anger at that other person that I'm not feeling how I'm suffering through the anger in this moment. Turning the mindfulness away from the thing we're angry at and towards the experience of anger itself begins to give the mind an education in the fact that this state actually doesn't feel very good, is not very helpful in our system here and now. It begins to educate us in the suffering of those states.

When the mind begins to get that education, it also starts to see how that anger is arising out of a holding, a clenching in our own minds. The mind sees it's something it's doing to itself. And so it starts to let go of that. It's really quite an amazing property of mindfulness that turning mindful attention to these difficult things actually helps us to let go of them. I didn't believe it when I first heard it, but over and over again I have seen the truth of that in my own experience.

The other interesting thing about mindfulness is that if you turn your attention to beautiful states of mind, wholesome, skillful states of mind motivated out of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—the quality of mettā, the quality of kindness that we were working with this afternoon, the quality of compassion, the quality of mindfulness itself, the quality of tranquility, the quality of generosity—turning mindful attention to those states, noticing how they are present here and now in the moment, creates the conditions for them to become more frequent in our experience.

So mindfulness has this simultaneous property: it helps us to let go of what's unskillful and cultivate what's skillful. By just turning our attention to the present moment and noticing what's here, we begin to naturally let go of the states motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion. We begin to naturally cultivate more of the wholesome qualities—love, kindness, generosity, compassion, equanimity.

So another reason why it's so helpful to be in the present moment, noticing the present moment: it's the only place anything ever happens. It's where our reactivity is born, so it's where we can start to see that reactivity. And the mind, being mindful in the present moment, begins to naturally let go of the unwholesome and naturally cultivate the skillful.

Another reason is that the present moment is the only place where there's any possibility of choice. This relates back to skillful action and unskillful action. Through seeing our experience in the present moment over and over again, we begin to notice that kind of motivation happening in our minds before we actually act. We can know that we're going to speak before we speak, we can know that we're going to move before we move, and we can even know we're going to think before we think. We can also know we're headed in the direction of an emotion before that emotion actually arises.

This is the factor in the mind of intention—intention is what motivates our action. And we can see this; we can see intention apart from the action. Through the physical actions of our body, we can begin to explore this, noticing that we can know we're going to move before we move. In the knowing of this intention—the knowing that I'm getting ready to move, or I'm getting ready to act, I'm getting ready to speak—in the knowing of that, we can also often, not always but often, see why we're going to do that thing. There's a motivation that underlies our actions. Accompanying all of those intentions to act is a reason why we're going to act.

And that reason is the key. The Buddha really pointed to this as a very important point to notice. If we can find that motivation and recognize whether it is skillful or unskillful, then we have an opportunity—having seen that intention and the motivation, because we've seen it come up—mindfulness has an opportunity to kind of step in and choose to not follow through on that intention.

If we're not mindful in the present moment, these choices happen for us. Our habits make our choices for us. The ways that we have engaged through our lives have created a kind of momentum of particular habits. We all have our own favorite habits. My two favorite habits were anger and self-hatred. And over and over again, I kept falling into those ruts. When mindfulness wasn't present, it was kind of like those were the ruts that I gravitated towards. I'm sure you all know your own ruts—you know your own things you tend to fall into over and over again. When we're not mindful, it's like those ruts are making our decisions for us, like our habits and patterns are choosing for us. So the choices are being made, whether or not we're conscious of it.

When we can bring mindfulness into the present moment, to this process of making choice, we can start to have a little bit of a wedge in the door to begin to say, maybe I don't want to choose that way. Not always. Often what happens as we just start this exploration, as we see this intention and this motivation, is that all we get to do is watch ourselves follow through on it. And then we just get to see the consequences of following through on that action. We get to see what happens as a result. Often it's some kind of struggle, some kind of suffering. And then the instruction is just to understand that suffering, just to meet it. Let go of thoughts of self-recrimination—"I should have been able to stop myself." If you could have stopped yourself, you would have.

Sometimes our habits are stronger than our ability to be mindful. And we have to respect that. We have to acknowledge that the conditioned patterns of our mind have a lot of power. Mindfulness is pretty powerful, but sometimes those habits are stronger than our mindfulness. And so when that happens, we just have to be compassionate for ourselves. This is happening because of the way causes and conditions have come together. The habits of my mind have led to this. And can I now be compassionate towards the situation I find myself in? Can I just meet this moment with mindfulness?

We can start exploring this moment of choice in our actions. It's actually an interesting exploration to make, something you might want to play with. You don't have to do this, but you might just want to try this: when you're sitting, you might take a period of, say, ten minutes at the beginning or at the end of the sitting, where you kind of just say, "Okay, I'm not going to move. I'm just going to see if I can hold still." And then, having made that kind of resolve around stillness, see if you can notice the intention to move before you move. If you notice that intention, you may want to see, "Okay, can I just see what's the motivation behind that? Is it an aversion because I've got an itch on my nose and I really want to scratch that itch? Or is it a pain that I want to move to relieve?"

I'm not saying not to move at all, but notice. If you can have that resolve for stillness, you might begin to notice that intention and begin to notice the motivation that accompanies it. And see if you can choose whether or not to follow through on it. Sometimes, you know, if there's a certain kind of pain—you've been sitting for a while and there's a certain pain, like my sciatic nerve, if I'm sitting on my sciatic nerve, there's a pain that really lets me know: it's time to move now. The body is going to be damaged if I don't move. And I can move then out of compassion rather than aversion. But if I'm not present to notice that, I'd probably just move kind of automatically out of aversion—"Oh, I don't like that. I want to get rid of that." But we can choose to move more skillfully. So explore that. You can play with that a little bit in your experience.

Another place to play with it is around the changing of postures. If you're sitting, then see if you can know you're going to stand before you stand.

The watermelon is out there and there's only a few pieces left. You've kind of had your eye on that watermelon, and you see somebody walking over there, and suddenly you're up, wanting to get to the watermelon before the other person gets there. That was some greed motivating that action.

So just see if you can notice—the larger changes of bodily posture are sometimes an inroad into being able to see our intention and the motivation that goes behind it. Again, not to say that we're not supposed to act at all. That's often a misunderstanding of the Buddha's teaching. But we see if we can, in the seeing of our motivation—often in seeing our motivations, there's a mixture of wholesome and skillful motivations and unwholesome, unskillful motivations.

Like the moving, for example, when there's pain in your body. Knowing that this pain is damaging the body—there may well be some aversion to that pain. And there is the sense of knowing this is a skillful thing to do. The damage to the body is not a good thing. So there is a compassionate motivation there as well. Sometimes I like to suggest for people, in seeing these mixed motivations, just see if you can connect a little bit more to the more wholesome motivation in taking the action. See if you can incline more towards the compassion than the aversion in the movement.

I've already talked a little bit about concentration, that this is another benefit of being in the present moment. The mindfulness, the sustaining of our mindful attention in the present moment, leads to concentration. It's as simple as that—if we can simply moment after moment be present, the mind will become concentrated, it will become settled, it will become calm. And this feels good. The state of concentration feels pretty good. So that's a benefit of this practice. As we learn how to engage with more continuity, it brings some peacefulness, it brings some happiness into our being. It brings a sense of well-being.

And through that well-being, through that sense of happiness, the mind opens into some of these more beautiful qualities that we were talking about this afternoon. In the present moment we can begin to have a heartfelt connection to the present moment—that kind relationship to our experience we were discussing. Being in the present moment, we can have that connection.

I'll read another poem by Rilke that speaks to this happiness of being here:

Truly being here is glorious. Each of you had an hour, or perhaps not even an hour, a barely measurable time between two moments when you were granted a sense of being. Everything. Your veins flowed with being. Yet we can so easily forget what our laughing neighbor neither confirms nor envies.

This state of well-being, this heart-opening connection to the present moment, is very beautiful. And we all know that feeling. But we do tend to overlook it at times. Our culture doesn't really respect or honor it. So we come into retreat and cultivate this sense of being present. And yet when we go back out into our lives, we often forget this because our culture doesn't value it. Being here, we really can begin to get a sense of the value of this being present. It's very beautiful.

And the being present, stable in the present moment, begins to open us up to insight, begins to open us up to actually seeing things more clearly. We begin to understand impermanence more deeply through being in the present moment—seeing impermanence directly through experience. Watching these emotions, for instance. Watching the feeling of wanting. I recommend this one highly. If you want something, you want that piece of watermelon—play with watching the wanting instead of following through on the wanting. Feel the wanting. Feel the kind of magnetic pull, that magnetic connection between you and that watermelon. It's like it's drawing you over there. Just feel it. Can you just feel it?

If you just feel it without thinking so much about, "I have to have that watermelon, that's going to make me happy for three seconds"—if you just feel the feeling, you will see it vanish. And when you see it vanish, you know in that moment directly the impermanent nature of that experience. And you will also know directly the way that that

wanting had you in its grip. When that wanting releases, it's like being released from a vice grip. And you directly see how you were suffering, how you were caught by your own mind.

So insight—insight is possible through being in the present moment.

I'll close by reading a Tibetan poem. In a way, it's a kind of bookend to the poem I started with. The poem I started with pointed out: let go of the past, let go of the future, notice with insight each presently arisen state. That's what we've been talking about. See each presently arisen state. You have to do this here and now. This is the only place you can do this. We need to do it today because we never know when we're going to die.

So this poem says some similar things:

This human body, at peace with itself, is more precious than the rarest gem. Cherish your body, it is yours this one time only. The human form is won with difficulty. It is easy to lose.

All worldly things are brief, like lightning in the sky. This life, you must know, is the tiny splash of a raindrop, a thing of beauty that passes away even as it comes into being.

Therefore, set your goal and make every day and night a time to attain it.

Treasure the time you have been given, for this is all that matters.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 48

The Skill of Meditation

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this talk, Andrea Fella opens with the inspiring story from the Dhammapada commentary of a seven-year-old novice monk who, after observing irrigators guiding water, fletchers straightening arrows, and carpenters shaping wood, asked himself: if these craftspeople can direct mindless materials, why cannot one with a mind guide that mind toward awakening? This reflection led him to full enlightenment before his noon meal, inspiring the Buddha's verse: "Irrigators guide water, fletchers shape arrows, carpenters fashion wood, and sages tame themselves."*
>
> *Fella unpacks meditation as a kusala (skillful) practice—a term the Buddha used both for wholesome actions leading away from suffering and for craftspeople skilled in their trades. She presents the five faculties (pañcindriya) as the essential qualities for developing this skill: wisdom (paññā), which provides initial understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the nature of skillful and unskillful intentions; confidence (saddhā), the willingness to try the practice; energy (vīriya), cultivated through light, frequent effort rather than forceful striving; mindfulness (sati), the knowing of present-moment experience; and concentration (samādhi), the stability arising from continuous awareness.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes that these faculties work cyclically—insight wisdom deepens confidence, which renews energy for practice. Fella offers practical guidance on balancing effort, using the analogy of riding a scooter: tap frequently at first, then learn to read when momentum needs refreshing. She describes how mindfulness reveals the actual nature of suffering in our experience and how watching mental states like wanting or loneliness arise and pass away provides direct insight into impermanence, freeing us from habitual reactivity.*

I'd like to start tonight by telling a story from the time of the Buddha. The story is about a very young monk, a very young boy. He was seven years old, and at that age he asked his mother if he could ordain.

His mother, having had the sense from the time he was gestated in her womb that he was a very special child, agreed. As she said, as soon as he was in her womb, all of the dull and stupid and careless servants became wise. And so she thought, this child is so wise. She made the resolve that she would never stand in the way of whatever her son wanted. So when he was seven and he asked to ordain, she agreed.

She took him off to the monastery, and her family had been a supporter of Sariputta, the very senior right-hand disciple of the Buddha. They spent seven days there with him. You can kind of imagine parents leaving their seven-year-old child with the monastics—they might want to spend a few days there. So they spent a week offering food and probably saying goodbye to their son.

On the eighth day, Sariputta was going to take him out for alms round. But the boy had never gone out for alms round in the first seven days, and so they lagged behind a bit. Sariputta didn't necessarily want this young monk to be with all the other monks because he didn't quite have the right manner of carrying the bowl or wearing the robes. So Sariputta wanted to give him some extra instruction, and they lagged behind a little.

As they were walking to the village for the alms round, the young boy was curious about what was around him. I guess he'd come from a more remote village or something, and he was seeing things he'd never seen before. So he was asking Sariputta about them.

They saw a ditch of water by the side of the road. He asked Sariputta, "What's that?" Sariputta said, "It's a ditch that the irrigators use to guide water to their crops." The boy said, "Does water have a mind?" Sariputta said, "No, water doesn't have a mind." Then the boy said, "So they can lead such a thing as water wherever they want it to, even though it doesn't have a mind?" Sariputta said, "Yes."

And the boy—I'll read this part to you, apparently this is what he thought to himself—reflected: "If they can lead such a thing as this, which lacks mind, to whatever place they wish, why cannot they also bring their own mind under their own control and cause it to be enlightened?" This is a seven-year-old we're talking about here, so obviously a very bright seven-year-old.

They walked a little further on and saw arrow makers. Again, he asked what they were and what they were doing. Sariputta told him that they were straightening out reeds to make arrows, putting them over a hot flame to straighten out the reeds and make them useful as arrows. Again, the same question: "Do those reeds have a mind?" And the same reflection: "If they can straighten out those things that do not have mind, why cannot they not straighten out their mind?"

Further on they saw carpenters building wheels and shaping wood. Again the same questions, the same response, the same reflection.

Now, monks walk along one behind each other, the senior monks in front and the junior monk behind. This novice monk was carrying Sariputta's alms bowl with him—that was the form at the time. After seeing and reflecting on all these things, he stopped. This young boy stopped and said, "Venerable sir, would you take your alms bowl back and let me go back to the monastery? I'd like to meditate."

He was inspired by seeing these things to straighten out his own mind, to see whether he could lead that which does have mind to where he wanted it to go.

And Sariputta, to his credit, didn't chastise this upstart young novice for giving him his bowl back—and in fact requesting that he go for alms round for him. "Oh, by the way, would you get my alms food too? I'm going to go meditate." This little seven-year-old boy.

And Shariputra agreed, so the boy went back to the monastery. And the story is, as these good stories go, that this seven-year-old boy became completely, fully enlightened before his noon meal.

I like this story for a couple of reasons. One, it's inspiring to think of the possibility that a child that young actually has the capacity to become enlightened. At one of the last retreats I taught, I was teaching with Gil Fronsdal, and I told this story. We had a little conversation about it afterwards, and he said that he hadn't heard this story before, but that it is said seven is the youngest it is supposed to be possible to become awakened. Seems pretty young to me, but I think it's interesting that it has been recorded as a story from the time of the Buddha—that monks that young actually became fully enlightened.

But the more practical reason I find this story inspiring is because of the verse it points to. After the Buddha came back to the monastery and heard this story, and determined that this young monk had become fully enlightened, he said: "Irrigators guide water, fletchers shape arrows, carpenters fashion wood, and sages tame themselves."

This is a verse from the Dhammapada, and the story I told you comes from the Dhammapada commentary. Most of the verses in the Dhammapada have a kind of back story that goes with them—what happened that inspired the Buddha to utter these verses. So that is the origin of this story.

The other reason I find this story inspiring is that it points to how taming our minds is like a skill. It compares the guiding of water by irrigators, the shaping of arrow shafts by fletchers, and the fashioning of wood by carpenters to what people who sit down and meditate do with their minds. The actions that carpenters, arrow makers, and irrigators use are skills, and we can cultivate the skills of meditation in the same way.

There's a term in Pali that's often translated as "skillful" or "wholesome." The term is *kusala*. Apparently this term, as it's usually referred to in the Buddhist texts, refers to those actions and intentions that are wholesome and helpful—that guide us away from suffering and towards freedom from suffering. Skillful actions are those based in non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion; those based in generosity, kindness, non-cruelty, and renunciation.

But the term itself, *kusala*, was also apparently used for people like carpenters and irrigators. If they were good at what they did, they were called *kusala*—skillful. So this term in the texts has a double meaning: a skill, something that can be cultivated, and this direction towards the wholesome.

I'd like to talk about the skill of meditation tonight—how we cultivate that skill. The skill of meditation is about learning how to wake up, learning how to guide our minds so that they don't, out of habitual tendencies, move us into our patterns and habits of suffering over and over again. When we're not mindful, as I said the other day, our habits and patterns kind of take over. With mindfulness, with the practice of meditation, we can begin to guide our minds in the way we'd like them to go.

In this way, it's a very apt analogy to the irrigators guiding water. When irrigators guide water, they're directing it to places where it's useful—to water the crops and support them to grow. In a similar way, we guide our minds in the direction that supports them to become happy, to let go of all those actions and intentions that drag us into struggle, dissatisfaction, despair, depression, anger, frustration, boredom, and all those difficult states of mind.

So in a sense, what we are cultivating in the skill of meditation is the skill of learning skillfulness—the skill of learning what is helpful for us and what is not so helpful.

There's a list of five qualities called the five faculties. These five qualities can be understood as the qualities that need to become strengthened in order for this skill to become strong for us. The five qualities are confidence, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

We can actually look at these five qualities as being almost general qualities that would need to be cultivated for any skill. Depending on what we're doing, the way these five qualities manifest would be slightly different. In order to accomplish anything, we need to have some sense of confidence that it's possible to accomplish it. Whether it's playing the piano or playing basketball or whatever we'd like to become skillful at, we need a sense of confidence that it's possible. And from that confidence, we may get some energy to begin to practice, to begin to engage.

The practice, the engagement, involves paying attention to what we're doing—beginning to be aware of what we're doing so that we can grow the actions and movements needed for that particular skill. With playing the piano, you start by seeing the page of notes, matching the notes to the keys, maybe figuring out how the chords go. It's all pretty slow at the beginning. But it's with that awareness of what you're doing that the skill begins to grow. That's the mindfulness part—the awareness of what we're doing, how we're engaging with this task.

And then there is the practice, the continuity, the repetition of that task—the repetition needing to be done over and over again in order for the skill to become strong. If you sit down to the piano once a week, you're probably not going to get very skillful at it very quickly. You need to sit down and really practice it, do those actions over and over again. This is the aspect of concentration: engaging in the actions, repeating them for a period of time. And from all of this engagement, the skill develops. The capacity to do this with ease develops. We understand how to engage with this task. And that's the understanding part, the wisdom part.

So with respect to meditation, the confidence is in the capacity to engage with the practice, and that helps support an energy to engage. And what do we engage with? We engage with mindfulness and paying attention to our present moment experience. Doing that continuously over periods of time, that continuity of mindfulness, brings concentration. And all of that together helps us to understand our experience, our inner life, helps us to more deeply understand things as they are.

The usual flow of these five faculties starts with confidence or faith as the first one in order to progress through them. That's where it typically starts, that list. But in my thinking about it, it feels to me that it makes sense to actually start with wisdom. We can think of these as a cyclic pattern. We need some kind of wisdom of what we're doing, what we are trying to engage with, in order to begin to engage—some understanding of what it is that we want to do. We don't just start by having faith in nothing; we have faith in something. And that something, in the teachings of the Buddha, is wisdom.

So I'd like to start there, to start by talking a little bit about what it is that we need to understand to begin, to begin to have confidence, to begin to engage.

There's a teaching about wisdom that there are three different sorts of wisdom, or three different ways that wisdom comes about. There's the wisdom that comes about from reading and listening to information—the wisdom that we gain by reading books, listening to dharma talks. Then there's the wisdom that comes about by reflecting on what we've learned, actually engaging our intellectual capacities, thinking about it, re-

flecting on how it might impact us, how it might relate to our lives. And then the third kind of wisdom comes about through cultivating our minds, through actually taking action to engage with the practices and teachings.

The first two—reading and listening and reflection—are essential underpinnings for the third. Without those first two, without learning a little bit about what the meditation practice is about, what the Buddha's path is about, we don't have anywhere to practice. So we start with some kind of understanding. And the engagement with those practices results in the wisdom of the third kind, which is the wisdom of insight. I'll come back to that after we've gone all the way through all of these faculties again, to show how this comes about to support insight.

So what is it that we need to understand? What is the wisdom that the Buddha offers us? It's phrased in a number of different ways, and it's not necessary, as I said a couple of days ago, to understand all of this. The first way that this wisdom is expressed is as the Four Noble Truths. It's the key core teaching of the Buddha. He said, this is really the central teaching: I teach suffering and the end of suffering. And the Four Noble Truths expresses that.

It expresses that there is suffering in the world, that there's suffering in our lives. And that the cause of that suffering is a mental experience—it's a wanting. It's essentially wanting things to be other than they are. We cannot, we seem to be, it's very difficult for us to just rest with experience as it is. We want it to be some other way. And that's what leads us into this suffering. Those are the first and second noble truths.

The third noble truth is that it's possible to let go of that wanting and that craving for things to be other than they are. That freedom is possible.

It can be realized. The fourth noble truth is that there is a path, a way that we can engage to free ourselves from this craving, this wanting—the Eightfold Path. That's one of the ways this wisdom is expressed.

Another way it's expressed comes back to this term *kusala*. When we understand what is skillful with respect to leading us towards happiness and away from suffering—when we understand in particular the underlying intentions and motivations that lead us towards suffering and lead us away from it—that is wisdom that will help to free our hearts. The wisdom of understanding that actions taken out of greed, aversion, and delusion will ultimately lead us into stress, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, suffering. And actions taken out of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—or to put that more positively, generosity, kindness, and wisdom—actions taken out of those motivations tend to lead us towards happiness, towards letting go, towards freedom.

Another way this understanding is expressed, another aspect of the wisdom that supports our waking up, is the teaching on karma, which is essentially a teaching on cause and effect. When we take certain actions—and it's kind of an expansion of the understanding of what's skillful and unskillful—this is the understanding that skillful actions lead us to happiness, unskillful actions lead us to suffering. That's a two-minute summary of the teaching of karma. I'm not going to go into more detail than that because it can get really, really vast.

Another way this wisdom is expressed is through our understanding of experience itself. We understand the nature of experience to be impermanent. We understand the nature of experience to be basically unsatisfactory, unreliable as a place for us to be happy. If we try to hold on to something that's impermanent as a kind of foundation—thinking "this is what's going to make me happy, this thing will make me happy forever"—that thing is unreliable. It will not make you happy forever because it is impermanent, inherently impermanent. In its dissolution, in its falling away, any happiness that was dependent on that will also fall away.

And then there is the truth of the process nature, or ephemerality—that there's no thingness to anything. Because everything is changing at such a rate that it never really holds still to be a thing. It's always in some process of change. We impute a thingness for a time, but things don't inherently have that thingness.

So there's a potency to this wisdom. As I think I said a couple of days ago, we don't need to understand all of these kinds of wisdom before we start to engage. All we need is a little bit. I kind of like to think of the wisdom of the Buddha being this really rich meal. You can just take a tiny little taste of this meal and get the whole explosion of flavors in your mouth just through that tiny little bite. Any little bit of wisdom that you can connect to and begin to engage with will open the door to the whole of the Dharma over time.

So we can begin with a little bit of understanding. Just a little bit, perhaps. The First Noble Truth is an interesting place to begin. There is suffering. And the Buddha, in the statement of that first noble truth, didn't stop and just say, "Yes, this is something you need to believe." No. He said this is something to be engaged with. Suffering is meant to be understood. That's what we're supposed to do with suffering—we're supposed to understand it. There's an action associated with that truth. With all four of the noble truths, actually, there's an action associated with each truth.

So if we just start with that one truth—understand suffering—and we understand what the Buddha means by "understand" is not an intellectual understanding but an experiential understanding, it's pointing us to turn to our experience, to turn to look at suffering, to understand how it comes to be, the causes and conditions that put it into play, what helps it to fall apart.

With a little bit of understanding, a little bit of intellectual understanding in these aspects of wisdom, we may begin to want to engage, to actually be at least interested in the thought, "Maybe this could help me out." This is the beginning of confidence. Confidence that we can engage, and confidence that it would actually be helpful for us.

Initially it might be a little bit of a leap of faith. Sometimes some of this wisdom that the Buddha offers sounds counterintuitive. I know that when I first heard this about understanding suffering, I thought, "Well, why would I want to understand it? Don't I just want to get rid of it? What's this about understanding it?" But I began to see in my own practice that my willingness to engage, to at least kind of give it a try, came when there was a lot of suffering. I was in a place of despair, in a way.

And I felt like I'd tried just about everything. I had kind of hit bottom. I thought, well, I've tried everything that I know of to be happy and I am just so miserable. That very hitting bottom actually made me more open to something that sounded counterintuitive. Okay, it says pay attention to your emotions and don't act on them. Well, I'll give that a try. Doesn't make a lot of sense to me, but I'll see what happens.

So that's the beginning of confidence. I didn't believe it initially. The term "confidence" is often translated as "faith," and to me, confidence is a more resonant term at times, because faith means believing something that I may not understand. For me, it wasn't about believing. It was more of a willingness to try. It was a willingness to say, okay, I don't understand how this is going to work, but I'm at least willing to engage. I'm at least willing to try.

This actually has been a way that I've worked with confidence over and over again in my practice. The Buddha didn't actually say you need to believe this. He said, "Come and see. Try it out." There's a term used for the Dhamma, a quality of the Dhamma: *ehipassiko*. This term means "come and see." Come and see for yourself how this works. You don't need to believe it, but try it.

I'm kind of scientifically inclined, and so I just looked at it as, well, okay, the Buddha said if you do it this way, this will be the result, so I'll at least run the experiment. I'm willing to see what happens if I pay attention to these emotions, just turn towards the feeling of the emotion instead of doing something about it, acting on it.

By running the experiment—and as I said, this dharma is so rich that any little piece of it can really bear fruit—as we begin to engage with it, often we begin to see the benefits, we begin to see the results. And that seeing the benefits begins to verify that little bit of wisdom. It's kind of like, I'm beginning to see that this is helpful. I see that this is changing my relationship to this experience.

There's a second quality that the Dhamma is described as having. The Pali is *opanayiko*, which means "leading onwards." To me this is what it is: we get a little taste of the Dharma, we apply it, we engage with it, and it benefits us. Because of that benefit, we go, oh, this is helpful, let me try it more, let me engage more. So it's got this onward leading quality.

As confidence builds, we tend to engage. We have energy to put into the practice. This is the second of the five faculties: the quality of energy. In the context of playing a piano, the energy is around practicing the piano. Here it's around engaging with whichever bit of wisdom you found supportive for you, like understanding suffering. The energy is directed to the practice. It's not simply energy directed to mindfulness, although that's a big part of it. But it's got this foundation of wisdom underneath it, pointing us in the direction we want to be going.

We're not simply guiding water randomly through any which way; we're guiding water to the crops, guiding water to the seeds that need to be moistened. Likewise, we need to have some wisdom about what direction to guide our energy. And that is the wisdom we spoke about earlier.

Energy can be cultivated by making effort. Often the terms energy and effort are used interchangeably. But there's a slight difference between them, and I'd like to clarify that a little bit. One passage in the Samyutta Nikaya says that the faculty of energy we're talking about here is that quality of mind that results from making wise effort. So effort leads to energy. Now that sounds perhaps a little counterintuitive.

that we need energy in order to make effort. And we do need some amount of energy in order to make effort. We're sitting here, we're alive, we've got enough energy in our bodies to be sitting upright here in the room. That's about all the energy we need to make this effort. So it doesn't take a lot of energy, actually, to make the effort. And that effort then, in turn, generates energy directed to the practice.

So I want to talk a little bit about this effort, because effort is so often misunderstood. Greg talked about this some last night too, and I think it bears repeating, because it is so often—I think it's cultural—that we really believe in this culture that the way to get things done is to really dive in there and engage and do it. "I'm just going to do it." We

bring a lot of energy, a lot of effort to our activities. And that kind of effort—the kind of effort that Greg talked about—you know, sitting down, the first thing in the sitting, "Okay, I'm going to be mindful. I'm going to be mindful for the entire thirty minutes." How do I do that in this first minute? How do I generate enough effort to be mindful for the whole thirty minutes? It doesn't work, as you know. It doesn't work. But that's kind of how we think. It's like going to a gym. "I've got to lift these heavy weights." Then we tear a muscle.

So the kind of effort that we need to make is really light. It is just enough effort to be present for a moment. Right now, pay attention to the sensations of your hands. Notice the sensations of your buttocks on the cushion or chair or bench. Notice the sensation of your feet. How hard is it when I say these things? Often, almost instantly, you can kind of touch into that experience. That's the level of effort we need to make. We just have to do it over and over and over again. Light effort. Many, many times.

So this is a different way of making effort. A simple persistence. It's a very light touch to staying with our experience.

There's an analogy I like. It's kind of like we need to learn how to balance how much effort to apply—or rather, how frequently to apply the effort. It's not so much how strongly to effort; the strength of the effort has to do with the frequency of reminding yourself to be aware. And as the energy gets rolling, we don't need to remind ourselves as frequently. We can kind of ride the wave of the energy that's there.

There's an analogy I think helps to illustrate this. You know those scooters that little kids ride on? When you start out on a scooter, you hold onto the little handlebar at the front and stand with one foot on the rail of the scooter, and then you tap the other foot on the ground to get going. When you start, you have to tap your foot on the ground pretty frequently because you're starting from a standstill. But as you get going, you need to tap less frequently.

It's kind of like that with our meditation practice. At the beginning of a sitting, at the beginning of a retreat, early on, we need to tap frequently. We need to remind ourselves to be mindful more frequently. But then as the energy gets rolling, we need to have a kind of ability to read that energy. Because it's easy for us to over-effort. We think we need to be reminding ourselves, "Be aware, be aware, be aware." But if we're already aware, Joseph Goldstein once said, it's kind of like trying to turn on a light switch that's already on. The energy is already there.

So we're learning to ride that energy, to recognize when we need to tap again. You know, like on a scooter—you ride for a while, and when you start to wobble a little bit, you need to tap again. That gets you going for a bit longer. Then you notice you start to wobble again, and you tap again.

We can get attuned to the energy in our minds this way. We can start to see: "Yep, I'm pretty present here. I can pretty much hang out with that." But we also notice that maybe we need just a little gentle reminder. And that reminder can take the form of a note. The noting practice is a really helpful way to use this—every few seconds, just a little note kind of nudges the mind. It's like that little tap on the screwdriver.

This learning to read our energy is trial and error. We'll continually be falling off on one side or the other, applying too much energy or not enough. Applying too much energy will get us wound up, make us too tight. And that kind of effort tends to drain energy—that kind where you sit down and think, "Okay, I'm going to be mindful for the whole sitting." That tends to drain our energy. But this light touch doesn't take much energy to make. And the accumulation of that builds.

Then we can fall off on the other side, where we get a little bit lax. It's so pleasant to just sit here riding that wave of energy that we forget to remind ourselves, and we drift off into wherever we go. So we need to learn through trial and error how to read our energy, how to remind ourselves, how to find the balance around energy.

A lot of what we are directing that energy toward is being aware, being mindful. The term for mindfulness is *sati* in Pali, and the root of that term comes from the word for memory. So we can think of mindfulness as having a component of remembering to it—remembering to be aware, remembering awareness in the present moment. That's one way to look at mindfulness. Another working definition is knowing what's happening while it's happening.

This isn't just the general awareness that we roll through our lives with. We can be wandering around doing things, kind of knowing where we are but not really present. If somebody asks us, "What have you been doing?" we'll remember, we'll know. But that's not true mindfulness. Mindfulness is when we really know in the present moment what's happening in the present moment.

The mindfulness task of this practice is exploring our inner world. It's about exploring what's happening in our minds and bodies—not so much about exploring what's happening out there, but rather the interface between the world and our bodies. How

seeing happens, how hearing happens, how our minds work, how our minds process information. Mindfulness reveals to us how our minds work through this inner exploration.

And it gives us a couple of different pieces, different things we learn about how our minds work. One of the things we learn is about what suffering actually is, especially from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths—this perspective of understanding suffering. We start to see what suffering is in our experience.

For instance, the feeling of frustration. There's that feeling in our bodies. And typically, before we run into this practice—at least I know before I ran into this practice—I took that feeling to be a signal that I needed to do something to the world. Something needed to be fixed or changed, or somebody else needed to change the way they were doing something. So that's the usual movement: we try to get rid of that feeling of frustration by changing something in the world, changing the way other people behave. We think that's the way we'll be happy.

And in fact, we do become happy that way, by doing things to change our world. We find there's a little bit of happiness that results. It lasts a little while, and then we have to rearrange our world again. And we have to do that over and over and over again, because nothing lasts very long.

And so the Buddha suggested—the Buddha's wisdom suggested—that a more reliable way to become happy is to let go of the frustration itself.

The frustration itself is the suffering, not the situation we don't like. It's the frustration itself, or the anger, or the depression, or the fear—whatever your pattern is, whatever your struggle is. So the wisdom of the Buddha suggests we should turn toward that field. Observe it, get to know it. Get to see how it comes to be.

This is another piece of what mindfulness begins to show us. Mindfulness begins to show us cause and effect. When I behave this way, when I engage this way, this is the result. So we start to get some insight, again, into this distinction between skillful and unskillful. When I engage out of wanting something, I see that the wanting itself is challenging and unpleasant. When I get the thing I want, I get a brief moment of feeling okay, but then there's fear immediately—am I going to lose that thing? Or there's sadness or depression or loss when it actually goes away. So we start to see, we start to gain insight, that behaving and acting out of wanting is ultimately not terribly satisfying.

We see a thought in our mind, and we see a tendency to follow that thought and create some mood or emotion. I saw this on one retreat, and I was quite shocked when I saw it. I had a pretty strong pattern of loneliness. I would just move into loneliness a

lot. At one point I was sitting at lunch, eating, and I was fine. I saw this memory arise in my mind about being with an old friend and doing something we really enjoyed doing together. And I saw my mind reaching out to that memory with the intention to become lonely. I was shocked. Why would I want to become lonely? But there it was. It was so clear that there was this response: "Oh yes, loneliness—let me wallow in that. I know that feeling. Yes, I know loneliness. That's me." It's kind of cozy because I'm so familiar with it.

So we actually sometimes want to put ourselves into these states. And with mindfulness, we can see this. This is the way mindfulness works a lot. We get an education into the suffering of these states by being with them. Spending time with loneliness: "This doesn't feel very good. This is how loneliness feels. There's heaviness, there's contraction, there's a feeling of weight. It's not a good feeling." And then when the mind sees that it's wanting loneliness, it remembers, "Oh yes, loneliness doesn't feel very good. Maybe I shouldn't go there." And it can let it go.

I've seen this happen in my practice so many times. It's quite amazing that through this education we get about suffering, when the mind starts to move in that direction, it understands. It's had that education. It recognizes, "I don't need to go there." And it's not something we necessarily have to do. We don't necessarily have to try to stop it. We just have to give the mind this education through mindfulness. So we see these causes and conditions that lead us into suffering.

As we stay more present, as we cultivate this mindfulness and stay more present with our experience moment to moment, this begins to cultivate concentration. The continuity of mindfulness itself is what results in concentration.

There are other terms for concentration that I like. Concentration often tends to have a kind of narrowing, focusing sense. The word itself gives us that narrowed sense. But there are other words I prefer: stability, composure, collectedness, settledness. All of these describe the state of mind that is concentrated. Essentially, it's the state of mind where awareness stays present over time. And there are two different ways to cultivate this continuity of awareness.

There are essentially two main approaches, two different camps of practice for cultivating this quality. One is the approach we're all pretty familiar with: one-pointed concentration, staying with a single object. This is a really effective way to cultivate concentration. It's an accessible method because the mind can stabilize readily, and it's easy to recognize when we're on the breath or off the breath. So it's relatively straightforward to learn to collect the mind this way. We stabilize our awareness with the breath and

watch the mind start to settle down. It's not running off into thoughts all over the place, and we notice that we're not getting pulled out of the present moment or reacting to things. That state feels pretty good. This is the classic way to cultivate concentration.

Another way to cultivate concentration—and in fact the reason why one-pointed concentration works—is that it stabilizes awareness. It's not the object that's so important; it's the stabilization of awareness itself. You could pick anything: an idea of a color, a word, the breath. You can stabilize your mind on just about anything, and it doesn't particularly matter. It's the awareness, the continuity of awareness, that brings the concentration.

We can also cultivate this continuity of awareness on changing objects, on changing experience. This is a different approach to concentration, where we enter into the flow of our experience, recognizing the changing current or the river of experience, the river of sensation of our being. This kind of concentration is a little harder to begin with because it's so easy to fool ourselves that we're actually aware and present when we're really thinking about something. It takes some ability to know what it means to be aware and present before we can begin cultivating this kind of mindfulness. So often teachings start with settledness on one object and then open into this broader field of changing experience. It's in this opening into change where mindfulness and concentration can lead us into the deepening of wisdom.

So we're back to wisdom again. The mindfulness, the concentration, being with experience moment to moment begins to point out, to show us, the truths of all experience. We really deeply see—experientially, not intellectually—we start to truly recognize impermanence.

I talked the other day about watching wanting, seeing if you can just hang out and observe it. Watching it get strong, feeling it pull on you, and then potentially seeing it disappear. If you can actually watch that wanting, pick something really minor, like wanting a piece of chocolate. Feel the pull, feel that desire to go pick one up, and see if you can watch it until it goes away. When that wanting disappears, you will see that nothing has changed in the environment. It is only in your own mind that anything has changed, and you are free from the feeling that something is off, that something is wrong because you don't have this thing you want. It's the wanting itself that's the source of the suffering.

This is insight—when we experientially recognize and understand this by seeing it directly in the moment. Seeing that wanting disappear is something you never forget. If you see it vanish in the moment, it's quite remarkable.

This is the third kind of wisdom: the wisdom of insight, the wisdom that results from mental cultivation. You understand deeply in your being the truth of impermanence, the truth of suffering. It doesn't come by thinking about it.

And so we've come full circle to the cyclic nature of these five faculties. Wisdom supports faith or confidence—that basic understanding of wisdom supporting confidence. Confidence then supports energy, the energy to engage, which supports being here, connecting with experience through mindfulness. Energy and mindfulness together bring mindfulness more continuously through moment after moment, which brings on concentration. Mindfulness and concentration together give us penetrating insight so that we can see the truths of impermanence, the truths of the unreliability of experience, of anything, as a place where we might think, "Yes, this is what's going to make me happy."

We see the relief of letting go of wanting things to be other than they are, deeply in our being. We see that we're much happier when we let go than when we're trying to hold on. And we see this truth: that there isn't actually anything to hold on to, or anyone to hold on to it. It's just a process of change, just a process of causes and conditions.

And with this wisdom, this insight, we get yet more inspiration to continue the practice. At least that's how it's worked for me. Seeing something, a simple understanding of how the mind moves toward wanting to become angry or wanting to become lonely, and watching it let go of that movement—it's like, wow, this stuff is powerful. I'm going to keep doing this. This is really helping me out. I see that I'm not becoming angry when I used to become angry.

We see the benefits. We directly experience the benefits, and so it encourages us to have more confidence in the practice. And so the cycle begins again.

These qualities of the five faculties, when they become strong and balanced, support our deepening into understanding and insight, and they yet then encourage us to keep going. Keep going until we become completely free.

CHAPTER 49

Faith, Wisdom and Doubt

Andrea Fella · 57 min

In this talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a profound reframing of faith (saddhā) for those who may struggle with the concept. Rather than blind belief, she presents faith as "placing one's heart upon" something—a quality of trust, confidence, and willingness to engage that can be verified through direct experience. Drawing from her own transformative journey with anger, she illustrates how the Buddha's teachings function like a scientific hypothesis we can test in the laboratory of our own minds.

The talk weaves together the Four Noble Truths with practical meditation guidance, showing how understanding dukkha (suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness) in all its forms—from catastrophic loss to subtle daily irritations—opens the door to freedom. Fella emphasizes that the Buddha's path addresses our mental reactivity to experience rather than attempting to eliminate unpleasant circumstances, allowing us to meet life with compassion rather than aversion.

Particular attention is given to doubt as faith's counterpoint, described through the Buddha's simile of being lost in a desert without landmarks. Fella offers specific strategies for different types of doubt—whether about teachings, teachers, oneself, or the practice—emphasizing that doubt often masquerades as rational thinking and may cover deeper emotions like fear or grief. The antidote consistently returns to direct connection with experience and taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha as living supports for practice.

Tonight I'd like to talk about faith, its relationship to wisdom, and the counterpoint quality of mind: doubt.

The word faith, for at least some of us, doesn't necessarily have positive connotations. Many of us already have a relationship with this word and what we understand it to mean. I know for myself, the meaning that I attached to faith was belief in something that was not provable. I looked up the dictionary definition this evening, and that is in fact one of the meanings: belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence. For myself, this kind of faith was not something I could resonate with or connect with, and so faith didn't seem to have a place in my life.

I'd like to explore what faith means in the context of our practice here, in the context of the Buddhist teachings. The word often translated as faith in the Pali is *saddha*, and I believe it was Carol or Sally who mentioned that the term literally translated means "to

place one's heart upon." This is an interesting way to explore the meaning of faith. What is it that we place our heart with? To me, this evokes a connotation of trust. Other translations for *saddha* are confidence and conviction.

This quality of *saddha*—confidence, faith, conviction—is actually absolutely essential for our spiritual journey because it is from a place of conviction or confidence that we begin to actually engage.

To begin this exploration of faith, I'd like to start by talking about suffering. We all experience suffering. The term generally connotes some kind of larger sufferings, the major tragedies in our lives: a friend dying, a major relationship breakup, our own diagnosis of a serious illness. Or it may mean the suffering associated with large environmental disasters—this recent hurricane, for instance, the amount of damage it caused, tsunamis, earthquakes. We all experience this kind of suffering, although it is more rare for us.

More common is societal suffering, suffering that results from discrimination—of race, of gender, of age, of sexual preference. There is so much suffering in this world because of discrimination.

Yet the suffering referred to in the Buddhist teaching—the entire orientation that the Buddha had for his search—was: is there a way to relieve suffering? Suffering was his whole orientation. And the suffering he was interested in relieving wasn't just this deeper kind, but also the more subtle kinds that we experience all the time, throughout our day. We experience suffering because we don't like the kind of food that's out. We prefer brown rice to white rice, and there's maybe a little bit of irritation that our preferred food isn't available. Or maybe there's stress because of our work, or a particular encounter with a friend that didn't go the way we'd like, and it keeps niggling at us. So many different ways we experience stress and suffering, both in the large and the small. The Buddha was interested in all of these.

The term usually translated as suffering, *dukkha*, means much more than this broad or deep, massive kind of suffering. I think "suffering" doesn't really adequately translate the Pali word. Some translators have tried other translations. Stress is one that Thanissaro Bhikkhu uses. Other translations might be unreliability, unsatisfactoriness, unease, distress. Some of these words make it clear that *dukkha* means the whole range of this feeling that things just aren't the way we'd like them to be.

Most of the kinds of suffering I mentioned have something happening in the world around them. There's a hurricane and a lot of destruction, or there's the actual breakup of a relationship—something in the world happening, some given experience. The

dukkha the Buddha was seeking to find an end to wasn't about finding a way the world could be free of natural disasters, because he knew that wasn't possible. Nor was it to be free of unpleasant experience—he knew that wasn't possible either. Rather, it was to be free of the mental reactivity to our unpleasant experience, to the natural disasters, to the tragedies of life. So that we can, with an open heart, meet our experience.

That open heart meeting experience, if it's meeting suffering, is going to have compassion as a response rather than anger or frustration or hatred or rage. That open heart meeting beautiful experience is going to have joy as a response rather than greediness and wanting. This is what he was pointing to: this reactivity of the mind.

This reactivity is the dukkha the Buddha was pointing to.

We all have our own familiar strategies for dealing with our struggles. One common approach is thinking that the way to relieve this distress is to fix the thing in the world that's a problem—or that we perceive as a problem. We try to get rid of what we don't like and keep what we do like, this continual sense of arranging things so they align with what we'd prefer. And if this doesn't succeed, we may escape into sense pleasure. That's another strategy for working with things not being to our liking.

When we first meet our suffering—before we really encounter a spiritual path—we think it doesn't get much better than arranging the world. This arrangement works for a little while. Perhaps we can arrange things so they suit us, and then we have a sense of happiness: "Oh, okay, I can relax. Things are just the way I'd like them to be." But the law of impermanence takes hold and things change. So we have to rearrange again. We keep trying this—rearranging and it breaks down, rearranging and it breaks down. Ultimately we know this doesn't quite work.

I want to add something here, because often when hearing this exploration of suffering—this notion that fixing things doesn't ultimately lead to peace—people think it means we shouldn't make any effort to change things. It's a little paradoxical, perhaps. If there's injustice in the world, if you see that because of discrimination there is suffering, the Buddha suggests we act to alleviate that suffering. But the intention behind that action is not reactivity, aversion, hatred, rage, or hostility—rather, it's compassion. We can act in the world. The Buddha suggests we choose to act out of compassion rather than reactivity. I want to put that out there because often there's a misunderstanding that this teaching means we're not supposed to try to fix or change anything. That's not what he's saying.

So we meet this suffering in our lives, and some of us begin our spiritual journey through an encounter with suffering. The Buddha said that an encounter with suffering will lead either to bewilderment or to search. When it leads to search, the question is something like: "Does anyone know a way out of this suffering?"

I know for myself, this is how I encountered my own spiritual journey—descending into a place of such deep suffering that I simply could not find a way out. It was just this sense of: "Does anyone know how to deal with this?"

If in that space of search we actually encounter a teaching that speaks to a way out of suffering, we may begin to sense a possibility that there's a direction that might help. This is the beginning, the initial stirring of faith. Hearing that someone has found a way can bring in a little bit of hope—"Oh, maybe there's something there." It brings a willingness to connect with that teaching. This is just the very beginning of faith, the beginning of willingness to listen.

In the context of our practice here, on this retreat and in our Buddhist spiritual journey, this faith, this confidence, is intimately connected with wisdom—the wisdom in particular of the Four Noble Truths. And here we are back at suffering. The Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering; the truth that suffering has a cause, that it's not random but caused by this essentially rebelling and reacting against things as they are, wanting things to be other than they are; the truth of the possibility for the cessation of suffering; and the truth of the path leading to that cessation—the Eightfold Path. This is what we're practicing here.

Faith with respect to these teachings, this wisdom the Buddha discovered on the night of his awakening, doesn't mean simply believing them. Not putting them up on a pedestal or reading them in a book and saying, "Yes, I believe the First Noble Truth. I believe that wanting is the cause of suffering. I believe there's a path that leads to the end of suffering." It doesn't do us much good to simply hold a sense of belief in these. The Buddha suggested that we need to act on these truths. Faith in our practice isn't about simply believing—it's about the willingness to act, the willingness to engage.

So the actions the Buddha suggested with each truth: we need to understand suffering. This understanding is a turning towards our experience.

This isn't an intellectual exercise. You all know this. It's the turning towards our experience. What is this suffering? What is this experience?

Understanding suffering in this way helps us to see how suffering is put together, the cause of suffering. The understanding of suffering begins to allow us to actually see how the cause is connected, how this wanting is connected to the suffering.

And then we begin to see the second action that the Buddha suggested would be really helpful: let go of the cause of suffering. Let go of the wanting. If you let go of the wanting, the suffering will not arise.

Even just a thought experiment along these lines. If you have a sense that there's a problem in your life, if there were no reactivity to that external situation, no wanting it to be different, would it be a problem? When the wanting goes away, the suffering goes away.

The third noble truth, the task, the action, is to realize the cessation of suffering—realize that it's possible, realize the actuality that suffering can come to an end. And the fourth noble truth is to cultivate or develop the path, to develop the qualities of heart and mind that support our being able to understand suffering and to let go of the cause of suffering, which allows us to realize this release from suffering.

The faith that we begin to have comes in stages, in a way. We may see that there are people who have practiced. For myself, I heard from a friend, "Wow, I found this really helpful." And that brought in a little bit of a sense of, well, maybe I would find it helpful too. We take inspiration and we borrow faith, in a sense, from other people at the beginning.

So we begin with this faith in the possibility of freedom from suffering and a little bit of a sense of faith that there might be a path, that there might be some practices that would help us. And some faith in those who have followed the path and realized some benefits and are able to express that: "Yes, this has been really helpful for me." These three—faith in the possibility, faith in the practices, faith in the people who have practiced it—this is faith in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, our three refuges.

For me, the way faith has expressed itself in my own practice is kind of more like a scientific hypothesis. The Buddha suggested, here are these truths, here are actions associated with these truths. If you follow these actions, you'll experience some results. It sounds remarkably like a hypothesis, a scientific hypothesis. And so we can understand this as, well, let's run the experiment. Our minds and bodies are laboratories. Let's run the experiment of using mindfulness to understand the suffering and see what happens.

We examine the teachings in our own experience. We turn towards our suffering using the teachings, the practices, and mindfulness to explore our experience. And in this way we may start to see some benefits for ourselves. We may start to recognize the power of these teachings for ourselves.

This is a kind of transition for us in terms of faith. Initially we have to borrow faith from others, talking to people about how they have connected with the practices and what benefits they've received. We can read them and reflect on them and think whether they make sense or not. But it's not until we start engaging that we begin to taste for ourselves the truth of these teachings. And they are verifiable for ourselves. In this way, the faith in this practice doesn't have that same quality of faith in something or belief in something that is not verifiable. We can practice ourselves and verify for ourselves that these teachings are effective.

In my own practice, I'll tell you how this unfolded for me in the first months. I'm very skeptical, very scientifically oriented, a scientific kind of mind. But I was in deep, deep suffering. And I had tried everything that I could think of. It was very much like what the Buddha said: does anybody know a way out of this? I have tried everything that I can think of.

I talked to a friend who had been doing this practice and she said, "Well, this has been helpful for me. Why don't I send you a book?" And so she sent me a book and I began reading it. One of the key little bits—I didn't understand much from this book, but the wisdom of the Buddha is actually pretty dense.

And so even a tiny little bit of that wisdom, if you can just get a tiny little bit of that wisdom and start to act on it, it's pretty potent.

In reading through this book, which was *Everyday Zen* by Joko Beck, one of the things I pulled out was: try observing your emotions rather than acting on them. Strong anger was my main issue at that time. It was pretty much making me non-functional. I would find myself in a rage, frozen at my computer, oblivious to everything around me, lost in my mind in fury. I was pretty non-functional at times.

So this teaching—observe it—I thought, well, what good is that going to do? I had no idea how that would be helpful. And I had no training at that point in mindfulness whatsoever. Nobody to tell me: pay attention in your body, let go of the thoughts. I didn't have any of those instructions. But I thought, okay, it doesn't make any sense to me, but nothing else I've tried has seemed to work. So I'll see what happens if I try observing my anger.

I tried this. I remember the first time I noticed the anger and remembered that I was going to observe it. I had said to myself, I'm going to do this, I'm going to try to pay attention to my anger when it happens. And the first time I noticed and remembered, my

thought was, wow, yeah, I'm angry. What do I do with this? This feels really unpleasant. I had no idea what to do with it. But in that moment, I thought, I don't know what I do. I guess I go back to work.

In retrospect, I realized that recognition of the anger, that moment, actually broke into the anger and allowed me to go back to work instead of being frozen in rage. There was a little bit of space around that anger. And over time, over the course of months of doing this practice, I began to see more and more space around my anger.

So the faith, the confidence in that teaching—I was getting some verification. It was definitely heading me in the right direction. I knew, at least I'm not quite so strung out here. I can function more. I could see that even just recognizing, yep, I'm angry, was really helpful.

And that helpfulness encouraged me to keep trying, keep practicing, keep exploring my anger. Then one day I was in the kitchen cutting an apple. I wasn't trying to be mindful, I was just present. I noticed as I was cutting this apple that a thought appeared in my mind about the person I was angry with. And in seeing that thought, I could see in that moment that there was this impulse to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry. I could see that direction. I was heading in that direction.

And in seeing that—having spent a lot of time paying attention to anger, noticing how really unpleasant it is—the mind in that moment saw that it was headed towards really unpleasant experience, and it let go. It just let go. I didn't even have to do it. The mind did it by itself.

I stood there in the kitchen waiting to get angry, because I hadn't had the experience of this person coming up in my mind without anger also arising. But I did not get angry.

I was so blown away. I thought, oh my God, this stuff is so powerful. That moment—when I look at it now—that was a seminal moment in my practice. Looking back on it, it was an understanding of the Four Noble Truths in that moment. I saw how the suffering was created by that movement towards wanting to turn myself up. And I saw that the mind could let go of that. I understood deeply the suffering of that reactivity.

I saw how the letting go happened. I realized the freedom there. I could directly witness—I directly saw—that had I not been doing that practice, this practice of observing, I would have been spun out in anger again. I saw the non-arising of anger, saw that anger did not arise. And I directly saw that the development of those qualities I'd been practicing for the past few months had led me to this place.

This was a moment of complete, deep confidence in the teaching. And that was really the moment that my—I feel like looking back on it, that's the moment I got on this path. That was the moment of deep verified faith. I knew for myself the benefit of these teachings.

I know you all have times in your practice where you have experienced something similar. It helps actually, at times, to recall these insights, these times when our faith is verified. This supports the reminder of the benefits of this practice—to remember how it supports you, how it has helped you in your life. We can do this to help cultivate this quality of confidence, of faith.

The practice of engaging with these teachings leads us to actually verifying for ourselves the truth of these teachings, which gives us a taste of the wisdom for ourselves and leads us to greater confidence in the teachings—which then cycles through. Greater confidence leads to more interest in engaging with the teachings, which leads us to deeper understanding of the teachings, which leads us to deeper faith. These two qualities support each other and encourage each other: the faith and the wisdom.

And yet the practice isn't one continuing deepening of faith and wisdom. We get caught. We especially, I think, can get caught around the gradual nature of the unfolding of this practice. I think we're a culture of instant gratification. We want the results quickly.

When we've had an insight, a recognition into a pattern, into a particular struggle that we've worked with, and we see, "Oh, this is how it's happening!"—and it falls apart in a moment like that—sometimes we can have the thought, the belief, "Oh, I understand now. That's not going to happen again." And yet the pattern returns again and again and again.

In seeing that, we can think, "I've seen through this before. What's my problem here?" We can feel like we must be doing something wrong if we can't see through it a second time, or a third time, or the fifth or eighth time it comes up again. Doubt comes in. Or maybe we figure, "Well, I must not have really seen through that in the first place." Or we figure, "Well, maybe it really didn't work. It never really happened. The practice didn't really work at all."

This is doubt. The Buddha described doubt—or he compared doubt, he gave a simile about doubt—as being like being lost in the wilderness. In particular, he described it as being lost in a desert. Imagine a desert. There's very little in the way of landmarks in a

desert. You take a few steps this way, you think, "That must be the wrong way, better go back." You take a few steps that way—"Oh, that can't be the right way." So there's this wavering quality, a sense of not really being able to commit to any direction at all.

This is how the Buddha described doubt. When we're caught in doubt, we come to a kind of standstill in our practice. We might try something for a few moments and then think, "Ah, this isn't working," or "There's another practice I should do." So we don't ever commit. We don't commit when we're caught in this state of doubt.

There are so many things we can have doubts about. And I think it's helpful to actually name some of these things, because in my own experience, the different things that we doubt—there are also different ways to work with the doubt that comes up, depending on the kind of doubt it is.

So there's doubt in the teachings. The Buddha taught 2,500, 2,600 years ago. No such thing as iPods, iPhones, Macs,

cars, 52-story buildings that planes fly into. There was just a much simpler life. What could he have possibly had to say that would relate to us here and now?

There are doubts we can have in the teachers. What do these teachers know? I know that there are much better teachers in Burma, so maybe I should plan to go to Burma.

We doubt ourselves. We doubt our ability, our capacity. We doubt the possibility that we can do this. This, I think, is probably one of the key ways we get caught. We seem to have the sense that everybody else can do it but me.

We doubt the practice itself. What does paying attention to the in-breath and out-breath have to do with anything? Or we can get stuck wavering about what practice to do. Should I pay attention to my breath? Should I do some metta? Should I directly face this difficult state? Oh, maybe I should try metta. No, no, let me try paying attention. No. So we waver. It's just like being lost in the desert.

The most important thing with doubt is actually to recognize that it's happening—to notice that doubt has come into our minds and has us locked into this wavering state. It has that feeling of, "What should I do?" In my experience, this recognition of doubt is the most important piece. Once we can recognize that doubt is happening, we have a kind of toe in the door to begin to help it release. Doubt really feeds on us not being aware of it. But when we become aware of it, something shifts.

I find that doubt is often experienced as a lot of thinking. So it can be helpful to get familiar with the ways in which your doubt manifests, what kinds of thoughts it takes shape as. In my own experience, I've found that if I find myself thinking about the practice—thinking about what kind of practice I should do, how this practice works, whether this practice even works—thoughts about the practice rather than doing the practice, it's worth checking in to see if doubt is present.

This kind of thinking can often be hooked into our logical, rational mind. And so it can fool us. Doubt has this incredible capacity for masquerade. It puts on this costume of reason: "I shouldn't be doing this practice. This practice obviously doesn't work for me." It can hook into our rationality, and we have a lot of trust in our thinking mind in this culture. Doubt brings that in and fools us into thinking that it's actually a rational, reasonable thought. So it can be really helpful to just begin to notice: when we are thinking about the practice, is there doubt present?

As I said a few minutes ago, I think there are different ways to work with doubt depending on the kind of doubt. If there are doubts in the teachings, the teachers, or the practice, I often find it helpful to reflect that the whole nature of this Dharma is that the Buddha said, "Come and see. Try it for yourself." He didn't say, "Believe me." He said, "Come and see." And so I come back to that sense of a scientific hypothesis for myself. The Buddha didn't ask me to believe this, but can I run the experiment? Here's a teaching. Can I run the experiment on my mind and body? Why don't I try the practice and see what happens?

With certain kinds of doubt—if there's a lot of confusion about a teaching, if you're not clear about a teaching and your mind is wavering about how you can work with this if you don't understand it—that kind of doubt, it's usually helpful to go talk to a teacher. Ask a question. Help to clarify your understanding.

Sometimes doubt can be covering up some other emotion. So it can be helpful to check in when you notice doubt. You've noticed, okay, there is doubt here.

What does it feel like? What does doubt feel like? When I've done this, when I've explored, it's like, "Oh, grief. There's grief here." That's what doubt feels like. I was caught for two hours one afternoon at Spirit Rock on a long retreat, just completely struggling with doubt. And when I finally recognized it—"Oh, doubt is present. I guess doubt is what I need to practice with. What does doubt feel like?"—I just felt so much grief. I could be with the grief. And in being with the grief, there was no doubt.

So it can be helpful to check in. The question "What does doubt feel like?" can sometimes open us to something underneath: a fear, an uncertainty, some other emotion, depression perhaps.

On one retreat, I felt like there was a lot of doubt. It was an early retreat—I think it was my second retreat. So I decided I would ask a question in the hall during the question and answer period. I was sitting there trying to frame my question in my mind about doubt. I heard in my mind the question being framed, and the first few words of every question started with "I'm afraid that..." When I heard this five or six times, I began to think, maybe this isn't doubt. Maybe this is fear.

I never even got a chance to ask my question, but I started just noticing that actually fear was everywhere, that the doubt had been kind of masking this fear. Somebody would walk up next to me and I'd feel this fear. The fear was quite predominant; it was there a lot. And I could be with it. It wasn't an overwhelming fear, but it was just that it had been hidden from me by this doubt.

If the doubt is about what kind of practice to do—"Should I do this or should I do that? Maybe I should do this. No, I should do that"—just pick one. It really doesn't matter that much. You can pick one, explore it, see what happens, run the experiment.

The antidote to doubt, the main antidote to doubt, is connecting with experience. When we are lost in doubt, we have gotten disconnected from experience. We are completely in a world of our thoughts, of our projections, of our ideas. We're not, as Joseph says, even in the vicinity of our experience when we're lost in doubt. And so if we can simply connect with experience, this question—"What does doubt feel like?"—begins to connect us again with experience. When we connect with experience, doubt actually doesn't stand much of a chance.

Sometimes we might listen to the voice of doubt and then apply a little bit of a teaching, and then listen to the voice of doubt and apply a little bit of the teaching. That's kind of like putting the kettle on and off the stove. We just need to connect with our experience. Sustaining the attention counters that wavering mind of doubt.

One of our ways that doubt comes up for us is through belief, through views. We think, "Well, since I'm experiencing some mind state—take your pick: fear, anxiety, dread, lust, boredom—since I'm experiencing this, I must not be doing the practice right." Again, the sense that the practice isn't working because we're experiencing something. Actually, what's in the way there is the belief that the practice isn't working. Can you just connect with boredom? Can you connect with fear, anxiety, worry, depression, lust? In that very connection is the antidote to doubt.

Another thing that supported me in my practice around doubt is to take refuge. This kind of emerged spontaneously—it can emerge spontaneously. On one retreat, I was really feeling like I just couldn't be mindful. Every time I'd try to be mindful, I couldn't be very mindful.

My mind was just all over the place, and I was wavering back and forth. "Oh, I'm such a horrible yogi. I can't be mindful at all. This practice doesn't work." And then I'd take a step and feel my foot on the ground. "I'm a good yogi! I can feel my foot on the ground." And then my mind would be all over the place again. "I can't pay attention."

At some point I realized that when I could take a step and feel the foot on the ground, that wasn't me doing that. It was simply the capacity of the mind that can be aware. And that, for me, is how I understand the refuge in the Buddha. The refuge in the Buddha, for me, is the refuge in our capacity for awakeness. And there it was, just all by itself—awareness appearing in a footstep. I thought, "Wow, okay, I'll just take refuge in that capacity. I can take refuge in the Buddha."

It gave me a great feeling of ease around my struggles with my mind. It was so clear I couldn't control my mind. But every now and then there would be this awareness that was very clear.

We can also take refuge in the Dharma, the refuge in the practice itself. Just sit and walk. One teacher suggested to a student to put a sign in their room: "When in doubt, follow the schedule." Just sit and walk. The practice will unfold if you simply continue. I think James mentioned that Bhikkhu Bodhi said there are two things: we must start, and we must continue. Just continue the practice.

Another support for countering doubt is to cultivate faith—to cultivate the quality of confidence. There are a few ways to do this. I mentioned one earlier: reflecting on ways that your practice has supported you. If you find yourself in a hindrance attack of doubt, it can be helpful to remind yourself that it hasn't always been like this, that you have actually had times when you've directly known for yourself the value of this practice. There's not one of you who hasn't experienced this. There's no way you would be coming on a retreat of this length if you didn't have some of that confidence, some of that verified experience. So recall those times when your faith has been verified. This is very helpful to reflect on. It supports our faith, our confidence, our trust in the practice.

Also recognize when confidence is actually present. At times when the practice is unfolding and you have a sense of engagement and connection with your experience, sometimes there can be a sense of confidence there. Acknowledge that. Actually recognize that quality. Mindfulness has this capacity: when we are mindful of beautiful qual-

ities of mind, like confidence, it increases their tendency to occur in the future. And when we bring our mindfulness to the hindrances, it decreases their likelihood of occurring in the future. So mindfulness has this great property—it supports the beautiful qualities and allows us to let go of the unwholesome qualities. Actually recognizing, being mindful of the quality of confidence, will support it to arise more frequently.

Likewise, another support for confidence is to recognize when other beautiful qualities arise. Guy talked about this in the guided meditation this morning—recognize when mindfulness arises. Notice it. There's a host of beautiful mind states that come as we practice. And sometimes as we're practicing, we become so focused on the suffering.

We're looking at our aversion, we're looking at the pain in our leg and the aversion to it. And we're not quite so aware that while we're actually being mindful of that, mindfulness is being cultivated and patience is being cultivated.

I remember on one long retreat, I had an incredible kind of clamping down around my heart, and it felt like there was very little I could do to be mindful of anything else. So I could just walk back and forth and feel this incredible pain in my heart. But in that walking back and forth, I said, "Well, at least I'm cultivating patience." Recognizing that strengthens the quality.

So recognizing these beautiful qualities—recognizing mindfulness, interest, joy, calm, equanimity, kindness, concentration, truthfulness, patience, compassion—beautiful qualities arise for us as we practice. As we recognize them, this cultivates the soil for faith, which undermines the soil that doubt can grow in.

So really, our practice, our faith related to this wisdom, we keep coming back to suffering. We can use an exploration of suffering as understanding suffering. This is our practice; this is what we're doing here. We can use suffering as a guide.

Confidence in this teaching of the Four Noble Truths gives us a sense that when we're experiencing suffering, it's not a mistake. It's actually the direction that we can meet. If we can meet that suffering, it's the direction for our freedom.

There's sometimes a teaching that we get the lessons that we need. That's kind of a new age teaching—we get the lessons we need. It's not that the world out there, the universe, is conspiring somehow to create the situations that will give us the lessons we need. It's our own minds that are struggling against situations. The lessons that we need are created because we struggle against things as they are.

So meeting our suffering is the very point, the very doorway through which our freedom can be found. All it takes is the willingness to do it.

CHAPTER 50

The Five Aggregates

Andrea Fella · 1h04

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella illuminates the Buddha's teaching on the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā), transforming what might seem like dry technical doctrine into a practical tool for direct investigation. She explains that the Pāli term 'khandha' simply means heap or bundle—the Buddha's way of categorizing all experience into five processes: form (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhārā), and consciousness (viññāṇa).*
>
> *Fella draws on the Khandha Saṃyutta texts to show how each aggregate functions both as what we experience and as a process of experiencing. She emphasizes that these processes occur in every moment, whether we're mindful or not, and that understanding them helps us see how we create suffering through identification. Referencing Bhikkhu Anālayo's commentary on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, she offers the insight that from the unenlightened perspective, body is 'where I am,' feeling is 'how I am,' perception is 'what I am recognizing,' mental formations are 'why I am acting,' and consciousness is 'whereby I am experiencing.'*
>
> *The talk provides detailed guidance on investigating each aggregate directly—from experiencing the four great elements (earth, water, fire, air) below the level of concept, to watching how intention arises and conditions action, to noticing how perception can mistake concepts for reality. Fella shares personal examples from retreat practice that demonstrate how these teachings reveal the constructed nature of experience and how mindfulness simply reflects what is already happening, requiring no additional effort to construct anything new.*

This evening I'd like to talk about a subject that's come up a couple of times at least in the dharma talks, and perhaps in the instructions, but we haven't covered it in much detail yet—the topic of the five aggregates.

The title itself sounds a little dry, technical, perhaps boring. The term "aggregate," which translates the Pali term *khandha*, doesn't resonate with us very much, especially in terms of direct experience. When I first encountered this teaching, the first image that came to mind was a big lump of rock. The geological term "aggregate" was what I thought of, and I wondered, what does this have to do with anything?

But this Pali term *khandha* is actually not a very technical term. It's an everyday, ordinary term in the Pali language, meaning something like heap, bundle, or pile. So this teaching on the five aggregates is essentially the Buddha looking at our experience and dividing it up into five heaps, saying that everything in our experience can be found in one of these five heaps. This teaching is really about looking at our experience—it's a teaching around how we can explore our experience. I think all of the Buddhist teachings were very practical. No matter how technical they sound, they always come back to how we can explore our direct experience, and this teaching is no exception.

The five aggregates are: the aggregate of body, which is basically the physical aspect of our experience; and then four aggregates relating to our mental experience. I actually think this teaching is particularly interesting because it explores our experience from both physical and mental perspectives, but it really looks at our mental experience in a fairly finely grained way. There's one physical aggregate—the aggregate of form—and the other four relate to our mental experience.

We can contrast this with the teaching on the six sense bases, which is kind of the opposite in a way. In the six sense base teaching, we look at our body through its five aspects—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—and then the sense base of the mind. In that teaching, the body is given a kind of emphasis; how the perceptual and knowing faculties work through the body is highlighted. In the five aggregates, the emphasis is reversed, and the exploration focuses more on the mental aspects of our experience.

So the five aggregates are: form, the body basically; feeling, the felt aspect of our experience, whether things are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; perception, the recognizing aspect of our experience; mental formations, the volitional aspect of our experience; and consciousness, the knowing aspect of our experience.

I'll go into some detail on these—what they are and how we can actually see them as experiences in our moment-to-moment experience. But first I'd like to talk a little bit about the aggregates themselves, just an overview.

There are two ways that these five heaps are described in the texts, in the suttas. Form is defined as this body, the aspects of the physicality of the body. Feeling is defined as the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral aspect of experience. Perception is defined as the recognition that we make, the concepts that happen in our minds. Mental formations encompass all of the mental activity that happens in our minds. And consciousness is the knowing.

So each aggregate is defined both in terms of what we experience and as a process. There are actually two definitions given in the suttas for each of these aggregates—one that essentially describes what we notice in our experience, and another describing how it happens, the process within our experience. These aggregates cover both sides.

Essentially, these processes of body and mind cover any experience you have. Any experience whatsoever can be found within these five aggregates. And these processes are continually going on, day and night. Whether we are awake or asleep, whether we are mindful or not, these processes just continue. Whether we are mindful or not, the mind recognizes things and knows things and feels things. The body experiences heat and cold. It's all happening all the time.

During this talk I'd like to explore both sides of the understanding of each aggregate —the what, essentially what is understood or experienced in body, in feeling, in perception, and so forth, and also the process, how it's understood as a process.

But first I'd like to say something about why. Why bother to understand this? What is the point? It still sounds perhaps a little dry and technical.

First, because these aggregates include the entirety of our experience, they are an excellent framework for beginning to understand our experience, particularly the mental realm. The distinctions of how our mind does what it does are very well described in this teaching. And it points us to the actuality of what we are experiencing. If we can begin to see our experience through this framework, through understanding these processes at work, we begin to see them simply as processes. It begins to undermine our identification with these processes.

And in fact, that is another main reason to understand them. The Buddha highlighted these five aggregates as being the primary ways that we cling, the ways that we identify.

In fact, he equated, in a sense, the five aggregates of clinging with our suffering. And that is, in one definition, the definition of the first noble truth. So through understanding these five aggregates, we come to an understanding of this first noble truth of suffering. Through understanding how we cling to them—that we cling to them—we begin to see too that this clinging itself is also simply a process. A process that goes on within these aggregates themselves. Clinging is found in the aggregate of volitional formations, the volitional aspect of our experience.

So we're encouraged to understand these heaps, these areas of experience, to get to know them really well so we can see how they serve as magnets for clinging, magnets for suffering.

The Buddha also highlighted this teaching in terms of the process of selfing—this confused, misperceived aspect of our experience. He called it "I-making" and "mine-making," and he noted that each of these aggregates particularly collects this I-making or mine-making. So understanding these aggregates is a good way for us to begin to see how we create this notion of self and believe in it. We can begin to actually deconstruct this notion of self through exploring these five aggregates.

One teacher, Bhikkhu Anālayo, who is a wonderful practitioner-scholar monk and a great researcher into the Pali Canon, wrote a book that I highly recommend if you haven't read it yet. It's called *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*—a modern-day commentary on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha's instructions on mindfulness. In that book, he talks about the aggregates and says that from the unenlightened perspective—the perspective from which we normally view our experience—body is where I am, feeling is how I am, perception is what I am recognizing, mental formations are why I am acting, and consciousness is whereby I am experiencing, the means or mode by which I experience things. So these are five ways that we tend to identify.

I'd like to describe each of these aggregates in turn, and then talk a little bit about how we can actually begin to explore this in our experience.

The form aggregate, in terms of a process, is described in terms of our subjective experience. In one sutta, the Buddha says—and it's a little bit hard to translate this particular line—but in terms of the process of form, he says, "It deforms. That's why it is called form." The Pali terms involve a word play that the Buddha is using. The term for form is *rūpa*, and the term he uses for deforms is *ruppati*, which is not etymologically related to *rūpa* but sounds like it. So he's making a pun, basically. *Ruppati* means something like breaks or gets injured or spoils. What he's saying is that we experience form because of things that impact our world, our body—that the form element is experienced through how things contact us, how the world contacts us. So it's in terms of subjective experience that this aggregate is defined.

This is about looking at our physical experience, the physicality of our experience itself, in an elemental way—in terms of both the process and the "what" of experience. The "what" of form is defined as the four great elements: earth, air, fire, and water, as well as sight, sound, smells, tastes, and touches. So, for instance, a bell has form—it's got earth element—and the sound waves are also form, but they are experienced only because they impact this body. It really is an experiential understanding of form that this teaching is pointing to.

We come into contact with our physical experience through the elements: vibration, tingling, and pulsing being air element; heat and coolness being the fire element; hardness and weight being earth element; and fluidity being water element. The teaching on form is about coming into contact with the actuality of our felt experience, the actual sense of form—not our ideas or concepts about form.

This exploration is a really good place to begin distinguishing mental and physical experience. So often when I talk to somebody who's just begun this practice, I'll say, "Tell me what you're experiencing." In a practice discussion, we'll be sitting there and I'll ask them to tell me what they're experiencing. Often they'll say something like, "Well, I'm experiencing my shoulder," or "I'm experiencing my stomach." But that is experiencing through a lens of concept, because we can't feel "shoulder." We feel pressure or tension or tightness or aching or pulling, but shoulder is a concept. So this exploration of form is about coming into the actual experience of form.

So then there are the mental aggregates, the four mental aggregates. I'm going to describe these briefly here for now, and then I'll come back to them in talking about how to see them in our actual experience.

Feeling is the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, constantly happening in our experience. The other aspect of this teaching of the aggregates is that they all come up every single moment of experience. Unless we're in some kind of formless jhana, we're experiencing body, feeling, perception, knowing, and mental formation in every single moment. And so every single moment of experience is colored by this feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—and we can recognize that. I talked about this the other morning, so that's the what of feeling. The how of feeling is the process by which we recognize pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—the process by which that happens in our minds, the mental process responsible for sensing and feeling.

Then there's perception. Perception is the process of recognizing experience, a kind of pattern matching where we see, based on what we have known in our past, what we've seen over and over again, and we come up with a label or a name for this experience that we're having. So you can see the color and the form of this thing that I'm holding up, and you will recognize it as a glass. The perception takes in all of these—there are layers of perception. Part of the perceptual process is noticing the color and the shape of this thing, and part of the perceptual process layers on top of that and recognizes that it is a glass. And you know this because you've seen a lot of glasses. Now, you haven't seen maybe this particular glass—you've seen a lot of ones that look a lot like this lately, but maybe not this particular one. But because you've seen them, this process of recognition happens.

This is an extremely helpful process. We couldn't really navigate our lives without this process of recognition. And there are some very sophisticated ways that the mind does this, particularly around recognizing faces. We will recognize the face of our mother like that—it's not going to take us any time at all. So this process of perception serves us really well, and it is not something that we need to stop or need to have any judgment about. It's simply the way our mind works. The difficulty comes in not seeing that this is a process of mind. Essentially, we conflate or confuse the concept with reality, and I'll talk about that more in a little bit. So this perceptual process is a second kind of mental activity.

Then there's the knowing process, consciousness. This is just a very simple meeting of experience. In the suttas it's described as just the bare, simple knowing. It talks about six kinds of consciousness: consciousness of seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, and consciousness of mind objects. So just a very simple, basic knowing of experience.

Before I move on to the fourth mental aggregate, I want to talk a little bit about these three—feeling, perception, and consciousness—as a group. My way of understanding these three is that they are the basic processes that meet our experience. We feel experience, we conceptualize it, and we know it. It's pretty fundamental to the way we navigate our world. It's actually kind of hard to tease these three apart. In fact, there was a person in the time of the Buddha that had this question about how to tease these three apart, and he asked a question about it. I'll read this to you.

The questioner says, "Are feeling, perception, and consciousness—are these states conjoined or disjoined? Is it possible to separate these states from each other in order to describe the difference between them?" And the answer is, "These states are conjoined. It is impossible to separate these states from the others in order to describe the difference between them. For what one feels, that one perceives. And what one perceives, that one cognizes."

So these three really come together to meet our experience.

We can recognize them independently, but we cannot experience feeling without having the knowing and the perceiving happening. We cannot experience perceiving without having the knowing and the feeling happening. It's like there are three facets of a prism. You cannot take one of the facets off—you have to have all of the facets there. So we can look through one of those facets and get the flavor of feeling, the flavor of perceiving, the flavor of knowing. We can distinguish them, but we cannot separate them out.

Then there is the fourth mental aggregate, the aggregate of volitional formation. The Pali term for this is *sankhara*. And even in the Pali, this has two meanings. It means both what is put together and that which puts together. So it has both an active and a passive connotation to it—both the what is put together and how that putting together happens. Essentially both sides of this are found in this aggregate of volitional formation.

The result, the *what*, of the process of volitional formation is the many mental activities involving volition, choice, intention. This includes emotions, thoughts, states of concentration, bliss, joy, peace. It includes afflictive emotions, reactive emotions, anger, irritation, lust. This is a really big category. It includes pretty much everything that is not feeling and perception. The process of volitional formation is that which shapes our experience.

I want to read a little bit of the Buddha's words here, because he had a great way of putting things. He says, "Why do we call them volitional formations?" And again, he's using a pun here, so it doesn't translate very well, but: "Why do we call them volitional formations? They construct the conditioned. That's why they're called volitional formations. And what is the condition that they construct? They construct conditioned form as form. They construct conditioned feeling as feeling. They construct conditioned perception as perception. They construct conditioned volitional formations as volitional formations. They construct conditioned consciousness as consciousness."

So this is saying that all five aggregates are being constructed. The volitional formations are responsible for the construction going forward of all of our experience, of all of the aggregates.

How does this work? How can we understand this? Let's take a simple example, like anger. The experience of anger itself is the volitional formation of anger. There's a choice in there. It may not be a conscious choice to become angry. But as I pointed out in my talk last week, when I saw anger coming up, when I saw a thought in the mind and I saw the mind wanting to jump on that thought and think more thoughts to get angry, I saw how that anger was intentional. I saw how there is a choice in there. So the anger itself has this intentional quality to it.

Now, how does this construct the aggregates? How does this impact the other aggregates? Well, if you think about how anger works, when anger is functioning, it distorts perhaps our face. It perhaps brings up physical experience—heat and pressure in the body, tightness, clenching in the jaw, contraction in the stomach. So anger has this im-

pact on form. The feeling aggregate typically becomes unpleasant when anger is present. Perception—we tend to recognize or perceive things through this lens of anger when anger is present.

For example, from my own practice: I was doing a metta practice at one point, and those of you who do metta practice may notice at times that the opposite of metta comes up. We may talk about this in the metta practice on Tuesday nights—when the opposite of metta comes up, it's not necessarily a problem. It's the purification of our hearts that metta draws to the surface, that which is not metta: anger. So I was doing a long period of metta practice over a month, and from time to time I found myself in a really aversive, angry state. One of my jobs during that retreat was to do the dishwashing late at night. I went down to do the dishwashing while I was in one of these aversive states, and everything that I saw was just—

wrong and bad. I was doing the dishes and I was having a little trouble closing the machine door, and my thought was an explosion of, "Who designed this stupid machine anyway?"

So you can see how anger influences the way we perceive our experience. When I was feeling metta, even if I had trouble closing the machine, it wasn't like an explosion and a berating of the person who designed it. When anger is present, it influences how we perceive things, how we recognize things, what we perceive.

Our consciousness is also directed by this state of anger—it's like a filter. We may be conscious of certain things and completely unconscious of other things when we are in such a state. It's as if we are attuned to picking up things that affirm this state of anger, and we will completely miss things that are not in line with it. These volitional formations can completely influence what we are actually conscious of.

And having anger tends to construct more anger. So all five of the aggregates are created out of this volitional formation. This is why it is so important to keep track of our intentions—these intentions that James talked about last night. When our mind is motivated and supported by peace and calm and generosity and kindness, it constructs our world more skillfully.

So how can we use this teaching as a support for investigating our direct experience? We'll go through each of these again and look at each one.

The bodily experience—looking at our experience through the actual lens, the actual felt sense of body. Not the concept of head, of hand, of foot, but as I say these now, I'm going to name quite a few elemental kinds of experience. See if you can touch into these in your experience.

The earth element: heaviness, hardness, density, weight. It's a sense of your body, the kind of weight of your body. Earth sitting on earth.

The air element—this is a big area of experience, at least in my experience. There's a lot of different air element sensations: vibration, tingling, pulsing, pressure, movement, pulling, pushing, tension. All of these are air elements.

Fire element is pretty obvious: heat. That's what I'm experiencing right now. Not too much coolness at this moment. We'll get some of that later on.

The water element—this one is a little harder to touch into at times. You might have a sense, a little bit of perhaps some stickiness or some moisture on the surface of your body. The water element is about fluidity, cohesion, liquidity. One way to contact the water element: blow into your hands and then push them together, and then slowly let them come apart, and you'll feel stickiness there. That stickiness is a manifestation of the water element.

So we can experience our physicality in these ways, the touch experience. And then there is form within the realm of sight—the shape and color that comes in is also in this realm of form. In the realm of sound, the pitch and tone that hits our eardrum is also in the realm of form. In taste, there's the bitter, sweet, salty, pungent, sour flavors that our tongue is designed to experience.

All of these take us below the level of concept to the actual experience of form. It's actually hard sometimes to experience this actual physical experience because we usually, in our normal way of living, experience things through our concepts. So it's hard, for example, to eat an orange and not taste "orange." What's actually experienced there is a combination of sweet and sour, the feeling of liquid across the tongue, the tartness and the coolness. There's just this mixture of experience that becomes "orange" like that.

So in this exploration, we quickly move to that recognition of what is experienced—hand or orange or chair—rather than the form or the shape and color of our experience.

It's really hard in the realm of seeing to break this down—to look out at this room and not see men and women sitting there, but to just see a pastiche of form and color. It's happened to me rarely on retreat where that occurs, where I turn my attention to something and it's just a wash of random color blotches, and then suddenly it pops into view. Oh, that's what that is. But that's not a normal place for our experience to go. We typically see things through this filter of perception. So this teaching begins to bring us

more closely into contact with the actual physical experience, and we begin to recognize at least when concept is coming into play. I'll talk more about concept in just a minute.

The mental aggregates, the processes of the mind—it's easiest to begin understanding these processes by seeing the result of the process, by observing the result. So by seeing and recognizing pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, for example, we start to see the process. We can begin to see the process of how feeling is felt.

I'm going to start this exploration by talking about mental formation because that's really the easiest one to see. You've all seen a lot of this. This is where we see our anger, our frustration, our irritation, our doubt, our confusion, our calm, our peace, our happiness, our interest. This is where a lot of our experience is found.

As we begin to see these—this "what" of our mental formations, our volitional formations—we start to see how they shape our experience, as I talked about a few minutes ago. If anger is coming up, we can begin to see how it impacts these other areas of experience. We see how it shapes our experience. This is the process of volitional formation, this shaping aspect.

Seeing this, especially around mental formation—seeing how they are a process—really begins to undercut the identification with the result of that process. Seeing that anger is a process begins to undercut the identification with anger. One of the main reasons why seeing them as a process helps us is because identification tends to solidify things. It stops them. As we see things as a process, this process of stopping and solidifying doesn't hold much truth anymore. We see through it.

Another way to explore the mental formations is to look at one of the aspects James was talking about last night: this moment-to-moment intention in our experience. The key defining characteristic of mental formations is that they have an intention associated with them. There's a choice or a volition associated with these. Beginning to see how intention works in your experience is a great exploration around this aggregate of mental formations.

As James mentioned last night, this is easiest to see in our bodily processes. We can particularly notice that we're going to move before we move when making major changes of posture. When you're sitting, before you get up from the sitting, there will be an intention to stand. You can know that you're going to stand before you stand. Actually, you can know that you're going to move before you move, you can know you're go-

ing to speak before you speak, and you can know you're going to think before you think. This knowing—this "about to," this recognizing, "I'm about to move"—is catching this factor of intention.

We can notice this even if you're having a still sitting. If there's an itch, for instance, you may notice the intention to move to scratch the itch before you move. In seeing that intention, the intention itself is neutral, but what accompanies it is going to give the direction to the shaping of the future. If it's accompanied by greed, aversion, or delusion, the shaping is going to head in that direction, towards suffering. If it's accompanied by non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion, the shaping will be skillful. It will head us more towards happiness.

In this noticing of intention, we can often see—at least when we recognize "I'm about to move, I'm about to shift my posture"—we can see the motivation that's associated with it and begin to choose or decide: maybe I shouldn't follow through on that. How do I want to shape my experience?

We also see in looking at this that intention comes up—intention arises—and it conditions the next moment. There's an arising of an intention to stand, and then the standing happens. The intention prods us into action.

When we actually start to see this in our moment-to-moment experience, when we start to see this really clearly, it begins to undercut one of the major ways that we identify a self. We have a particularly strong identification of self around being the one who chooses. This is a big area of selfing. Who else would be choosing? But choice chooses. Intention intends. And seeing this in our experience—when we're sitting, we see this impulse, this urge to stand, and then we watch the standing—we see this is just unfolding. We can actually see this happening without there being an "I" doing the choosing.

We also start to see that the choice itself is conditioned.

Suppose you've been driving in a car for a really long time—three or four hours—and you don't have any water with you. That condition of driving for so long without something to drink is going to condition the body to get thirsty. So thirst will arise. That thirst arising conditions the desire or the wish to satisfy it. And so the intention or the plan is formed to stop to get a drink.

All of this just unfolds. There doesn't actually have to be somebody there deciding or making this choice of "I need to pull over and stop." It will unfold on its own. The condition of body not having a drink for a long time conditions the thirst—body conditions body. The thirst conditions the desire to alleviate it—body conditions mind. That desire

to alleviate the thirst conditions a plan of action: "I'm going to pull over and stop"—mind conditioning mind. And that plan of action conditions action in the body—mind conditioning body.

It's just a flow of body conditioning body, conditioning mind, conditioning body, conditioning mind, conditioning mind. There's no one doing it. And seeing this, actually witnessing the unfolding of this in your experience, will really begin to undercut this identification with mental formations.

Then there's the feeling process—the process of experiencing pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Again, there's simply the recognition of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral in our experience. And then there's the exploration of feeling itself: how feeling comes to be.

I had an interesting experience of this on one long retreat—I think it was my first long retreat. I was having a meal, one of the simple teas, and there were apples and bean dip. I think that was all we had that evening. I took a bite of the apple, and it was really pleasant—one of the best apples I'd ever had. It was just about this time of year, fresh and crisp. I took this bite, and a delightful, tingling experience went through my whole body. Pleasant.

So I noticed the pleasantness of it and took another bite—pleasant. Then I took a bite of the bean dip, which had a different flavor and texture. It wasn't quite as pleasant as the apple. Then I took another bite of the apple, and the contrast between the bean dip and the apple made the flavor of the apple all the more pleasant.

I was just noticing. After a while of taking multiple bites of the apple, the pleasantness wasn't quite as pleasant. Then I'd have some bean dip, and the pleasantness would come back in the apple. Over the course of the meal, the mouth seemed to get used to this whole thing, and it wasn't nearly so pleasant.

I began to see how the feeling that comes up is a result of conditions. In that case, the pleasantness was more pleasant having the apple after the bean dip than after multiple bites of apple, because of the contrast between them. Same apple, different conditions in the mouth created different experiences of pleasant.

So we can explore how feeling comes to be. That simple exercise actually showed me how feeling is a result of our choices—a result of karma. How we feel things is shaped by our volitional formations. I saw that directly in that exploration. In your own exploration of *vedanā*, you can begin to investigate how feeling comes to be.

It's also a very powerful place to watch the process of feeling within the whole flow of how suffering comes to be. I talked about this when I discussed feeling the other morning. A pleasant experience tends to condition a liking—a mental formation of liking. That liking further conditions a wanting, a feeling of "I need this," followed by greed.

Watching how feeling plays into this whole cycle is another very powerful exploration of the feeling process—seeing its place, its role in the creation of suffering.

In being able to recognize feeling in its own experience, as I said, it can kind of short-circuit this almost nearly automatic movement to craving. We can just know: pleasant is pleasant. It doesn't have to move to wanting and needing and grasping. We can just know: unpleasant is unpleasant. It doesn't have to move to "I hate this, I can't stand this."

Then there's the process of perception—the process of recognizing something. I've found this to be a fascinating exploration. This is actually one of my favorite places to explore in the aggregates. It may be a little hard to see initially, but one of the easiest places to explore it is in the realm of sound, at least in my experience.

You'll hear something. There's the contact of the experience of hearing. And then, when the mind is pretty quiet and calm, you may notice that very shortly after that experience of hearing, there's going to be a name set in the mind, or an image perhaps. There's a sound, and then the word "car" appears in the mind, or an image of a car appears in the mind. Or there's the sound of a sneeze, and then an image of a person sneezing appears in your mind. That's the process of perception. There's the sound, and then there's the recognition of the sound.

This is a pretty clear distinction between the two. You can pick up on the actual experience of hearing and recognize that it is different from the label or image that goes through the mind. So that's a place to explore this, a place to play with it.

Another place I've had fun playing with this is in watching the mind try to recognize something that's unfamiliar. I saw this happen last night. I walked into my room and there's a device sitting in the window with a cord hanging down from it that's all wrapped up. I walked in the room and the first thing my mind went was: huge spider. This black cord was there. Then the mind recognized: wire, cord. I could see how the mind misperceived immediately. The mind was trying to recognize something that wasn't very familiar as I walked into that room.

You can sometimes see your mind trying on various explorations of what something is. On one retreat, I walked into a very dim room, and there was something in the dark on the other side of the room. I watched my mind go through several things. The first thing it said was: grotesque being. And then—it took about twenty seconds—it came up with: vase of flowers. I could really see this process of perception trying to recognize. This is something our minds will just naturally do. They'll keep trying until they come up with a fit that feels right. "Ah, vase of flowers. Okay, that's what that is."

In this exploration, we can actually see that this process is prone to mistake. We also start to watch and see that we can easily confuse the concept with reality. Just play with this and see. Especially when perception is making a mistake, it gets a little easier to observe. I had one experience where the mind was confused and was identifying a sound as a pig, but then I discovered that it was actually bats. I could really see how the mind had created a whole story around pigs that were being slaughtered. There was a reality there. But when I found out they were bats, my whole reality changed.

Through this exploration of perception, we can start to see how we mistake concept for reality. This is a huge place where we get caught. In fact, the whole process of selfing—the whole process of identifying a self—is a misperception. It's within this realm of perception, and the fact that perception often makes mistakes, that we delude ourselves into believing in self.

Then there's the aspect of consciousness, of knowing—the process of knowing. Every experience arises with both the experience and the knowing of it. They come up together. And it's possible to see either side of that experience. Most of the time, in our normal way of experiencing things, we're paying attention to what we are knowing—the qualities, the features of what we are knowing. We're not so aware of the knowing itself. But they both come up together, and we can recognize that knowing is happening. It's a pretty subtle experience. It's not something we can try to do necessarily, but your mind will naturally, from time to time, move between what is known and the fact of knowing.

This kind of exploration is definitely not something to do. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says, "Nothing I tell you is anything to do. I'm just giving you information, and that information may inform you so that you can then see things in a different way." So this is along those lines in terms of information. The mind can recognize the knowing aspect of experience.

One way I've explored this, or one way I've seen this more clearly in my own experience, is by noticing when there's something unpleasant happening—aversion, for instance. Aversion is happening in my experience, and the aversion itself is unpleasant. I discovered this on one retreat. I was noticing the aversion, noticing the unpleasantness

of it, and then at some point the mind just shifted to: aversion is known. And the whole experience shifted. The knowing feeling—and I'm not sure whether it was the knowing itself or the mindfulness—had a quality of neutrality to it. So the experience really shifted. I could really clearly see this; I could switch back to knowing the aversion and really feel the unpleasantness of it, and then shift to aversion is known, and I could feel the shift to more neutrality.

So this is a way to explore it. Actually, even using the label—"aversion is known" or "experience is known," whatever experience is known—can begin to point us to this aspect of knowing.

The last piece I'll put out there is that, as I said earlier, these aggregates are happening all the time. Whether we're mindful or not, all of these experiences are happening. Mindfulness fits in as a volitional formation; mindfulness itself falls within that aspect of volitional formation. When mindfulness comes into being, one of the ways to explore these experiences of the aggregates is to see that mindfulness is kind of like a mirror. It reflects what's happening. As mindfulness comes into being, it is already reflecting these five processes that are already happening. These aggregates are already going on, and when mindfulness comes in, it can just notice what's already happening—just notice the feeling that's already happening, what's being recognized that's already happening.

This has been a really big help for me in my practice: the recognition that when mindfulness comes back, I don't have to do anything. There's already plenty going on. The aggregates have already been doing their thing when I wasn't mindful, and mindfulness comes in and can just meet this moment. This is what's happening now. Just waking up to what is already taking place. No need to construct anything, no need to do anything. There's already plenty happening. Just notice what's obvious in that moment.

This exploration will ultimately help us to see how these processes function and begin to loosen that grip of identification that we have.

So let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 51

The Wandering Mind

Andrea Fella · 1h03

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella invites practitioners to transform their relationship with the wandering mind—from seeing it as a meditation failure to recognizing it as a rich field for investigation. Rather than simply returning to the breath when we notice distraction, she encourages genuine curiosity about the patterns, causes, and qualities of mind wandering itself.*
>
> *Fella explores the various forms wandering takes—from low-energy drifting and daydreaming to charged 'mind storms' driven by strong emotions. She draws on the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta to illuminate how our inability to control the wandering mind points directly to the Buddha's teaching on anattā (not-self): 'If consciousness were the self, it would not lead itself to dis-ease.' The talk also examines how perception leads to thinking and then to papañca (mental proliferation), revealing the cause-and-effect nature of experience.*
>
> *Practical guidance centers on the moment mindfulness spontaneously returns—a completely effortless arising that can teach us the qualities of awareness itself. Fella shares her own journey of learning to notice this moment earlier in the process, eventually recognizing 'mindfulness re-arising' as it happens. She addresses how feeling tone (vedanā) underlies wandering, why the mind may scatter after periods of concentration, and how to navigate the fine line between non-judgment and complacency. The invitation is not to follow specific instructions but to cultivate genuine interest in this universal pattern.*

In my own practice, I found it really helpful to explore patterns or habits of mind that happened to me over and over again. This exploration of a pattern gives us a lot of information about our minds. Each time that pattern happens to us, if we can bring mindfulness to it, it's like we get a different perspective on that pattern. We may see different ways that it comes into being, different ways that it arises, different aspects of our mind that hold it into place, that keep the pattern going, and different ways that it can fall apart. So each time we see a pattern, we get a little bit more information about how our minds work around that pattern or habit.

We all have our own patterns and habits. Some of us will have patterns of anger. Some of us will have patterns of greed, patterns of loneliness or self-hatred. And there's one pattern—at least one—that we all share: the pattern of the wandering mind.

We experience this pattern a lot in our practice. In experiencing it, it's not something we often think of exploring so much in and of itself as a pattern, a phenomenon that might be interesting to watch or observe or get to know. We typically think of it as something that is wrong with our meditation, that we need to get back to being present, get back to the work of being present.

So I'd like to explore with you tonight ways that I have explored the wandering mind, some of the ways that it's helpful for us, some of the reasons it's helpful for us to explore this, what we can learn about ourselves and our minds, and how we can engage with this. I find it actually quite an interesting phenomenon. It happens in so many different ways. The wandering mind itself is not just one kind of phenomenon. There are so many different ways that it happens.

We usually use this term for an experience where we kind of lose touch with present moment experience. We often use the phrase "the mind wanders out of the present moment." This wandering out of the present moment may happen just as a kind of drifting off. This happens particularly as the retreat moves on. At this point in the retreat there's more of this particular kind of wandering where there's just a little bit of low energy and the mind is not quite connected with experience. The mind just kind of drifts off. Some thought has come up into our mind and the mind just drifts off into thinking about that. There's not particularly a charge or any kind of emotional response to that. It's just a drifting. It may not even be thinking about things you know about or care about. Some of you have seen thoughts like that—you find yourself thinking about people you don't know, talking about things you don't care about. Why does the mind do this? This is kind of a low energy phenomenon.

It can manifest too as daydreaming, just images, almost like you're dreaming awake. Or it might even happen as kind of a spacing out—not so much actively thinking, but the mind has lost touch with the present moment and is just in some kind of spaced out state without much thinking. That also can be a kind of wandering. We'll wake up into this space of, "Wow, I was just kind of zoned out there, but there wasn't a lot of thought happening."

And then there are also the familiar kinds of wanderings where it's not so much a wander out of the present moment, it's more like a charge out of the present moment. We leap onto a thought, or an emotion comes up and there's a lot of charge. Maybe call this a mind storm. It's kind of driven by greed or aversion or delusion, some kind of strong emotion fueling the thoughts. Or there might be not so much an emotional

charge out of the present moment, but just a kind of reflection. We get caught by our reflections. We get caught by some thought of the past or some thought of the future or even some thought of the present moment, describing what is happening right now.

The general quality of the wandering mind across all these different kinds of wanderings—one thing they kind of have in common is it's basically a state of low mindfulness or non-mindfulness. That's actually what's going on in this experience. The term "wandering mind" is perhaps not quite the best description because that's not what's actually happening. The mind actually doesn't wander anywhere. What happens is that mindfulness disappears, gets lost, and in that space the mind does other things. That's what we call the wandering—basically the non-arising of mindfulness.

or the infrequent arising of mindfulness.

In this space of wandering mind, when the mind has wandered off and there's very little mindfulness or no mindfulness, there's not much we can do about it. We can't make ourselves come out of that wandering mind. We cannot make mindfulness re-arise as an act of will when there is no mindfulness. There's one teaching that mindfulness is the proximate cause of mindfulness. So how does that work? Partly because mindfulness arises spontaneously from time to time. And that's just what happens when we come out of a wandering mind—mindfulness arises spontaneously. When mindfulness has arisen, then we can connect with it and cultivate it actively. So when mindfulness re-arises, we can respond.

We can notice what happens in the moment when mindfulness returns. We can be aware of what the mind is waking up into. We've said this a lot: this is actually a key to our practice, this moment of coming into mindfulness after having been lost in thought. And our relationship to that moment is important—to not have a judgmental relationship, but just to recognize that in that moment mindfulness has returned. What's happening? What is mindfulness aware of as it returns into being? That's one of the ways we commonly recognize the fact of the wandering mind.

There's another way that we wake up from that wandering. At least I've seen this at times, particularly when I'm on a longer retreat like this one. This kind of waking up happens to me a little more: the mind wanders back into the present moment. It's as if you're present, then the mind wanders out of the present moment, and then it wanders back. You've been paying attention to the breathing, the mind wanders off, thinks about something, wanders back, connects with the breathing, and then you recognize that you're breathing. There's a recognition or a memory: wait a minute, I was thinking a minute ago, but I didn't see the mind come back into this. I just remember coming back

into this breath. Sometimes it can wander back behind our backs somehow. We just find ourselves back and paying attention to the breathing, but we recall that the mind had wandered.

This is interesting to notice if you can recognize it. If you notice that, the thing to recognize or do with it is basically that you're noticing remembering. You're remembering that the mind wandered. That's what the mind is doing in that moment when it recognizes that it's remembering.

There's a lot we can understand about our minds by observing this pattern of the wandering mind. The most obvious thing we can learn or understand about ourselves is some of our personal patterns—how we get caught, what we get caught on, the kinds of themes that our mind habitually gets hooked to. Through recognizing over and over again the moment of waking up and acknowledging what we're waking up into, we can begin to see and get familiar with some themes. I think it's Jack Kornfield who talks about the top ten thought patterns that we have—we all have our favorite kinds of ways that our mind gets hooked into thought. Part of this exploration is to begin to see: how does our mind get hooked? What does it get hooked to? This is learning about our personal patterns, one of the things we can learn by exploring the wandering mind.

Another thing we can begin to explore or learn with the wandering mind is that our mind is out of control. We sit down to meditate with the plan, the intention to be present, and we find that our mind wanders. Why does that happen? If we're sitting down with the intention for presence, what is it that sweeps us off? Habits sweep us away. Causes and conditions sweep us away. We have very little control over the fact that our minds wander.

There is a little bit of control in the wandering itself, a little way we can begin to explore how our minds wander out of the present moment and connect to that losing touch. I'll talk about that more in just a moment. So there's a tiny little bit of control there. It's not that we have control—it is that the processes of mind have choice. The processes of mind have choice about whether mindfulness will continue or mindfulness will let go and we get lost. There's a tiny little bit of choice that the mind has in that place.

But once the mind is lost, we have no control over how long it wanders or when we'll come back. We don't have any control over when mindfulness will re-arise. And instead of thinking of this as a problem, I find it interesting to recognize that this is actually pointing to a very deep truth—that out-of-control nature of our minds.

The Buddha talked about this out-of-control nature of the mind as pointing to the teaching on anattā, on not-self. In the second discourse that the Buddha gave, the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, he mentioned this quality of being out of control with respect to the five aggregates. He said: consciousness, perception, feeling, volitional formations, and form are not self. I'm going to express this teaching from the perspective of consciousness, because this is really the exploration I find around the wandering mind—an exploration of consciousness.

Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were the self, it would not lead itself to dis-ease. It would be possible to say with regard to consciousness, "Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus." But precisely because consciousness is not self, it lends itself to disease. It is not possible to say, "Let my consciousness be thus."

So how many of you would, if you could, say "Let my consciousness be thus"? We can't do it. It doesn't work that way.

We usually see our experience in terms of the sense of self—the sense of I, me, mine—in subtle and obvious ways. Because we have this belief, and it's there until you're fully enlightened, this feeling of "I am." The sense of "I am" is said to be one of the last things to go when one is fully enlightened, so it will be with us for a while. But the belief, the view of self, is something a little more gross. The sense of "I am" is a subtle experience, but this belief in identity—the identity view, the sakkāyadiṭṭhi—we also tend to operate a lot from this belief.

Because we have this belief, it operates kind of under the surface for us. It filters our perception in much the way that states of mind filter our experience. If we have a state of anger coming up, we tend to see things through that filter of anger. Because we have this belief of self, we tend to filter things through that belief. This is one of the key delusions in our minds—this belief in self, this sakkāyadiṭṭhi.

And because it's there, we tend to experience the world in ways that confirm that belief. We notice things that confirm this self-view. We don't particularly notice things that don't confirm it. Or if we notice things that don't confirm it, we just don't connect the dots—that this thing doesn't confirm the belief in self. So it's very hard for us to take in evidence for not-self.

I'd like to suggest that the wandering mind is just such a piece of evidence. We see this over and over and over, but we don't really connect the dots and see how this is pointing to not-self.

Another aspect of this exploration of the wandering mind is related to an exploration of not-self. In exploring the experience of the wandering mind—and any experience that we have, this is not about just the wandering mind—we begin to see the cause-and-effect nature of our experience. Seeing that cause-and-effect nature begins to undermine our belief in our sense of self, because we see that things are just unfolding as causes and conditions, cause and effect, this process of being in flux. That's more evidence for not-self.

The Buddha also pointed to this recognition of cause and effect as being an avenue to explore that will help us understand this teaching. In one teaching, he was talking about this cause-and-effect nature of our experience to one of his monks. This monk was asking him about these experiences. I'm just going to jump into the middle of the dialogue.

The Buddha is saying: "With the six sense bases as condition, contact comes to be." So with the six sense bases—our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and the mind—with these six sense bases as condition, there's contact. Something meets our senses. "With contact as condition, feeling comes to be."

And the monk he's talking to jumps in here and says, "Venerable sir, who feels?"

The Buddha says, "Not a valid question. I do not say one feels."

If I should say one feels, in that case, this would be a valid question. But I do not speak thus. If one should ask me, 'Venerable sir, with what as condition does feeling come to be?' this would be a valid question. To this the valid answer is: with contact as condition, feeling comes to be. With feeling as condition, craving comes to be.

And this monk, not quite getting it, then says, "Venerable sir, who craves?"

So we also have this sense. It's not an uncommon experience to have the sense of who is it that feels, who is it that craves. And the Buddha points us to looking at experience through this cause and effect process that unfolds as a way to begin to understand. There isn't necessarily one who feels. It's a process that feels. Feeling comes to be on the basis of contact.

Through this exploration of the wandering mind, we can see, we begin to see some of the cause and effect nature of our experience. Through exploring the wandering mind, we can start to see something about our minds, our own personal processes, the personal ways we get caught, our patterns, our habits. We get to see and explore the out of control nature of our mind, the cause and effect nature of experience. And we can also begin to understand awareness itself, mindfulness itself, through exploring the

wandering mind. We can begin to recognize how it feels to be aware, to be mindful. What are some of the qualities of the mind that is aware, the mind that is mindful? We begin understanding this as a process.

So I'd like to talk about how to explore this. What are ways to look at it? I'd like to talk a little bit about how I've done this in my own practice.

The easiest place to begin this exploration, at least in my own experience, is in the moment when we wake up, the moment when we remember about mindfulness. As I said a little earlier, developing a skillful relationship with this moment is key for us. And I think most of you—all of you are reporting a much less judgmental relationship with that moment. Over the course of the retreat, it tends to be much easier to wake up and to recognize, "Oh, here I am again," and not have it be such a big deal. It's just like, "Oh yeah, here I am. I'm back. Here's what's happening."

Exploration of this moment of mindfulness re-arising has been key in my own practice. Once the judgment has fallen away, I've been able to get interested in this actual re-arising of mindfulness, taking an interest in that moment of mindfulness coming back. What is it about? How does it feel?

One of the most interesting things about it that I find is that since it is a spontaneous re-arising of mindfulness, it's effortless—pure mindfulness, spontaneous mindfulness. Connecting with that moment of mindfulness returning is not something you have to do. It's completely effortless in that moment. So it's a pointer. That moment of waking up is a pointer to a kind of ease that can happen with mindfulness.

It doesn't last for long, that ease. We do tend to have to pick up on that moment and then prompt a little bit. This moment of arising mindfulness, a spontaneous moment of arising mindfulness, we could call unprompted mindfulness. It just happens. Causes and conditions have come together to make it happen. And then we can connect with that moment and continue to cultivate the continuity of the mindfulness.

One thing that's interesting to play with—I find interesting to play with in that moment—is getting a sense of that ease of mindfulness and noticing how long it will last.

There's an analogy that I like to use about this prompted and unprompted mindfulness, about getting familiar with this feeling of mindfulness coming back. It's the analogy of using one of those scooters, those little scooters that kids use, those thin things that you put your foot on and you have to tap on the ground to get your momentum up—not a motorized scooter, but one that you actually have to use your foot with.

In working with the scooter, you have to tap on the ground quite a few times initially to get it going. And then after a while, once the scooter is moving, you can get a sense that you don't have to tap as frequently. You get a sense of the balance, the momentum of the scooter, and you notice when it gets a little wobbly and you need to put your foot down again.

We can have a similar feeling about this quality of mindfulness—that we can get familiar with the feeling of mindfulness itself and get a sense of when we need to reconnect, re-engage, remind ourselves again to be mindful.

In this moment of waking up, we can get a sense of riding that wave of easy mindfulness, that effortless mindfulness. Over time, we develop a feel for when we need to remind ourselves again. We don't necessarily have to jump on that moment, saying, "Oh, mindfulness! I've got to be mindful!" and trying somehow to hold it and grab it. We can begin to get a sense of how much momentum the moments of mindfulness have.

In working with this moment of waking up—not only the recognition of mindfulness and the effortless quality that it has—it's helpful to notice what we wake up *into*. This is one of the main instructions we give about waking up into the wandering mind: mindfulness has re-arisen. What is it aware of in that moment? Often it's thought—planning, thinking, remembering, judging, arguing, describing, fantasizing. Whatever it is, just recognize it. Awareness has re-arisen. Mindfulness has re-arisen. Simply notice what mindfulness has become aware of in its re-arising.

One thing that can be helpful when working with thought is to recognize not just the kind of thinking that's happened—the planning, the judging, the remembering—but the way in which thinking is happening in your mind. This connects to the process of thought, how thoughts actually occur for you. You might notice them as if you're speaking to yourself, or as if somebody else is speaking to you. Whose voice is it? Your mother's voice? Your partner's voice? Or it might be images. So notice how thinking is happening for you in that moment of waking up. What is it that you've woken up into?

If the thinking is pretty strong, has a charge to it, it's really helpful to notice the emotion underlying it. We're actually waking up not only into the thinking but also into a whole complex of experience that has arisen as a result of the thinking. Thoughts are pretty powerful. When we think certain thoughts, it tends to impact us. If we're thinking about an argument we had with a friend, it can bring up anger in the moment. So in the waking up, is there emotion? Notice the emotion. Notice the feeling tone when you wake up.

This has actually been a really interesting and helpful exploration for me. If there's been some kind of mind storm, some kind of reactivity, you may notice unpleasant experience. If there's been a fantasy, you may notice pleasant experience. But one of the ways I've found this exploration of feeling tone to be particularly helpful is when the mind kind of just drifts out of the present moment—that kind of drifting out I talked about at the beginning, where there's just a little bit of low energy and the mind moves into a kind of drifty space. In my experience, at least, that's a pretty pleasant experience. To connect with the pleasantness of that drifty quality when you wake up gives a little bit of energy to the system. It's a very organic way to connect with that drifting quality of mind, because there's often not much real content to connect with—it's just drifting. But the feeling tone is actually part of what may be holding us in the drifting. The mind has gotten caught in that pleasantness, and it hasn't been noticed. So if we can notice that pleasant quality, we're back. We're connecting with what's actually happening. This has been a really helpful exploration for me—noticing the feeling tone when I wake up.

At one point in my practice, I became really interested in whether I could notice just when the mindfulness returns. I seeded myself with this question: What's the earliest I can be aware of mindfulness coming back? This exploration was actually really helpful in cutting through the whole judging pattern, because what typically happens when we wake up into thinking is that we judge ourselves for thinking, and then we've lost the recognition of that moment of mindfulness. If we're judging ourselves for thinking, there have already been some moments of mindfulness to recognize that we've been thinking. So in taking an interest in this question—how early can I notice the waking up? How early can I notice mindfulness re-arising?—for me, this exploration really cut into the pattern of judging.

And initially, as I explored this, there seemed to be a kind of lag between when mindfulness came up and when mindfulness actually noticed that mindfulness had come up. The mind would wake up—it's like coming out of mud. There's a little bit of awareness, and then the mind sinks back into the mud. A little bit of awareness, and the mind sinks back into the thoughts. A little bit of awareness, and then the mind sinks back. At some point, the awareness gets strong enough to recognize, "Oh, I'm mindful, I'm back."

So it doesn't necessarily happen—at least initially in my exploration—that I was noticing "mindfulness re-arising," just the spontaneous mindfulness re-arising. It was much hazier than that. But this exploration began to attune me to this moment of mindfulness re-arising. Just this exploration of how soon I could notice it seemed to make me aware of the mindfulness earlier in the process, to the point where I did begin to see:

mindfulness re-arising. It's almost like being born in that moment. Suddenly, poof, I'm back. In the midst of reaching up for the shampoo bottle—I'm back, I'm reaching for the shampoo bottle. It's kind of a miracle in a way, that mindfulness re-arises and that we can be there for it re-arising.

So taking an interest in that moment. What does it feel like to be aware now? This was also a key exploration for me: What is the difference between the feeling of being aware now and the feeling of having been lost a few minutes ago, or a few moments ago? We can't really be mindful of the feeling of being lost while in the lostness. But in the waking up, in the moment when we come back into mindfulness, there's a lingering memory of what that feeling of being lost was like. In that experience, there's a contrast between what it feels like to be mindful and what it felt like to be lost.

This exploration, for me at least, really began to point out the qualities of mindfulness—qualities of a mind that is aware and mindful. When I first started sitting, teachers would give instructions in the morning sitting, and often they would say something like, "Feel a sense of presence, connect with a sense of presence in your experience." I would have no idea what they were talking about. I just had no clue what that meant, to connect with a sense of presence. This exploration of the moment of remembering is what began to educate me in what it means to be present.

The feeling of mindfulness is a subtle feeling, but it's actually pretty clear and apparent once you begin to connect with it and pay attention to its qualities. I found that the contrast between the moment of loss and the moment of waking up was a really good place to check into those qualities—the quality of clarity, of brightness, of transparency.

Meditation practice gives us a lot of opportunity to explore this, because we get lost a lot, and this moment of returning happens a lot. Hundreds of times, if not thousands of times through the day, you've got an opportunity to recognize mindfulness coming back. Familiarity with this feeling of mindfulness coming back seems to begin to point out to us when mindfulness comes back. Mindfulness actually comes back a lot through our day, but we don't recognize these moments of spontaneous re-arising that happen all through our day—in daily life and here on retreat.

Spontaneous re-arising of mindfulness happens when we notice the watermelon at the end of the table, and then we leap on it and start planning and thinking about how we're going to get to that watermelon to make sure it's not all gone by the time we get there. We become aware of something, but we aren't aware of the awareness of it. Instead, we leap onto the thing we've noticed and take action or plan around it.

Beginning to familiarize yourself with this feeling of waking up will start to point out these moments of mindfulness to you. This has been a huge gift for my practice, both in retreat and in daily life. These spontaneous moments of mindfulness happen so much. As we get familiar with them, they point themselves out to us, and we get the benefit of these small moments—small moments of completely effortless mindfulness that happen all the time.

I've talked quite a bit about noticing the returning from wandering back into the present moment. We can also begin to explore the other side of the equation: the getting lost. There's this gray area in the middle where there may not be much we can learn. Sometimes there is. Sometimes there's a foggy area in the middle where there's a little bit of mindfulness, where we may be very stuck to thoughts, and yet there's a little bit of mindfulness where we can feel the sense of what it's like to be caught by that thought. Again, there's not a lot of control we have in that situation until mindfulness accumulates and begins to clearly recognize what's happening. Doubt seems to be this way a lot—we get caught in the story, and at some point it's like, "Oh yeah, this is doubt, right, oh right."

So there is that kind of middle area where we can see where we're lost. But mostly the exploration I'm working with here is on either side of that wandering—the coming back into awareness and the getting lost.

Early on in practice, we may think it's not possible to notice where our minds move out of mindfulness into getting lost. But it actually is something we can begin to recognize: how our mind moves out of the present moment. What is the process by which this happens? I'd like to explore a couple of different ways.

This exploration, just to point back to what I was talking about earlier regarding cause and effect—this exploration of how the mind wanders really begins to educate us on the cause and effect nature of our minds.

One of the key ways that our mind tends to wander is from a sense perception. We recognize something, and we're not clearly mindful that we have recognized it. So there's awareness flowing in the present moment, and then there's some perception of something. Sitting in the meditation hall, we hear footsteps. There's the perception of footsteps. When it's not clearly noticed, a process will tend to unfold.

From recognizing footsteps, we'll tend to start thinking about footsteps. "Somebody's coming into the meditation hall. It's the middle of the sitting." So thinking has started. And then the next step of the process that the Buddha talks about is that it's not simple thinking—it moves into full-blown mental proliferation. *Papañca* is the term the

Buddha uses for this. "They're not supposed to be coming into the meditation hall in the middle of the sitting. There are rules about this. I'd better write a note to somebody. We really need to keep the meditation hall quiet. After all, we're doing all these things to make sure the meditation hall is quiet, and here's somebody walking into the hall." We go off. We just get lost.

At any place during this part of the process, we can be aware. But we tend to get caught by something—the footsteps, the thought that it's somebody walking into the meditation hall. That may be what catches us. So we can watch this process happening. This is a cause and effect process: there's sound, there's the perception of the sound, thinking tends to arise very closely after perception, and from that follows mental proliferation.

We can watch this process, get familiar with this cause and effect. Now, we can't necessarily see the whole thing, but we can notice where we're waking up in this process. And knowing how this process works can begin to help us with seeing how our minds wander.

One of the things I think happens to us is that we're paying attention to experience and we have a bit of an agenda about what we're paying attention to. We're paying attention to our body sensations, connecting very clearly with them. And then we hear the sound. Our attention, our awareness, has connected with the sound and recognized it as footsteps. But there hasn't been clear mindfulness of that, partly because of this agenda for staying with body sensations.

So in the practice here, what we begin to notice is when our minds start to lose touch with our object of meditation. It can be a subtle sense of, "Oh, the attention has moved. It's now noticing sound." If we saw that—if we just saw that the attention had moved to sound—then it would simply be hearing, and it wouldn't necessarily lead to getting lost in thought.

Sometimes we have such strong opinions about things that the opinions kind of come in and take over—the opinion that people shouldn't be coming into the hall at certain times, for instance. But we can watch this process, see how the mind wanders out of the present moment.

Another exploration: not only from sense perception, from the recognition of sound or sight or smell or taste, but also from feeling tone. We can wander out of the present moment from feeling tone.

For example, the breath. The breath feels very comfortable. There's a lot of pleasantness. We're paying attention to the breath, paying attention to the sensations of the breath, and the breath has become so pleasant and so comfortable that we kind of drift out of the present moment into the pleasantness. Not necessarily thinking, but also not terribly mindful of the fact that what is happening is that pleasantness is happening. We get lost in the pleasantness. We don't clearly notice that feeling, and we drift off.

And then perhaps—one pattern I've seen in my own mind—"Oh yeah, this feels really good. I should do more of these retreats." I would often notice the flavor of what was going on based on whether I was planning my next retreat or avoiding my next retreat.

We can also drift out of the present moment in response to neutral experience. We don't often notice when neutral is happening. It's something that we don't connect with. So again, this is part of the key to the mind wandering out—when we don't notice something is happening, we don't clearly connect with it.

Beginning to notice feeling tone, noticing that neutral is happening, can be very revealing. One of the patterns I saw happen many times when my mind was in a place of neutral was a sense of leaning into that neutral, kind of expecting or waiting for something to happen. And when nothing happened, I was a failure. I saw that my mind, from nothing at all, from just a place of neutral experience, could launch into this very familiar pattern of "I'm a failure, I'm no good."

Neutral, I think, is a really interesting place to watch familiar habits begin. When the mind is in a space of neutral and is not particularly aware of it, familiar habits and patterns are very likely to arise. For me, it was "I'm a failure."

So we can begin to notice the moment that the mind begins to let go a little bit of what it's paying attention to. You're paying attention to the breath, for instance. There's the awareness of the experience of the breath, and we're connected to the breath. If we have a very strong agenda about that, we may not quite notice that the attention is connected to the breath but just not quite as attentive.

I began to notice this on one retreat. I was doing a lot of breath meditation, and I began noticing that I could feel the attention just losing touch a little bit with the breath. When I noticed that, I'd be like, "Oh, okay, I can come back. Come back to the breath." Then I'd notice that the attention lost touch a little bit with the experience of breathing. "Oh, come back to the breath."

At some point, after noticing that several times—that kind of the mind letting go of the object of breathing—I recognized, "Well, I'm mindful. Why don't I see what the mind is doing? Why don't I just see where the mind wants to go?" And the awareness opened up into a new space, a very broad, spacious awareness, a kind of space I'd not been in before. It allowed a deepening of the practice by allowing the mind, being mindful of essentially what the mind is already doing. The mind let go of the breath—what is it doing here? It was almost as if the holding to the breath was not allowing the mind to settle more deeply in that case. So allowing the mindfulness to stay connected with the awareness: Where does it want to go? What does it want to pay attention to?

There are so many different reasons why the mind wanders. The most common, most obvious are of course the obvious defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion—caught in our patterns, caught in our memories that come up. Recollections arise, emotions arise out of that, and we get caught. Very familiar. Reflecting on the past, thinking about the past, thinking about the future, thinking about the present. All of these are some very obvious and familiar reasons why the mind wanders.

Some other reasons why the mind starts to wander: at this point in retreat, at least one thing I've seen is that there seem to be periods of time where things stabilize and there's a feeling of settledness that you get familiar with. And then either it deepens and settles further, or else suddenly it's like, "Whoa, the mind is wandering all over the place! What's going on? It was so settled yesterday."

In my exploration, I've seen several different things that lead to this phenomenon of the mind being relatively settled and then suddenly it's like an explosion of wandering mind.

One thing that happens is that as the mind starts to relax and lets go of the habitual structures we are familiar with, the surface layers of the mind begin to release, and we settle into a kind of ease in that space. What can happen then is that there's been a relaxation of holding ourselves together with familiar structures of personality. When those familiar structures fall away, sometimes old patterns, deep habits, deep thoughts, and deep feelings can come to the surface because they're no longer being held in. We can open into essentially a new space, and it may be that the very settling is what's allowing this new unsettledness to arise. So it's not necessarily that you've gone backwards. It's a moving into deeper levels of holding, deeper levels of feelings and patterns that will need to surface, that will need to be felt for full freedom to happen.

Another common reason why the mind starts to wander—and this one is probably familiar to some of you—is that the mind gets a bit concentrated, more relaxed, and moves into a kind of dreamlike space. You sit there and it's like you're dreaming. You're

not falling asleep, but all these dreamlike images keep arising. Often this is a manifestation of concentration combined with a little bit of low energy. The mind starts to wander because the energy isn't quite in balance with the concentration.

In this kind of space, it's not necessarily helpful to jump on things and say, "I really need to put in a lot more effort here." The mind is actually in a pretty subtle state when there's some concentration but low energy. I've found that very small adjustments can bring up the energy—just open the eyes, or perhaps straighten the spine a little bit. One time I noticed that just thinking "I should stand up" was sufficient. It sent a rush through my body to even have that thought. I realized I could just sit there for a few more minutes because there was more energy in the system. So making small adjustments when the mind is more settled like that can be very helpful.

Another interesting way I've seen wandering happen after times of clarity is that the clarity of mindfulness itself, when we're really, really clearly connecting with moment-to-moment experience, can lead us to subtler experience—experience that we're not so familiar with. And because we're not familiar with it, we get lost.

An example of this, and one of the first times I noticed it, was during a three-month retreat. It was several weeks into the course and the breath had gotten pretty settled, pretty continuous. I was able to stay with my breath for long periods of time. Then one day I sat down and suddenly the mind was just wandering all over the place. What's going on? I began to get curious about this wandering, so I started exploring. I noticed that within the space of a breath or two, the sensations of breath got so subtle that I could hardly feel them anymore. That's when the mind would wander. In seeing that process, I began to learn how to connect with subtle breath.

So just checking in—what is actually happening, particularly if the mind starts to wander after a period of settledness—without assuming that you must have lost your concentration. There are several different reasons why the mind can start to wander in the settling itself, and exploring that wandering, exploring why it's happening, was very helpful for me.

As we get less reactive to the wandering mind and develop more of a sense of "here's mindfulness coming back," there can be a trap: a sense of complacency. There's a fine line between judging ourselves for the mind wandering and falling into complacency—"No problem, the mind's wandering. Oh, here's mindfulness. Yeah, mindfulness is back"—without really connecting with it. We need to be careful that in letting go of judgment, we don't slip into complacency. I found that interest and curiosity in the wandering mind itself was really key to navigating this edge.

I've described many things that can be noticed in exploring the wandering mind, and I'd like to say that this isn't actually something I'd suggest you try to do—thinking, "I need to do this exploration of the wandering mind." It's more that I'm offering you information, and my main hope in this talk is that you become interested in this process and want to explore for yourself what you notice around it. I've described what I've noticed, and in hearing that, you might begin to see some of these things. But it's not so much that you should try to see how perception leads to thinking, leads to proliferation. It's simply information I'm offering.

And so, having given this talk, I'm going to suggest that you forget it. You don't have to try to remember anything that I've said. But I do hope there's a sense of interest or curiosity in exploring this pattern, because it can lead us to some very deep understanding about our minds.

So let's sit for a few moments.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 52

Aversion and Insight

Andrea Fella · 1h02

> *In this talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of aversion as a gateway to deep insight rather than an obstacle to practice. Drawing from the Sallatha Sutta (SN 36.6), she illuminates the Buddha's teaching on the two darts—how we compound inevitable unpleasant experience with our reactive aversion, creating unnecessary suffering.*
>
> *Fella provides an extensive taxonomy of aversion's many flavors, from obvious manifestations like anger and fear to subtle forms such as boredom, impatience, and the quiet wish that things were different. She emphasizes the importance of turning attention away from the trigger of aversion toward the experience of aversion itself, particularly its physical manifestations in the body. This approach helps disentangle us from the narrative fuel that perpetuates reactive patterns.*
>
> *Through vivid personal stories, Fella demonstrates how habitual patterns are constructed in the present moment despite having roots in the past. She shares her discovery that even deeply conditioned states like self-hatred can become doorways to profound insight when met with patient, compassionate attention. The talk offers practical guidance for working with overwhelming aversion, including redirecting attention to neutral experience, and reveals the surprising possibility that aversive states may sometimes mask wholesome qualities like mettā waiting to emerge.*

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

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

As you're all aware by now, aversion comes up a lot in our practice, possibly more for some than others. There is a sense that we each have our own proclivities, our own favorite challenges. Some of us tend more towards the aversion side, some more to-

wards the greed side, some more towards the delusion side, but we all have all three of these aspects in our experience. I'd like to focus tonight on how aversion comes up for us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aversion seems to have some of its roots, at least, in our biology—just the fact that our physical body produces painful experience. Very naturally, we want to protect ourselves. The body and mind seem to be designed to protect ourselves. So there's a very natural wanting to avoid unpleasant experience. Sometimes it almost feels hard-

wired, but it isn't hardwired. It's possible to experience unpleasant experience without that quick movement to reactivity, without the pushing away. As my colleague Gil Fronsdal sometimes says, pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.

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

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

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

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

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

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

hostility, dislike, rage, irritation, annoyance, worry, hatred, distrust, cruelty, discontent, frustration, aversion, dissatisfaction. Then I went to the thesaurus and got some more: loathing, disapproval, disgust, fury, disrespect, disparagement, contempt, humiliation, unkindness, meanness, spitefulness, disdain, disquiet, anxiety, apprehension, dread, distress. Many, many flavors—from the subtle to the obvious.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One key to this exploration of aversion is turning the attention away from the thing that we are averse to. There's often something in our experience or in our environment that is triggering the aversion. It may be the way somebody is taking their food in the dining hall. It may be the way somebody is walking. It may be something happening in your own body. In working with aversion, it's helpful to take the attention out of the thing that is the trigger for the aversion and turn the attention to the experience of the

aversion itself—taking the attention out of that external object and placing it, turning it back towards the mind and body. How does it feel in the mind and body? Aversion feels like this.

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

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

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

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

Bringing our attention to the physical sensations helps us to let go of that narrative, and the narrative itself is one of the fuels for the pattern. Turning our attention away from the narrative and towards the bodily experience gives us a way to let go of the

fuel. The bodily experience is a result, an effect of the manifestation of the emotion. And turning our attention towards that can be a way for us to simply allow it to flow in our experience as opposed to continuing to churn it up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Observing strong patterns in my own experience, something I have really come to appreciate is that even though these patterns are deeply conditioned—we've practiced them a lot, and there are many causes and conditions from our past that lead us to react in a certain way—in a sense, there are kinds of ruts in our mind. We've practiced a pattern over and over and over again so that the neurological explanation is that when

we practice a pattern a lot, the nerves in the brain say, "Well, this is a really important pattern. I'd better shore this one up." So when we practice something a lot, a particular kind of reactivity, the pattern gets very ingrained in the brain.

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

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

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

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

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

It's not actually necessary with our mindfulness practice to go back and dig and think about why we are this way. Why do I feel like I'm a failure? Oh, it must have to do with when I was a kid in school and all the kids teased me. Thinking about that is not so helpful in our mindfulness practice. But noticing what's happening in the moment as

the pattern arises—that is very helpful. We begin to see the conditions, the causes in the moment for that pattern to come into being. And by witnessing this with mindfulness, these patterns begin to slowly, slowly, slowly unravel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

One thing I found particularly helpful in my own experience, when a pattern arises that—in my case, the pattern I was observing was anger. Anger was my favorite. When anger would come up around a particular situation, what I found helpful, after realiz-

ing that when I tried to bring mindfulness to that experience it sucked me in—the anger was stronger than my ability to be mindful of it—was to recognize that it wasn't so helpful to try to be mindful as long as that anger had the upper hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During one sitting, finally, after several weeks of watching this, observing this, I felt the sensation of this contraction just completely not resisted at all—just completely not resisted, this feeling in the area of the heart. And it got big. This feeling of almost painful contraction just grew and grew. It was easy to let that happen because there was no resistance. It grew and grew and got really big. And then it flipped into metta. The next thought in my mind, after this beautiful expansive feeling of suffusing metta, was: "This is stupid, this is sappy, this is corny." I recognized in that moment that I had some resistance to that quality of metta.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So let's sit for a few moments.

CHAPTER 53

The Cycle of Suffering: Paṭicca Samuppāda

Andrea Fella · 58 min

In this comprehensive talk, Andrea Fella unpacks paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), one of the most profound and complex teachings in Buddhism. Drawing from the Kaccānagotta Sutta and other discourses from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, she explains how this twelve-link chain serves as a detailed exposition of the second noble truth, describing the precise conditions through which dukkha arises in our experience.

Fella guides practitioners through each link—from avijjā (ignorance) through saṅkhāra (mental formations), viññāṇa (consciousness), nāmarūpa (mentality-materiality), the six sense bases, contact, vedanā (feeling), taṇhā (craving), upādāna (clinging), bhava (becoming), jāti (birth), and finally jarāmaraṇa (aging and death). She presents this not merely as a cosmological description spanning multiple lives, but as a moment-to-moment process observable in our own experience. The arising of a self-identity as "a good yogi," for instance, demonstrates how this entire chain unfolds within ordinary experience.

The practical heart of the teaching lies in recognizing the "weak links" where mindfulness and wisdom can interrupt the cycle. Particularly at the junction between feeling and craving, clear awareness can prevent the automatic cascade into suffering. Fella emphasizes that ignorance co-arises at every point in the chain, and wherever wisdom meets experience, liberation becomes possible. She concludes with the Buddha's teaching that all things —whatever we bring mindful attention to—have liberation as their essence and culminate in Nibbāna.

Tonight I'd like to talk about the teaching of dependent origination. This teaching is fundamental, foundational to the Buddhist teaching, and it is also an extremely complex teaching. I think of dependent origination, which is a chain of twelve links that describe the causes and conditions that lead to suffering, as a detailed exposition of the second noble truth. It goes into great depth about how suffering comes to be in our experience.

Sometimes dependent origination is called the middle teaching—distinct from what we usually think of as the middle path or middle way. The middle teaching, at least in my understanding, is not a practice but rather a description of how suffering is created in our experience. The middle path is a set of practices that help us to understand and see this teaching in our moment-to-moment experience.

I'll read you a quote from a sutta that talks about how this is a middle teaching, from the Saṃyutta Nikāya:

"This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends upon a duality—upon the notion of existence and upon the notion of non-existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world. 'All exists,' Kaccāna—this is one extreme. 'All does not exist'—this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle, the middle teaching. With ignorance as condition, volitional formations come to be. With volitional formations as condition, consciousness comes to be. With consciousness as condition, name and form. With name and form as condition, the six sense bases. With the six sense bases as condition, contact. With contact as condition, feeling. With feeling as condition, craving. With craving as condition, clinging. With clinging as condition, existence. With existence as condition, birth. With birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering."

What the Buddha is pointing to here is that largely we think about things in terms of either existing or not existing. He's pointing to this teaching of dependent origination as a counter to that, a middle way between those two extremes. When we see that the origin of experience is in this causal chain—that it's simply a product of causes and conditions creating experience—the idea of non-existence doesn't occur to us. And when we see that the cessation of these very same conditions is just a causal process, the notion of existence doesn't really fit for us either. So this teaching is between these two extremes of existence and non-existence. There is a chain of conditions that leads to a kind of stream, but it's not existence in the way that we think it is. It's not a thing existing; it's a process—a conditioned process of things coming together and falling apart.

This teaching is complex, with twelve links in the chain of dependent origination, and I will cover them all this evening. This teaching has always been complex. There is an interchange between Ānanda and the Buddha that underscores this complexity. Ānanda comes to the Buddha and says, "It is wonderful, it is marvelous how profound this dependent origination is and how profound it appears. And yet it appears to me as clear as clear." And the Buddha says, "Don't say that, Ānanda. Don't say that. This dependent origination is profound, and it appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine, that this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, covered with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe, ruin, and the round of rebirth."

So the Buddha basically equates a penetrative understanding of this teaching with full liberation. We probably won't get there tonight, but there's one sutta that I really like to contemplate, both when giving Dharma talks and when hearing them. It's a story of a monk who's giving a Dharma talk about the five aggregates. He's not fully enlightened, but he's more awakened, more realized than the people he's giving the talk to. So he's explaining to them his understanding about the five aggregates, which they don't really understand very clearly at all. The sutta says that during the process of giving this Dharma talk and having a Dharma discussion—because it was actually a back-and-forth discussion—both all the people who were listening and the person who was giving the talk became fully enlightened. So there's hope for all of us tonight.

I hope to make this talk both clear and practical. This teaching can seem obscure, sometimes almost irrelevant—why do I need to know this? I have actually found it helpful in my own practice to have some understanding of this teaching, and so I'm going to offer it in a way that will hopefully give you some sense of its practicality, why understanding this is helpful, how this teaching can support our practice.

A couple of comments about that just to begin. I think one of the key ways this supports our practice is that it provides such a clear causal description of how suffering is created. This is an impersonal process that's described. It happens in all of our minds.

It's not just me or just you that experience this. It's an impersonal process. So it helps us, seeing this or hearing this teaching—at least for me—to resonate or connect with the impersonal nature of the arising of suffering.

The other aspect of this teaching that is helpful is because it does describe a set of causes and conditions that lead to suffering, and it points to suffering and the causes of suffering as happening in our mental processes. This chain describes a set of conditions leading from one to the other, tending from one to the other.

But as Guy said the other night when he spoke about a portion of this chain of dependent origination, it's not in lockstep once this thing gets started. It's not as if it's just dominoes. It can sometimes seem like that—we can watch portions of this chain falling as though dominoes were stacked up against each other. But it is as if at some point, through clearly seeing particular aspects of this chain with wisdom, with mindfulness, that chain can be cut. Through seeing how the causes are created in our minds, choices that we make can begin to dismantle this process. Through understanding the causes of suffering, we see that when the causes are not arising, the suffering doesn't arise. And the choices that we make can help support the causes of suffering to not arise.

So the twelve links of dependent origination—I'll just state them right now and then go through them. Ignorance conditions mental formations, conditions consciousness, conditions mentality-materiality. The Pali word for this is namarupa, sometimes translated as name and form. Then name and form, mentality-materiality, conditions the six sense bases—our eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Having the six sense bases conditions contact. Contact with the sense bases conditions feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Feeling conditions craving. Craving conditions clinging. Clinging conditions becoming. Becoming conditions birth. Birth conditions old age, sickness, and death—and as the Buddha says, the entire mass of suffering.

Before I go into the links, I want to just point out that this chain is often described not just as a one-way chain to suffering, but as a cycle. So the ending of this chain at suffering doesn't simply end with suffering; it actually loops back. Suffering tends to condition more ignorance—although it doesn't have to, and I'll get to that in a little while. So this cycle loops back on itself. Suffering tends to condition more ignorance, which then sends the cycle into another round.

The classical teaching on this topic, in the commentaries in particular, breaks this chain down into essentially three lives. In that teaching—and I see this potentially as partly a pedagogical way of understanding this cycle—ignorance and mental formations, which are the first two links in the chain, come from a previous life and condition the arising of consciousness in this life. So the chain of dependent origination broken into three lives has the previous life being ignorance and mental formations. Then the links from consciousness through mentality-materiality, six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and becoming—all of that is in this life. And then that conditions our arising into the next life, into birth, and aging and death.

So the literal phrasing of the links, particularly birth, aging, and death, tends to support this notion of this chain being a description of how the round of suffering is carried from life to life. Part of the teaching here serves as a way of understanding a question frequently asked in the time of the Buddha: if there's no self, who gets reborn? His answer to that lies in this chain of dependent origination. It's just causes and conditions flowing.

So the suttas support this understanding of the chain of dependent origination as describing how suffering continues or propagates between lives. And they also support an understanding of the teaching as a description of how suffering is created moment to moment in this life.

If we even think about it, to break it into ignorance and mental formations in the previous life conditioning all of our consciousness, feeling, craving, and clinging in this life—we don't have to even think about a previous life to recognize ignorance happening here and now. It's not just ignorance from a previous life that's conditioning this life. It's ignorance here and now. It's ignorance in this moment that's conditioning the unfolding of our experience and our suffering. We also don't have to wait until the next life to be born and die.

So all of these links, even the ones said to be connected to the previous life, can be laid into this life. Likewise, the links said to be connected with the future life can be seen as overlaid into this life as well. In this case, the term birth is understood not as being born from your mother, but as the birth into an identity, the feeling of self. And the term aging and death can be understood to refer to the passing away, the cessation of moment-to-moment experience—how these identities that come into being pass away, how moment-to-moment experience just changes radically, arising and passing away, moment by moment.

So there are both interpretations: the three lives interpretation and the understanding of the chain of dependent origination as unfolding in moment-to-moment experience. Both can be understood from the suttas.

Now the second interpretation is the one that I connect with most. I don't have any knowledge or intimation of previous lives, so I cannot, in my direct experience, connect with that part of the chain as referring to previous lives. But I can connect with quite a bit, or at least portions—I have seen portions of this chain at work in my own experience. And this has been very meaningful to me, to actually witness this and see how it works. So this is how I'll speak about it tonight, from this perspective.

I'm going to start in kind of an unconventional way. The first link of the chain is ignorance, but I'm not going to start there. I'm going to start kind of in the middle, where Guy started the other night, because this is really the easiest place to begin to connect with what the Buddha is talking about. I actually found a sutta tonight when I was reviewing the suttas that the Buddha gave on dependent origination. There's one sutta where he too begins with: there's the eye and there's a sight and there's contact, and from that contact there's feeling. So in one discourse he actually began right with our physical experience. And that's where I'm going to begin tonight, just starting with our sense bases.

There's contact with those sense bases. So the first link I'm going to talk about is that we have these sense bases: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and our mind. Because of those sense bases, there is contact with experience. This arises because of those sense

bases and because there is consciousness, which is a previous link. If the body was just lying there dead, there's not going to be this contact. But because there is life, because there is consciousness, there's contact with these sense bases. That's the second link tonight. Six sense bases condition contact.

Each one of those contacts with the sense bases produces a feeling to it, a flavor. It's got a flavor: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is the vedana, the feeling tone of experience. We've talked about this quite a bit. Based on this feeling tone, in a really straightforward way, natural in a way, if it's pleasant, we like it, we want it. If it's unpleasant, we don't like it, we don't want it. If it's neutral, we may not notice it. But often what arises from here—and in this chain, this is the condition—this feeling tends to condition this wanting. We're kind of like a simple automatic machine that tries to maximize pleasant and minimize unpleasant in our experience. This is the wanting. This is the craving. Feeling conditions craving.

We usually automatically act on this craving. We take a kind of action to grab onto that thing. That's clinging. There's the wanting and the clinging. As Carol described the other night very beautifully, that distinction: the wanting, the craving, is described as being like the thief that's reaching out to get something. And the clinging is when the thief actually grabs it.

Once something is clung to, our intentions, our actions kind of rally in the service of that clinging—to control it, to make sure it stays in our possession in some way, or to make sure that whatever it is we're clinging to, we can continue to have. This is becoming. It's the entire process, the intentions and actions that are generated to serve the clinging. We like becoming. It actually feels good in a way to know where we're headed, how we'll get there, how we'll control things. So sometimes this becoming feeling can take a subtle form like "I'm in control, I know what I'm doing."

Following on from this becoming is birth into some kind of identity. Things become me or mine or "I am." This might take some obvious form like "this is my shawl," a kind of possessive aspect. Or it might take more of an identity form: "I am a kind of person who does things right."

One little side note about dependent origination, one thing that I find really helpful to reflect on: it describes how suffering comes to be, but it also describes how this process of selfing comes to be. This process of becoming and birth, this identification process, is the process of selfing. We can study the suffering, and by studying the suffering, we're studying the selfing. Or we can study this process of selfing, and we will be seeing how suffering is generated in our experience.

From this point of birth into an identity, suffering is inevitable, because anytime there is a birth into an identity, a birth of any sort, there will be aging and death.

There will be a dismantling of that identity. Whether that identity is a sense of possession—this is mine—the suffering might come from the obvious separation. Somebody picks this up and walks off with it. It's no longer mine, and I suffer because it was mine. I liked it. I enjoyed the feeling of it. And now it is no longer mine. So there can be suffering from that.

Or there can be suffering if you have an identity around being the one who does things right. There may be some evidence pointed out to you that you simply cannot ignore—that perhaps you don't always do things right. You made a mistake. And that shatters the notion of being the one who always does things right. There is a death of that identity.

So I've gone through those links rather briefly, and I'd like to give you some examples. I'm going to offer just one example since I have much more I'd like to cover. There's the obvious example I could give around sense pleasure—the clinging that happens around something pleasant to our senses and the possessiveness that arises. But I think more often, what happens in our suffering, the way this chain unfolds, involves clinging around an identity. And so I'll describe how that might unfold.

You might have a notion arise—the idea of being a good yogi comes into your mind. This is contact with the sense door. The idea arises in the mind. What does it mean to be a good yogi? A thought, a fantasy might appear about being a good yogi. You might, for example, envision telling your teacher about some profound insight. I've had this experience myself—this fantasy comes to mind. That's contact. The idea arises in the mind, we become aware of it. That's contact.

Then there's a feeling tone to that. The feeling tone around this particular idea or fantasy may be pleasant. Thinking about describing yourself having this great insight to your teacher feels pleasant as a fantasy. Then there may be the wanting for that fantasy to become reality. That's the craving. The clinging that results is a kind of intensification of that wanting—a fixation on the idea as being necessary. I think of the clinging in this case as a belief that being a good yogi is necessary for my happiness. So that belief comes into being. There's the wanting for the fantasy to become reality and the belief that it's necessary—the craving and the clinging.

The becoming aspect is the intentions that rally in the service of that belief—what we start to do, how we start to act in order to fulfill that belief. Perhaps we have these intentions around what we think we need to do to be a good yogi: sit for a long time in

the hall, do really slow walking, or whatever your particular version might be. Some ideas about that. And then we begin to act them out. We begin to follow through on those intentions that are in the service of that belief. This is important. This is necessary. Here's what I need to do. That's becoming.

Then the birth is—and let's say for simplicity in this example—that these patterns of behavior actually lead to the feeling of being a good yogi. This is the birth into the identity, the distinct feeling of identity, the sense of "Ah, I am a good yogi." And perhaps there's evidence to confirm this. You see yourself walking more slowly than everybody else, or perhaps you're sitting later at night or getting up earliest in the morning—whatever it is, there's some kind of evidence to support this. So there's this distinct feeling of self here.

And then from this point, again, this distinct feeling of self is a construction of the mind, and it is impermanent. It will pass. Things will happen.

Now, it may be possible to hold onto that identity in an unbroken chain until you die. It's possible—unlikely, but possible. So your separation from that identity could happen at your death.

But most likely what's going to happen is that something will change in your experience. You'll have a sitting or two where the mind is wandering all over the place. No longer does it seem like you're really able to be present and connected for the entire sitting—being a good yogi, really able to sit and not just sit for a long time but be completely mindful and present. And then along comes a sitting where you're sleepy or tired, or the mind just starts going back into fantasy or remembering your childhood.

The five hindrances come up, and this is now proof that you are not a good yogi. So that identity of being a good yogi dies a smashing death, and another identity is born: "I'm not a good yogi."

This is suffering. The actual loss is suffering. The threat of loss is suffering. The fear of loss is suffering. The suffering that we experience is in direct proportion to the amount of attachment we have to that experience—how strongly we were clinging to it.

A simple example demonstrates how the strength of attachment gives rise to different intensities of suffering. If you're sitting at the dining room table and you have a glass by your place, and you go away and come back and your glass is gone, there may be some irritation or annoyance that somebody cleared away your glass. That's a small kind of suffering. The attachment to these glasses is not that strong. We do have a subtle attachment—"This is my glass while I'm using it here at this meal"—but when some-

body clears it away, there's just a kind of annoyance. "Oh, I need to go get another glass. Why did somebody clear it away? Didn't they see it was obviously my glass?" So there's a little bit of suffering that arises.

If you have brought your own personal insulated travel mug with you and it's sitting next to your plate, and you come back and it's gone, maybe a little bit more suffering arises. This points to the intensity of the clinging—more of a sense of ownership, a possession of your own personal property.

So that gives you a flavor for how this chain works. We've talked about a number of links in this chain. Now I'd like to go back to the beginning and review those first few that I haven't talked about yet.

But first, again, I want to point to the cyclic nature of this. Suffering conditions ignorance. The Buddha actually pointed to this directly in one teaching. He says: "And what is the result of suffering? There are some cases in which a person, overcome with pain, her mind exhausted, grieves, mourns, laments, beats her breast, and becomes bewildered. Or one overcome with pain, her mind exhausted, comes to search outside: 'Who knows a way or two to stop this pain?' I tell you, monks, that suffering results in either bewilderment or search."

So suffering often leads to this confusion, this bewilderment side of things, which is related to ignorance. Suffering leads to ignorance. The main definition of ignorance given in the suttas is not understanding the Four Noble Truths. So ignorance means we don't understand suffering. And here again we see the connection between suffering and ignorance: when we don't understand suffering, suffering leads to more ignorance. We don't understand suffering, we don't understand its cause, we don't understand how it comes to be.

In ignorance, we think we know what will lead to happiness. We think having what we want will make us happy. And as I think you've all seen, having what we want only goes so far. It doesn't actually lead to a very deep kind of satisfaction. In fact, when we get what we want and have that moment of "Ah, yes, this is the way it's supposed to be," clinging arises from that, and we are just deepening the rut of this pattern of dependent origination, this pattern of suffering.

But if we can meet this suffering with wisdom—mindfulness and wisdom coming together—the causal chain can lead us in another direction, towards liberation, towards freedom.

So suffering leads to ignorance. Ignorance conditions mental formations. Based on ignorance, mental formations arise. Just as a reminder, mental formations are the intentional aspect of our experience.

And so based on ignorance, our intentions are formed—how we choose things, decide things, and behave. These intentions are the mental formations. Mental formations are the patterns and habits that lead us forward through this cycle. Out of ignorance, these patterns and habits make us act in unskillful ways. We take the most obvious move to get rid of suffering: to have what we want, to get rid of what we don't want. Which just leads us through this cycle. We think we are acting to alleviate our suffering by getting what we want, but actually it's just cementing this process further.

So these unskillful patterns and habits are the mental formations that result from ignorance. With mental formations as a condition—these mental formations conditioned by ignorance—consciousness comes to be. But ignorance is an interesting factor here. Ignorance is at the beginning of the chain, but one scholar monk, Ñāṇatiloka, pointed out that ignorance isn't just at the beginning. It's actually arising at every point on this chain.

So in those mental formations, those unskillful habits and patterns, it's not simply that ignorance has propelled them into being. There is that aspect of it—because of ignorance we act in unskillful ways. But in that very acting unskillfully, ignorance is there in that moment. Ignorance co-arises with every link in this chain when wisdom is not present.

With mental formations as a condition, consciousness comes to be. We can think of the habits and patterns conditioning our consciousness and what we experience. These are the filters we've talked about—those habits and patterns, the proclivities. Ignorance has put us into a certain frame of mind, and that frame of mind then conditions how we see things.

As an example, which we've used before, if there's an arising of anger in the mind, there is a kind of proclivity, a filtering that tends to point us towards things that confirm that anger, or perhaps even just pulls unpleasant experience out of our environment. When we're in an aversive state, it tends to orient us towards the unpleasantness in our environment. This is the process of mental formations conditioning consciousness.

This filtering mechanism is pretty deeply put into our psyche. It's deeply ingrained that when we have an agenda towards something, our mind is designed to exclude things that aren't in line with that agenda. There's an interesting, amazing study that points to the power of this. Researchers asked participants to watch a video of basket-

ball players and count the number of times the ball was passed between players on a team. While watching, most people were able to pretty accurately count that number. But then they were asked at the end: did you notice anything unusual? The vast majority said no. Occasionally somebody would say, "Was there a gorilla in there somewhere?"

And there had been. While these people were passing the basketball, a person in a gorilla suit had come out, wandered around the basketball court, and then walked off. The vast majority of people did not see this. Their sense of their own perception was so strong that when they actually saw the video again, they denied it was the same video. "This can't be the same video." This is the power of this filtering mechanism.

With consciousness as a condition, nāma-rūpa—materiality and mentality—comes to be. That's a somewhat unusual term. Other translations render it as "mind and matter" or "name and form." The most concise definition I've seen is that it refers to the processes of our body and most of the processes in our mind. If we go back to the five aggregates, mentality and materiality are the four aggregates of body, feeling, perception, and mental formations. The only one excluded is consciousness. And that consciousness is what's conditioning the other four.

So this is one way to understand materiality and mentality: as four of the five aggregates, the four excluding consciousness. There's a very close dependence between these two. The five aggregates are often talked about as arising together. In one sutta, the Buddha describes his exploration of these links in the chain of dependent origination, contemplating mentality, materiality, and consciousness. He thinks: what conditions mentality and materiality? Consciousness conditions that. And what conditions consciousness? Materiality and mentality condition consciousness.

So he sees that there's a kind of back and forth, a mutual conditioning of these two. In one sutta, a monk is confused about this and asks Sāriputta to explain it. Sāriputta gives an analogy. He says it's as if there are two sheaves of wheat propped against each other—they hold each other up. If you take one out, they'll both fall. This is the way in which these two are mutually conditioning.

Based on the state of our consciousness, however it is disposed, if it's flavored by anger, then the other aggregates are conditioned by that flavoring of consciousness. If we have anger in our minds, we tend to perceive things that confirm that anger. The feeling tends to be unpleasant. Our body may be distorted with tightness and tension, and our face may have an unpleasant expression on it. So these other four of the aggregates—mentality and materiality—are conditioned by the kind of consciousness, the kind of flavoring to consciousness.

Now we've made a full loop around this chain. We're back where we started: there is this mind and body, and there are the six sense bases. But you can see now—when I first started talking about it, we were approaching it from a neutral place. There's the eye, and then there's a sight, and then there's contact, and then it's either pleasant or unpleasant. But actually, coming in from this point, it's not starting from something neutral. It's already got a spin to it. Our mind already has a spin to it. We are predisposed to have contact with things that confirm our ignorance, our views, our identities. And so this cycle tends to reinforce itself. A very potent cycle.

This chain being a description of causes and conditions that support the arising of suffering, and understanding that it's not lockstep, that there is possibly a way to get out of it, we look at how we can change the conditions. If we can change the conditions, then perhaps the cycle will lead in a different direction.

The main way to change the conditions is to bring mindfulness and wisdom to our experience, moment by moment. The only place we can have any foothold or toehold in breaking this chain is in the present moment, in this very moment. We can't do anything about what happened in the past. But we can meet this moment with mindfulness and wisdom. This begins to undermine that ignorance, which is co-arising at every point in this chain. When ignorance is present in the mind, wisdom is not present in the mind. When wisdom is present in the mind, it begins to knock that ignorance down.

We can use mindfulness and wisdom at any point in this cycle to begin to dismantle this process of suffering. And there are some weak links in this chain. We've talked about in particular the link between feeling and craving. There's another one between suffering and ignorance—that link at the beginning of the cycle where suffering tends to lead to ignorance.

In that quote I read where the Buddha said suffering leads to bewilderment or to search—in that search, we may meet a teaching, some wisdom that seems to point us in a different direction. If that wisdom meets us at the right moment, it will lead to faith instead of ignorance. Suffering also has the possibility of moving not to ignorance but to faith.

There's another chain described called the chain of transcendent dependent origination that begins with suffering and then moves from faith to gladness, to rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowledge and vision of things as they are, to disenchantment, dispassion, liberation. A similar kind of causal link leading from suffering met with wisdom and understanding, leading to faith.

The work at this point in the chain is to understand suffering. This is the first noble truth. This is what the Buddha told us is our work with suffering: understand it. Not intellectually, but understanding in the moment how the suffering comes to be, how it dismantles. Understand the processes around it. Essentially, understand some of the aspects of this chain.

This is much of what we've been doing here—meeting our suffering with mindfulness and wisdom. With this teaching, all of the teaching we've been doing, the discussions in the interviews, the teachings, the question and answer—there's this wisdom being chewed on in this room. And this wisdom and the mindfulness together, when they meet suffering, they begin to put little holes into that suffering. We begin to see how this thing we used to suffer over—it's not such a big deal anymore. There's a lot more space around it. Or sometimes we even see suffering end.

Completely. A particular pattern simply collapses when we see, "Oh, I see how I think this is going to continue forever." Seeing that ignorance in the mind, actually seeing it—the ignorance can't sustain under the light of that understanding, and it falls apart. The pattern falls apart. We've all seen this: the power of mindfulness and wisdom to cut through our suffering, to transform it in a moment.

Then there's the link between feeling and craving, which is also a weak link. We've actually talked about this one quite a bit, so I won't spend much time on it. But I do want to point to another sutta where the Buddha highlighted this aspect of feeling. I'll read it to you. He brings a completely different twist on the topic than the chain of dependent origination, where feeling leads to craving, to clinging, becoming, birth, suffering—that's the flavor of dependent origination.

In the sutta, the Buddha said: "I will teach you the all, the root of everything. All things are rooted in desire. They come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings." So here we're in the same terrain as some of those links of dependent origination. We have contact and feeling, and there's attention, which is in the realm of mental formations. But then it goes in a different direction: "The foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness. Their peak is wisdom, their essence liberation. All things merge in the deathless, and Nibbāna is their culmination."

Here the Buddha points to feeling, then to concentration and mindfulness leading us to wisdom. So whatever we feel, bringing concentration and mindfulness to our experience—this is a very central practice in what the Buddha teaches, this mindfulness of feeling. Bringing concentration and mindfulness to our experience of feeling, we simply see, "Oh, it's feeling. It's just feeling." That wisdom—essentially, feeling leads to craving

when ignorance is present with that feeling. When wisdom is present, feeling leads to the cessation of feeling. Pleasantness ceases. Unpleasantness arises and ceases. It's just feeling.

One key aspect of this sutta that I like to highlight is that it points to all things. All things have liberation as their essence, merge in the deathless, and culminate in Nibbāna. All things. It doesn't matter what we bring our mindfulness and concentration to. Joined with wisdom, whatever we are paying attention to has this capacity to lead us to liberation. The touch of a doorknob. A feeling of anger. Fear. A feeling of bliss, of happiness, of balance of mind, of equanimity. Whatever we are experiencing, mindfulness and wisdom lead us toward freedom.

Whatever we're doing—brushing our teeth, eating a meal, sitting in meditation—moment by moment, this work of seeing our experience can begin to break this whole chain apart. We see ignorance at work. And in that seeing, there's freedom.

So let's sit for a few moments.

Thank you for listening to the Dhamma.

CHAPTER 54

Crossing the Flood

Andrea Fella · 58 min

In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a rich exploration of two interconnected water analogies the Buddha used to describe the path to liberation. The first is the simile of the raft from the Alagaddūpama Sutta (MN 22), where the Buddha describes building a raft from materials at hand—grass, twigs, branches, and leaves—to cross a dangerous flood. Fella illuminates how this raft represents the Noble Eightfold Path meeting our moment-to-moment experience, emphasizing that we cannot avoid contact with the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion but must navigate through it.

The second analogy comes from the Ogha-taraṇa Sutta (SN 1.1), where a deva asks the Buddha how he crossed the flood. His paradoxical answer—'by neither tarrying nor hurrying'—becomes a powerful guide for practice. Fella unpacks how tarrying manifests as sloth, laziness, or getting stuck in pleasant states, while hurrying appears as restlessness, over-efforting, or anxiously seeking results. This balance between sinking and being swept away offers practical wisdom for meditation.

The talk concludes with an exploration of when to let go of even wholesome states, using suffering as a guide. Fella shares personal examples of noticing subtle agendas behind mindfulness—wanting experiences to change, wanting to understand, over-efforting—and how recognizing these forms of clinging leads to deeper freedom. The teaching that an arahant naturally embodies the Eightfold Path without effort suggests that our practice now models the very freedom we seek.

Most of you have probably seen the scheduled change for the part one yogis posted on the board. We'll talk about that tomorrow, but let me just notice how even something that simple can impact your minds.

When the Buddha taught, he used a variety of teaching styles. One of the ways he communicated and expressed the Dharma was through the use of analogy. I think he was actually quite a master at analogy. For me, when I read the analogies the Buddha offered, I find that they seem so appropriate and apt—it's like the teaching comes in from a different angle. The image created in my mind around the analogy often goes in a different way than simple words do. Analogies provide an intuitive way that we can connect with the teachings.

Tonight I'd like to explore two analogies that the Buddha offered. They're both quite familiar—you're probably acquainted with one or the other or both of them. They're both water analogies. The Buddha used water a lot in his analogies, and both of these have to do with crossing a vast expanse of water or a flood.

Before I actually get into these analogies, I want to explore a little bit about what this flood means. The Buddha explicitly said in one teaching that the floods he's referring to in these analogies are the four floods: the flood of sensuality, the flood of existence, the flood of views, and the flood of ignorance. It's said that they're called floods because these aspects of our mind keep us submerged in the round of existence, in samsara, not able to find our way to freedom from suffering.

This particular list, the four floods, is not talked about that much in the suttas. But all of these unwholesome states referred to in the floods are grounded in what we could call the three unwholesome roots of greed, aversion, and delusion. That's how I relate to this notion of flood and of crossing the flood—that we're crossing over this flood of greed, aversion, and delusion. We get swept away by greed, aversion, and delusion. We get drowned in these states of mind.

We try to arrange things to suit us. We try to arrange our lives, even for small moments, so that we can have things be the way we like them to be. You might think of this as coming up for a breath of air. But it doesn't last long. Things fall apart, and so then we have to work again, struggle again to find a way to come up for another breath of air, arrange things again. And again it doesn't last very long. We're submerged again.

I think you all know this sense of being submerged by these qualities of mind, and the struggle of using our habitual, familiar ways of getting that breath of air, seeing that it's just an endless struggle. I'm reminded of the saying of the Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland: "You see here, it takes all the running you can do to stay in one place." Being flooded by greed, aversion, and delusion, we're not able to navigate our lives very skillfully.

Tonight I'd like to explore two of these analogies about crossing the flood. I think we actually have a lot to learn about practice and what the Buddha had to say by looking at the various parts of the analogy, by unpacking it a little bit. So I'd like to explore these two analogies in some detail.

The first one is the simile of the raft. I'll read this to you and then go over parts of it—read a little bit, do a little commentary, then read a little more and do a little commentary.

"Suppose a man in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water whose near shore was dangerous and fearful and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferry boat or bridge going to the far shore."

So a couple of the parts of the analogy so far. First is this near shore that's dangerous. The Buddha equates this near shore with identity. Why is identity dangerous? He says that the near shore is dangerous. Some identities are obviously dangerous just in their very being, in their way of feeling. I have had various identities that have felt dangerous—the identity of self-hatred, of being miserable. "I'm the miserable person. Well, I'm happy now, but I know that really what I am is miserable." Those identities, those very identities can feel, at the very least, unpleasant and uncomfortable. That's one way that identities are dangerous.

And then there are those other identities that we feel somehow are the way things are supposed to be. When I feel like I know how to do things, when I feel like I'm right, when I feel like I'm a good person—whatever it might be, fill in the blank. These identities are a kind of way of feeling stable, secure. It's like, "Yes, this is me. This is when it feels right. This is when it feels good. This is the way it's supposed to be." There's this solid feeling, and with it comes a sense of what feels like safety or security.

But it's an illusory kind of safety. In the analogy, the near shore is solid—it's at least not in the expanse of water—but the Buddha says it's a dangerous place. In clinging to an identity, we have to make this effort to protect it, to defend it, to make sure that other people agree with this identity, that they see who we really are. There's an endless need to prop up this identity, and we suffer when some experience or circumstance undercuts that sense of solidity, of security.

On one retreat, I got very familiar with two patterns that I saw playing off of each other. One was "I'm a good yogi." The other was "I'm a failure." When I was in that place of feeling like I was a good yogi, it felt like that's what it's supposed to be like, that's what I'm supposed to be and do. I was trying to find a way to have that identity and get rid of the other one. What I discovered, kind of to my surprise, was that these two identities were intimately interconnected. There wasn't a way to have one without the other. The very having of that identity of "I'm a good yogi" was the setup. Because we can't always have things the way we think they should be. So when for a few moments or hours I couldn't be very mindful, or the mind was wandering a lot, the other identity arose: "I'm a failure. I'm not that good yogi." These identities are a dangerous place. They create suffering.

The second part of this analogy is the vast expanse of water—this is the flood. I've already spoken about this a little bit. The other part we've talked about is the far shore. The Buddha equates the far shore with Nibbāna: freedom from suffering, freedom from needing to do, needing to protect, needing to defend, freedom from clinging, freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion.

To continue with the analogy, we have this man who is on a journey and has come to this place. He thinks, "There is this great expanse of water whose near shore is dangerous and fearful and whose further shore is safe and free from fear. But there is no ferry boat or bridge going to that far shore. Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft. Supported by that raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I could get safely across to the far shore." And then the man collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into a raft. Supported by the raft and making an effort with his hands and feet, he got safely across to the far shore.

There are a few parts to this aspect of the analogy that I'd like to unpack. The first is the raft itself—this raft by which we cross over the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion. In exploring this analogy, Ajahn Sumedho wrote something that really spurred my thinking and prompted me to look closely at the various parts. He wrote: "The Buddha referred to his teaching as a raft, which you can make out of the things around you. You don't have to have a special motorboat or submarine or luxury liner. A raft is something you make from the things around just to get across to the other shore. We're not trying to make a super-duper vehicle. We're just able to use what's around us for enlightenment."

This is quite inspiring to me—this notion of the raft being created from just what's at hand. And what's at hand is our present-moment experience. Wherever we are, whatever's happening, we have our sense experience: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and things happening in the mind. So the raft is built in part out of our moment-to-moment sense experience.

The other part of the raft—in fact, what I think of as the binding for the raft—is the Dhamma. The Buddha equates the raft with the Eightfold Path: wise view, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. We can look at the path as a way to meet our moment-to-moment experience. It's the binding that holds the raft together.

Our moment-to-moment experience, our sense experience—we meet it with wise understanding, with the intention to engage. We meet it with wise effort and mindfulness, and it cultivates concentration.

On one retreat I was sitting with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, he went over how this Eightfold Path is really a moment-to-moment unfolding. It's not necessarily something that unfolds only over a long course of time. In each moment we're cultivating the entire Eightfold Path. And for the three aspects of ethical conduct—wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood—he pointed out that these are fulfilled by abstaining. Here on retreat, those aspects are fulfilled by the abandoning of killing, taking what's not given, all of the precepts we're working with. Wise livelihood is fulfilled by engaging in the practice of meditation. Wise speech is primarily fulfilled by silence. So moment to moment we are cultivating the Eightfold Path by meeting our experience.

Using this combination of our moment-to-moment experience and the Eightfold Path, we cross over this flood of greed, aversion, and delusion. This is the raft built out of our present moment experience and bound together with the Dharma.

Another aspect of this analogy of crossing the flood that I resonate with is this notion of being on a raft. A raft is pretty creaky. You're not going to stay dry, right? You're on the raft; you're going to be in contact with that stream while you cross over it. You're going to be in contact with the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion as you cross over it. The raft helps keep you afloat so you're not drowning in it, but you're in contact with it. We don't cross over the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion by somehow magically floating up in the air and flying across. We have to meet the difficulties. We have to meet the flood in order to cross over it.

It's not a mistake when we turn with mindfulness to our experience and see anger, aversion, longing, pride, arrogance, frustration, ignorance. It's not a mistake. The practice brings these into our awareness. The practice doesn't create these states—it uncovers them. It allows us to see them in the space of mindfulness where we have an opportunity to work with them. Rather than having them run us, rather than having them make our choices for us—because if they're not seen, if these states motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion are not seen with mindfulness, they're going to be running the show. They're going to be making our choices for us.

Being on the raft with mindfulness, with effort, with concentration, with understanding and intention, we meet those states of greed, aversion, and delusion, and we aren't swept away by them. We can cross; we can navigate them.

The other piece—he says, "making an effort with hands and feet, he got safely to the far shore." So we build the raft, and we can't just go out into the water and sit there. We've got to make some effort. We've got to head in a direction. If we just go out and

drift, it's pretty unlikely, even floating on this raft, that we'll actually get to the far shore. We need to make the effort. Engage with the practices of the Eightfold Path. Make the effort to stay present.

This effort is the resonant piece of the second analogy that I want to bring in, so I'll shift to that one for a few moments.

This analogy comes from a time when the Buddha was sitting in meditation and was visited by a deva. The deva came to ask him a question: "How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?"

"By not halting, friend, and by not straining, I crossed the flood."

"But how is it, dear sir, that by not halting and by not straining you crossed the flood?"

"When I came to a standstill, friend, then I sank. But when I struggled, then I got swept away. It is in this way, friend, that by not halting and by not straining I crossed the flood."

One of the notes about this sutta observed that there's meant to be a little bit of a paradox in this analogy of not halting and not straining while crossing a flood. The comment says that typically how you would cross a raging stream would be to find a foothold, stop there, look, find the next place where you could step, and then rush quickly through the raging water to get to that next foothold. Rest for a minute.

That's not what the Buddha describes for crossing the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion.

There's another translation of this that is my resonant translation. In reading the suttas, I actually recommend—if you get interested in reading the suttas—finding multiple versions. When you discover a particular sutta you're drawn to, seek out different translations, because we're reading translation. Different uses of words can highlight things or resonate with us somewhat differently.

And so there's another version of this sutta that translates these words: "By neither tarrying nor hurrying, I crossed the flood. When I tarried, I sank. When I hurried, I was swept away." For me, this has been the image and the words that have resonated most deeply. Neither tarrying nor hurrying.

The first thing I want to point out about this—something I personally take great inspiration from—is that the Buddha says, "When I tarried, I sank. When I hurried, I was swept away." He didn't do it perfectly. He had to experiment. He had to find what

worked, what allowed him to cross the stream. We also need to do this. We need to experiment and observe what happens, observe what supports us in our practice, what helps us to cross the flood, what sweeps us away, what makes us sink. Again, it's not a mistake when we find ourselves tarrying and hurrying, sinking and being swept away. We learn from that. The Buddha learned from it, and we can follow his example.

I want to explore this notion of tarrying and hurrying. The commentaries describe many different ways that tarrying and hurrying can be understood. I'm not going to follow the commentaries so much, but rather explore some of the ways I've found in my own experience—this image of tarrying and sinking, hurrying and being swept away—how I've felt it in my own practice.

The first and most obvious form of tarrying is sleepiness, the dullness of that hindrance of sloth and torpor, where we're just sunk into oblivion. There's a feeling of sinking there. This is tarrying in our practice—we are not engaging. The counterpoint to this, restlessness, is a form of hurrying. When the mind is restless and unable to really meet and connect with experience, it's like we get swept away. We land on something for a moment and then our minds get swept away.

Related to these two of dullness and restlessness, for tarrying there's also a kind of laziness or indulgence—we find ourselves indulging a pattern of thought. It's almost like we're in a whirlpool, using another water analogy. We get caught in a whirlpool of thinking. We don't go very far. We're sinking into the water in that whirlpool of thought. On the other side of laziness is over-efforting, being anxious for results. For me, this has had a feeling not so much of sinking, but of not really connecting. It's like being swept away on the current, not meeting experience moment by moment.

Another way to explore tarrying and hurrying is through greed and aversion. We can think of greed as a kind of tarrying. We get stuck on something. "Oh, this is pleasant. I think I'll just hang out with this for a while." It could be anything—a very blissful state of meditation that we get stuck in, or a pleasant fantasy whose pleasantness catches us, and we just remain there. With aversion, we have a sense of not liking an experience, and rather than meeting it, we want to rush past it, on to something else. That would be hurrying past our experience from aversion.

Then there's another aspect of aversion which can be a form of tarrying. I'm very familiar with this one, actually. This is a way my mind tends to work with aversion: I get stuck to things I don't like, trying to get rid of them. That's a kind of tarrying. "How can I fix this? How can I change this? How can I control this? How can I get rid of this?" Or

with greed, we can have the sense of being swept away—just the anxiousness of wanting the next pleasant experience. "Where's the next pleasant experience? How can I get the next good thing?"

The commentaries do mention that one of the ways of exploring this tarrying and hurrying is through looking at how we can be sunk into unwholesome states of mind and caught by, swept away from the true goal by wholesome states of mind. This is an interesting one, I think, to explore. Yes, the unwholesome states of mind catch us and drag us down. But we can get caught by wholesome states, feeling like, "Oh, this is what is most important—being with this state of bliss"—and missing out on the understanding, the wisdom that we can cultivate through combining concentration with mindfulness. So we can get swept away from the true goal, not able to actually land on the far shore, by being caught by these wholesome states.

Another sutta explores something that's not connected particularly in any of the commentaries with tarrying and hurrying, but I found it and it resonated for me again in my own experience—ways that I get stuck and swept away. This is a sutta about investigation. The Buddha said, "One should investigate so that consciousness is not distracted and diffused externally, and internally is not fixed."

What does that mean? For me, again, it's not explained anywhere that I've seen, but I have seen in my own experience at times that when I'm investigating something, if I'm looking at something, it's kind of like my mind goes, "Oh, look at that thing. Let me put that under the microscope and really look at it." And it's almost as if I hold onto it in order to look at it. I think that's what it means by being fixed internally—that we kind of get stuck in the pattern of investigation, holding onto something in order to look at it.

Distracted externally—my connection with that is that we can move into looking at the outer experience, looking for explanations of why things are happening in our history, in our surroundings, essentially in our external environment. We look for the reasons why things are happening, as opposed to really seeing moment to moment that suffering and its causes are happening in the present moment. That's another way to look at this tarrying and hurrying.

For me, this image of neither tarrying nor hurrying has been a really supportive image, actually. Just almost envisioning the Buddha crossing this stream, like walking on water, with a very steady pace. Each time the foot meets the water, it comes up. But it meets the water. It meets it, and then it comes up. It meets it, and it comes up. Just that very steady meeting of experience, moment by moment.

On long retreat, this image has been so helpful to me. Just keep going. Just keep going. Moment by moment, just meet what's right in front of you. And whether we're on retreat or at home, whatever is happening, we can just meet with this very steady pace, moment by moment. Meeting things we like with balance of mind—not holding on to them, trying to keep them, not lost in thoughts about how to control it or get more of it. Meeting things we don't like with balance of mind—really meeting it without rushing over it, but also without getting stuck to it, trying to figure out how to change it or fix it or get rid of it. And meeting things that we usually ignore.

Actually, I think in the ignoring we can both get sunk and swept away. It's kind of like things that we're not really connecting with can grab us from behind and either pull us down or send us off. So meeting the things that we usually ignore, moment by moment—every experience.

Returning to the raft analogy, we left our protagonist at the far shore. He had made it across. And the sutta continues. The Buddha says:

"Then when he had got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me. Since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder and then go wherever I want.' Now, what do you think? By doing so, would that man be doing what should be done with the raft?"

"No, venerable sir."

"By doing what would the man be doing what should be done with the raft? When that man got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to haul it onto the dry land or set it adrift in the water and then go wherever I want.' Now, bhikkhus, it is by doing that that the man would be doing what should be done with the raft. So I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping. When you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even good states, how much more so bad states."

There's a lot to explore in this—this letting go even of wholesome states. The image here is of having crossed over, then setting the raft adrift.

The letting go is not so much a pushing away; it's a not clinging to. One of the key pieces here, I think, is that we can't let go of this raft too soon. We have to use the raft in order to navigate the flood. So the Buddha doesn't recommend letting go of the raft while we're in the middle of the stream.

I think that in hearing this teaching of letting go of everything, letting go of craving, letting go of wanting, we see how when we're engaged in the practice there is wanting —wanting to be mindful. And we've talked about this. We've talked about the notion of wholesome desire, the possibility for wholesome desire, of the *chanda* that can be associated with wholesome states, and the unwholesome desire. We let go of the unwholesome desire, the unwholesome craving, and try to connect with the wish that's associated with the wholesome.

But there can be a kind of confusion that happens when people hear this teaching about letting go and they see that they want to be mindful, they want to cultivate these qualities of concentration, of effort, and then they realize, "Oh, but I'm not supposed to want anything." We have to build the raft. We have to use mindfulness, effort, concentration in order to cross this flood. If we let go of the raft too soon, or if we think, "I'm not supposed to want mindfulness, so I'm not going to do anything to be mindful. If I find myself wanting mindfulness, I won't engage in that mindfulness"—the instruction there is to notice the wanting. It's not to let go of the mindfulness. It's to notice the wanting.

So we use the teachings, which help us to let go of suffering. And there's likely to be some clinging in this process. The path can unfold as a staged letting go. We start our practice, and a lot of what we see initially, and for a long time in our cycles of practice, is real challenges. *Dukkha dukkha*. We see the pain of afflictive emotions, the pain of holding on to wanting things to be the way we want them to be. We really experience that suffering. And we use wholesome states of mind to begin to let go of those unwholesome states of mind. This is using the raft to cross over the flood, using these wholesome states to let go of the unwholesome. And then we start to see as we practice that we're holding on to those wholesome states. We begin to see that there's suffering, there's clinging in those wholesome states as well. And then we need to start looking at that. So practice can unfold by stages.

The Buddha actually pointed to this. He said, "Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisattva, I too clearly saw as it actually is with proper wisdom how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them. But as long as I did not attain to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I could still be attracted to sensual pleasures. But when I clearly saw, as it actually is with proper wisdom, how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, much despair, and

how great is the danger in them, and I had attained to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I was no longer attracted to sensual pleasures."

So here the Buddha is pointing to the wholesome pleasure of meditation, the wholesome pleasure of concentration in meditation, as being a way to surmount or let go of the dependence that we have on happiness coming from sense pleasure. This is the only way we think that happiness can come until we actually meet another way. And so by depending on the wholesome states of concentration, of insight, we let go of the unwholesome.

And then in another place he said, similarly but pointing to a little more realization, "I see other beings who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, being devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, burning with fever for sensual pleasures, indulging in sensual pleasures, and I do not envy them. Why is that? Because there is a delight apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, which surpasses even divine bliss."

Here he's pointing beyond the happiness of wholesome states themselves to a state that surpasses divine bliss. And the commentaries point this to freedom, to the freedom of complete liberation. This is, I think, what he's pointing to when he says letting go of the raft once we've crossed over—letting go even of the wholesome.

Now in my own experience exploring this navigation of when to let go of the wholesome, my own guideline, my rule of thumb, is to use suffering as a guide. As we explore our experience—I'll go through some various ways I've used this suffering as a guide, and I think you've probably seen some of this as well. As we practice, as I said, there are a lot of unwholesome states that we meet. And as we bring mindfulness to that, we start to see that the unwholesome states begin to fall away. Sometimes we bring clear mindfulness right to a difficulty and it just falls apart.

And so we start to want that falling apart. An unwholesome state comes up and we bring mindfulness to it in order that the thing will go away. "Oh, here's a painful experience. Let me be mindful of it, then it'll go away." This is a clinging around mindfulness. It's an attitude in the mind, an agenda. Essentially, it's an agenda around why we're being mindful—so that these difficulties will go away.

We start to see, actually, and I know you've all seen this, how this agenda just gets in the way. When we have that agenda—"I want to be mindful in order that this will go away"—we often find that it just locks things in place. So we have to start seeing that agenda itself.

Now, it doesn't mean that we stop being mindful. It doesn't mean that we let go of mindfulness just because there's an agenda there. It means we turn that mindfulness to include the agenda. The agenda and the mindfulness begin to get decoupled so that we can bring mindfulness without that agenda. Initially, it seems hard to do. How do we decouple them? We decouple by turning and noticing the agenda itself, noticing the suffering of the agenda, using suffering as our guide. This is where we need to turn our attention, to bring our mindfulness.

As we continue in our practice, maybe some of these more obvious agendas begin to fall away, but we get really interested in our experience. We really want to understand what's happening. This can be a very helpful agenda at times. If we're in the midst of an aversion attack, wanting to understand it is very useful. And yet this wanting to understand, I've seen in my own practice, becomes a kind of habit and pattern in itself. The wanting to know becomes the important piece. It's like, "I'm not okay unless I understand this, unless I know this." So this wanting to know is a subtler form of wanting—a wanting to understand.

At least in my own experience, what I've seen is that at some point, that very wanting becomes clearly suffering. And that's when I need to turn and look at that habit. I don't necessarily worry about it too much if I see wanting to understand while I'm engaged in observing an aversion attack. But when the mind is more balanced, when there's a flow of experience, and the mind leaps in wanting to understand—again, it's like that tarrying. It steps into the experience, fixes on it, says, "What is this?" We sink into that experience. So again, beginning to notice this agenda. That's all that the practice asks of us: turn towards what is creating the suffering itself. That wanting to understand, at some point, is the suffering and needs to be seen. What is the clinging around that? What is the suffering there?

I've also seen in my practice a kind of holding on to mindfulness, doing the mindfulness, pushing the mindfulness. "I need to be mindful. I need to be mindful. I need to be mindful." In seeing that, I began to see there's an over-efforting, a pushing in to try to be mindful. That over-efforting can bring a kind of struggle to it. Again, when we notice the suffering of that, that's when to turn to explore it.

One of my favorite ways to explore this over-efforting is to ask myself a question. Noticing that over-efforting, turning to notice, "Okay, over-efforting is happening," and then asking myself: "How little effort do I need to make in order to be mindful here?" That one question has been hugely supportive for me. I actually find I can let go of quite a lot of the doing of mindfulness. To my surprise, I don't have to do the mindfulness in

order to be mindful. Mindfulness gets its own momentum, and we're getting in its way, essentially, at some point, by that trying to be mindful. So again, this is an agenda behind the mindfulness that we can see.

And we can see the suffering of it when we begin to experience the suffering of it. That's when we look at it.

Sometimes we can be in a state of beautiful, expansive clarity—calm, quiet, no problem. It really seems like a very pure experience, and it doesn't seem like there's any suffering in there at all, no clinging at all. Those are times that are great to just check into and get familiar with that experience. It's also helpful at times like that to explicitly check your relationship with that experience. What is your relationship to this state of blissful peace, calm, quiet, purity?

On one retreat, I noticed just this kind of state, and it did not feel like there was any clinging in the state at all. It felt so pure. And then I checked: what's my attitude? There was a subtle, just a very subtle leaning in, trying to make it continue—a little doing to hold on to that state. When I noticed that, the mind was clear enough that all I had to do was just notice that subtle clinging to the state, and it let go. The next thing that arose was clear suffering, wanting it to continue. And again, that was seen and that was let go. The next thing was fear that it wouldn't continue. And the next thing that arose was joy that the mind had uncovered all of this. I was blown away. I had no idea there was defilement in that state. I had no idea.

So this practice of checking the attitude, checking our relationship with experience, is a key practice. In fact, all of these examples that I'm giving are looking at essentially the clinging that is there in the relationship with the practice, in the relationship with the mindfulness. This checking into what is my relationship to the experience is very helpful for uncovering this kind of clinging even to wholesome states.

The last part of the analogy is the letting go altogether. I just want to say something about that, because the analogy has the raft set adrift, and the raft is the Eightfold Path. So I want to explore that and bring in some teachings from other places.

One piece here is that the letting go of the wholesome states once one has fully crossed over greed, aversion, and delusion—the understanding isn't that they have somehow transcended those wholesome states and that they don't apply. In one sutta, the Buddha says about the Eightfold Path that right view comes first. And how does right view come first? In one of right view, right intention comes into being. In one of right intention, right speech comes into being. In one of right speech, right action comes into being. In one of right action, right livelihood comes into being. In one of right liveli-

hood, right effort. In one of right effort, right mindfulness. In one of right mindfulness, right concentration. In one of right concentration, right knowledge comes into being. In one of right knowledge, right deliverance comes into being. Thus, the path of the disciple in higher training possesses eight factors—the standard Eightfold Path. The arhat possesses ten factors: the Eightfold Path plus right knowledge and right deliverance.

So in this crossing over the flood, my understanding here is that someone who has fully transcended greed, aversion, and delusion is living the Eightfold Path. They don't have to try to do it. They don't have to hold on to it. It's just simply an expression of their being. The Buddha says the arhat, the fully awakened one, possesses the ten factors—the Eightfold Path plus right knowledge and right deliverance.

So in a way, we can think of our following the Eightfold Path, engaging in the Eightfold Path moment by moment, as a way of modeling what it's like to be liberated. The path and the goal, the freedom from suffering, the way one behaves in the world—my understanding of this is that the way one behaves in the world is through living the Eightfold Path. So by following this path, we too can live the Eightfold Path. Maybe not in that pure way where it doesn't take any effort. But I like this notion that what we're doing to engage in the practice is very much how our life will be with complete freedom.

So let's sit for a couple of minutes.

Thank you for your attention.

This talk was given by Gil Fronsdal at the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, California.

CHAPTER 55

Hindrances Can Wake Us Up

Andrea Fella · 1h03

In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a transformative perspective on the five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇa): sense desire (kāmacchanda), ill will (byāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), restlessness and anxiety (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā). Rather than viewing these mental states as obstacles to practice, she draws from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) to show how the Buddha included them as legitimate objects of meditation in the fourth foundation of mindfulness.

Fella uses the metaphor of a naturalist to describe the investigative approach we can take with hindrances—observing them with patience and curiosity rather than trying to eliminate them. She explains how each hindrance operates through delusion: sense desire convinces us that obtaining pleasant objects will bring lasting happiness, while ill will persuades us that removing unpleasant experiences is the path to peace. Through vivid personal examples, including her experience with sense restraint practice and working with intense anger, she demonstrates practical approaches for each hindrance.

The talk emphasizes a middle way of neither repressing nor indulging these states, but meeting them with wise mindfulness. Fella shares how even states like sleepiness and spacing out can become objects of clear awareness, challenging the belief that meditation requires a particular mental state. She offers specific techniques for working with overwhelming emotions, including the practice of respectfully acknowledging difficult states and setting them aside when mindfulness isn't strong enough to meet them directly. The teaching concludes with an invitation to develop courage and curiosity in meeting our challenging mind states, recognizing that insight into suffering requires direct contact with it.

This morning in the instruction period I described a little bit about working with mind states in general. This evening I'd like to explore some particular mind states that tend to catch us up.

The Buddha was very kind to us in all of these lists that he made. One of the lists that he offered to us was a particular set of mind states, mental energies that tend to hinder our ability to be in the present moment, hinder our concentration. This list is called the hindrances. The five hindrances that the Buddha identified as being states that tend to get in our way, tend to make it difficult for us to meditate, to be mindful, to settle into concentration, are sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt.

The very name "hindrances"—I think because of the understanding that these states tend to get in the way of our being in the present moment, we may tend to think that if they are present, we cannot be present in the present moment. That they inherently hinder our ability to connect with experience in the present moment. What they do mostly is tend to take us away. There's a lot of habitual energy around these hindrances that tends to catch us, to have us get caught in their beliefs and their delusions, and tends to obscure our ability to be present—but does not inherently obscure our ability to be mindful of them.

In fact, in the Satipatthana Sutta, the instructions that we have of record that offer what the Buddha had to say about mindfulness and practicing mindfulness meditation, he included this list as good objects for meditation. In the fourth foundation of mindfulness, he included a whole section on how to practice with the hindrances.

One of the keys around the hindrances is recognizing that they are hindrances, they get in our way, only when we are not mindful of them. When we can bring mindfulness to them, they actually become the path. They become the soil, the compost, in which our mindfulness can strengthen.

These states, the hindrances, tend to be experienced as unpleasant, as dukkha, as suffering. In the First Noble Truth, the Buddha said, what do we need to do with suffering? Suffering happens. And we need to understand it. That was his instruction to us around suffering: understand suffering.

With these hindrances, if we apply that instruction, we need to understand these hindrances. Not intellectually. This understanding in the First Noble Truth that the Buddha was talking about is not an intellectual understanding, but an experiential understanding, a knowing, a meeting, a being with. An understanding that arises through connection with the experience, not through thinking about it.

And so we become explorers, we become naturalists, we investigate, we get to know our states of mind—and in particular these hindrances when they arise.

I like the analogy of a naturalist in terms of investigation in our practice. The way a naturalist works: a naturalist will go out into nature and just observe. Take their time observing what happens over time. They walk through the woods, identify perhaps different plants or different animals to observe, and over time they continue to go back over and over again to look at them. The understanding arises with a naturalist as the observation gains some momentum, as the naturalist over time begins to see: oh, this is what happens to this plant as it grows. This is what this animal does at this time of year, and this is what they do at this time of year. These are the calls they make when they're

mating. These are the calls they make when they've found food. These are the calls they make when they're alarmed. Over time, just through being in the environment, they learn. The knowledge grows.

Very similarly, as we—with patience, with kindness, with persistence, a gentle patience and persistence—meet these states, we get to know: how do they come about? What are the conditions that lead to them? What are they like when they're here? What are the conditions that support their falling away?

As naturalists we observe, not with the agenda to get rid of the hindrances, but with the interest to understand.

One of the principles, one of the interesting things about the way the practice works, is that things shift and change as we observe them. They shift and change not because we want them to, not because we are observing them in a particular way in order to make something happen to them, but they shift and change because as we hang out with our experiences, much as with the naturalist, wisdom and understanding begin to grow.

As we notice what happens as sense desire arises over and over and over again, wisdom begins to grow. We begin to understand something about the nature of sense desire. Or we begin to understand something about the nature of fear, anxiety, restlessness, doubt. As we begin to understand that nature, wisdom strengthens, and it is wisdom that creates the transformation. Wisdom transforms our mind. Understanding transforms our minds.

In exploring these hindrances with you, I'd like to talk about each one.

I'd like to encourage this attitude of interest, investigation, and curiosity. These hindrances will arise—probably every single one of them in every single one of you. They're going to be with us, and they're going to be with us for a while. So it might be useful, rather than having an adversarial relationship with them, to get curious about them.

For a while in my practice, I definitely had the sense that the hindrances were obstructions. They were in the way, things to be gotten rid of in order to get down to the real practice. I believed the real practice didn't begin while I was experiencing anger or sense desire or sleepiness—that it was not possible for practice to begin until those went away.

Through many three-month courses and many times of basically having the hindrances so in my face—one retreat was what I call my self-hatred retreat—it was like surrender. Okay, I guess self-hatred is what I have to pay attention to. And as I surrendered to it, getting interested in it, that's when I began to see that deep, transforming understanding can arise right in the midst of observing these hindrances. Watching self-hatred, deep understanding about its ephemeral, empty nature as a mind state became possible.

So the hindrances are not in the way of practice. They are our practice. They don't tend to feel good, and so we don't like them. But that's just ill will—another hindrance.

These hindrances do at times tend to come together in what we sometimes call a multiple hindrance attack. You have a feeling of sleepiness, and then you hate that feeling of sleepiness, and then doubt arises: "Oh, I'm sleepy." There you've got three of them all at once. They can tend to come together, but they are workable. They are our path. Transformation can happen right in the midst of them. I'd really like to encourage a sense of curiosity, of interest to understand them. With that perspective, wisdom will grow.

So, sense desire. This one's pretty basic. Certain things are pleasant; we tend to like them, to want them, to want more of them. This movement of being in the presence of pleasure and not really clearly understanding whatever it is—this pleasant phenomenon—as being an ephemeral, impermanent experience. Our delusion, our mind thinks, "That is what's going to make me happy."

It's actually quite amazing when we start to really see the way sense desire works. While it's operating and while we believe it, we really do think that extra cookie is going to make us happy. Watch it for yourself. In that moment, in the throes of being caught and enthralled by sense desire, we have absolute conviction that that cookie is going to do it for us. We are not aware of just how impermanent and unreliable that bit of pleasure is.

Caught in the state of sense desire, sense desire believes that having that pleasant thing is what's going to make me happy. And sense desire also believes that if I don't get that thing, I will be unhappy. So sense desire tends to keep us from being present because we are caught in this story, caught in this fantasy.

Sometimes it's an idea in our mind. We construct something. It may be something actually there in the dining room, or it may be an idea in our minds—something from the world enters into our mind and we start planning the perfect job. "That's what I'm going to do when I leave." It becomes this kind of enduring fantasy. We can get hooked into sense desires of our own construction as well.

In that time, we are caught in the fantasy, caught in the belief that having that thing is what will make us happy. We are not noticing that in the very moment of having that sense desire and being pulled out of the present moment, there's an inherent sense of offness, of dissatisfaction happening. Essentially, with sense desire, we are willing to give up happiness here and now—the sense of ease and peace here and now—for the possibility of a fleeting moment of happiness, maybe, in the future.

Sense desire has this powerful delusive force to it, making us believe that getting that thing will make us happy. What sense desire will not tell us is that if the sense desire goes away, there won't be a problem.

So this is the exploration with mindfulness. When sense desire arises and you notice it, you become aware of it, see if you can take your attention out of the thing you are reaching for, whatever it is that you want, and turn towards the experience of sense desire itself.

That experience of sense desire itself doesn't feel very good. It feels off, it feels like something's wrong. We get the visceral sense of why we follow through on it—in effect, because it doesn't feel good. And when we get that thing that we want, that feeling of dissatisfaction goes away for a moment. That's one of the hooks that sense desire has for us.

When we get what we want, we get a double hit of pleasure. We get the pleasure of the thing that we want, and we get the pleasure of the sense desire going away. I'd like to propose to you that the bigger part of the pleasure, the biggest hook actually for us, is the sense desire going away—that relief that we get when sense desire disappears. It's huge.

When we begin to turn towards the experience of sense desire, look at it, feel it, get to know it, and we watch it for long enough that we actually begin to see it, maybe we even begin to see it dissipate or even see it vanish, then we will know for ourselves that sense desire has been like pulling the wool over our eyes, making us believe that the only way we can be happy is to get what we want.

In one three-month course, I was doing the practice of sense restraint—not looking at people, keeping my gaze down. And I found that I really wanted to look at people. For many weeks I was walking around with blinders on. "I'm not going to look. I am not going to look. They told me not to look. I'm not going to look." So it was kind of like I was doing it because I was told to. At that time there was more of an encouragement towards sense restraint, and so I was forcing myself to do it. As I felt all that sense desire arise, it was like, "No, no, no, I'm not going to follow. Nope, nope." There was a lot of repression of the feeling of wanting.

After several weeks of this, finally I got it. "Ah, this is sense desire. This is desire. Maybe I should look at it. Maybe I should watch it as opposed to just trying to force myself to stay unmoving." And so I began to do that. I began to watch the desire. I didn't follow through on it—I kept my gaze down—but rather than having it be a forceful thing, I got interested in the desire.

It was actually fascinating to begin to see how it appeared, when it appeared. I would be walking, minding my own business, nobody around. Sense desire was very far away. The desire to look at people—when people weren't around, the desire to look at people didn't exist. That was pretty clear. And then as I was walking, somebody would pop into my peripheral vision, and boom, sense desire would arise in that instant. I was seeing it coming into being.

As I felt it, I felt like a pull, like a magnetic pull, to look at that person. It took some energy not to look up, but while I was feeling it, I was interested in the experience of that pull. Then it got even stronger. It strengthened as the person would walk a little bit up in front of me, and all it would have taken was a little flick of the eyes to look up and look at them. Oh, it got so strong. And there, just noticing, feeling the feeling.

I was doing walking meditation out here. A person would cross in front of me—oh, very strong when they were right there. And then they'd go up the steps and into the door. The desire disappeared. It vanished in an instant. I felt like I'd been released from a vice grip.

The recognition of just how powerful that experience of wanting had been—around something as simple as looking at somebody. How painful it had been to be caught in that vice grip around the simplicity of wanting to look at somebody. The mind reels at how much dukkha there is for the many kinds of wanting we have that are more potent for us than looking at somebody.

Seeing this, being curious about watching this moment—the moment of seeing it arise, seeing it strengthen, feeling it, then seeing it disappear—that was a powerful moment. Not only for the understanding of how much suffering it was, but for the understanding of the happiness that came from the release of the wanting.

In that moment, the delusion of wanting—the story it was telling me that I would be happy if I looked—was seen for the complete hoax it was.

So, watching sense desire, getting familiar with it. As we explore turning towards sense desire, there's a kind of middle way that we practice around both sense desire and ill will: we neither repress it nor indulge it. It can be quite challenging to walk that middle line. When we open to sense desire without repressing it, sometimes it can slip into, "Oh, I'm just going to feel this desire," and we end up indulging it. We might find ourselves in a fantasy, just indulging that fantasy. So it takes some honest discernment to recognize when we are slipping into indulgence rather than really paying attention to the desire itself.

In general, I would say that if you're noticing desire and there's a lot of pleasant experience, you may be indulging it—not really connecting to the feeling of the desire itself. The desire itself has a little bit of an off feeling to it. We have to learn to be honest with ourselves about whether we are indulging. If we find that a particular kind of sense desire has so much power over us, there may be some strategies that help. Let yourself not be in the presence of that thing you desire, if possible. Just keep yourself away from it. Or you may be able to turn your attention elsewhere, put your attention on something else—especially if it's a sense desire of your own construction in your own mind, a fantasy kind of sense desire. Let yourself set it aside and put your attention on something neutral in your experience. Perhaps the breath, perhaps sound. Just keep saying no to that pattern if you find that trying to pay attention to it just loops you into it over and over again.

Then there is ill will. Ill will is the flip side of sense desire, so much of what I've said about sense desire applies here as well. Ill will tends to arise when we are in the presence of something unpleasant. We don't like it; we want to get rid of it, fix it, change it, control it. There are many different flavors of mental states that can come into this category of ill will, including anger, frustration, hatred, irritation, annoyance, rage, and dislike. It's a range of experience, from extremely strong to quite subtle.

The delusion around ill will is that the mind of ill will believes getting rid of that thing is what will make us happy—or getting ourselves away from the thing is what will make us happy. Fear can also come into this category. Fear may arise as the sense of, "I don't like that thing; I need to get away from it."

Again, one of the main ways to work with ill will is to see if you can take your attention out of the thing you are averse to and place the attention on the aversion itself, on the ill will itself. It's very helpful, for both sense desire and ill will, to recognize how these mind states impact the body.

There are often many thoughts accompanying both sense desire and ill will. With sense desire, the thoughts may run along the lines of, "How can I get that thing? I'm going to be so happy. It's going to be so great if I get that thing." With ill will, it may be, "If I get rid of this thing... How can I fix this? How can I change this? How can I control it? I can't be happy unless I figure this out." These kinds of thoughts tend to run when we are caught in the throes of sense desire or ill will. And the thoughts themselves are like fuel for those states of mind. If those thoughts are running and we're not aware of them as simply thoughts, it's as if we've got our foot on the gas pedal, fueling the belief in those thoughts and in that state of mind.

As we begin to explore sense desire and ill will, one of the most helpful things is this: as you turn towards the sense desire or ill will itself, see if you can let go of the thoughts, the story associated with it. Take your attention away from the thing that serves as the trigger and see if you can come into the experience of the ill will or sense desire itself.

It can be particularly helpful to look at this in the body. Ill will in the body often manifests as contracted feelings in the throat, tension around the heart, heat, or pressure in the case of anger. There are many bodily sensations that accompany ill will, anger, rage, and irritation. Get familiar with those. When we attend to the physical sensations associated with the emotion, with the ill will, we are in the present moment. We are mindful in the present moment. There can be some level of balance, of wise mindfulness with the experience—as opposed to being caught by the beliefs and stories of ill will.

So, turning to the body. As we explore that, as we put our attention in the body and take our attention out of the fuel of the thoughts, we begin to see things shift and change. We may experience some relief or release around these states of mind.

at least for me, it feels like bringing attention to aversive states of mind produces an almost immediate relief as I put my attention on the aversion. The aversive states tend to be really unpleasant, and when we recognize them, something shifts.

With sense desire, our minds can be caught in the fantasy or the thought, "Oh, that's going to be so great." Our mind is deluding us into thinking that we're happy or feeling good when this sense desire is going on. We're so confused that we don't even notice the unpleasantness of the sense desire itself. But with aversion, with ill will, it's pretty obvious. It doesn't feel good, usually. It doesn't feel good.

And so putting our attention on the ill will itself, sometimes we can recognize, "Oh, that's what's happening right now. Anger is happening right now." And there can be just a little bit of space around the experience. We don't feel quite so caught up or revved up in the ill will. Right in the very turning towards it with mindfulness, there can be a little bit of release, a little bit of relief. A little bit of that wisdom can begin to operate.

With ill will, with aversion, with anger—these states can often get very strong. If they're not seen, they can very quickly spiral out of control. Dislike can quickly turn to irritation, which can quickly turn to anger, which can quickly turn to hatred or rage. It can mushroom really quickly. And sometimes it gets so strong so quickly that there can be overwhelm. It becomes very difficult to bring mindfulness to it. Or if we try to bring mindfulness to it, we find ourselves hooked. We turn towards it, thinking, "Okay, I'm going to try to be present for this anger," and then boom, we're right back in the story. It becomes nearly impossible to let go of the story.

I found this happening for myself around anger at one stretch of time—a particular person that I was angry with. Whenever they came up in my mind, I would get so angry. I tried being mindful of it, but I discovered pretty quickly that when I tried being mindful, almost immediately I was back in the story. The intention to be mindful, the mindfulness itself, was not quite strong enough to meet the power of that rage.

As I began to see that turning my attention to it with mindfulness wasn't so helpful, I began choosing to put my attention elsewhere. For some reason this often happened while I was walking. The mind would be drifting, and it would land on a thought of this person and spin into rage. So what I would do when I was walking was simply put my attention on something neutral, which happened to be my feet on the ground. Just noticing, "Okay, yep, there's that anger. Yep, okay, I see you."

This shift to turn away from a hindrance cannot be done with aversion itself. It can't be done with, "Oh, there's that anger. I hate that anger. I can't be with it. I need to push it away." It has to be a more respectful kind of recognition and acknowledgment. The way I did this with my anger was almost like I bowed to it. "I see you. I see you, and I see that you're asking for attention. And I can't do it right now. So I will come back to you when my mindfulness is stronger."

That kind of respect and acknowledgment—it's like saying, "Ah, not now. I see you, not now." That whole conversation in my mind got collapsed down to just the phrase: "Not now. Not now."

I worked with that anger in that way for a long time—months. Months I worked with the anger in that way. And actually, that simple tool, "not now," in that particular case was really powerful. What happened was this: I was mostly working with this particular anger in daily life, and I would notice it. At first it was happening daily—"Oh, not now. Okay, not now"—multiple times a day, even. And over time I began recognizing another one of the tools that the Buddha points to around the hindrances.

Noticing when it's not there. Notice the absence of the hindrances.

And so I began noticing that the bouts of anger were getting further apart. Perhaps every few days I would have this experience and think, "Oh, not now." And then every few weeks. At some point, it occurred to me that I had not experienced that anger for a very long time. And in that moment of remembering—"Oh, gosh, that anger's not there"—of course the person popped into my mind. But the anger still did not pop into my mind. It was kind of like, "Whoa, where did it go?" It was startling in a way.

Since that moment, that anger at that person has never returned. It disappeared when I wasn't looking. It disappeared because I was willing to meet it, bow to it, and set it aside without aversion. Slowly over time the pattern got deconditioned. And so that tool also can be very powerful—a simple recognition, acknowledgement, and then turning to the breath or feet on the ground or hearing.

When we cannot meet our difficult mind states directly, wisdom can also grow in the simple recognizing and setting aside.

Then there's sloth and torpor—sleepiness, low energy, thick mind, dull mind. Often the mind is agitated around this particular hindrance because there are beliefs operating, particularly in meditation. If sleepiness arises in meditation, if low energy or thick mind arises, we often have the belief, "I can't meditate while this is happening. It's not possible to meditate while sleepiness is happening. I have to increase the energy. I have to become not sleepy in order to meditate." That's a belief that we have.

What I'd like to suggest is that if you have enough energy to have the thought, "I'm too sleepy to meditate," then you might have enough energy to be aware of the sleepiness itself, of the low energy itself. Perhaps play with it.

One of the confusions in the mind, I think, or one of the beliefs around meditation, is that we're supposed to be able to see things clearly. And when the mind is sleepy, things are very hazy—it's hard to touch what the experience is. From the standpoint of being able to clearly recognize and clearly connect with this sensation and that sound, that may not be available when you're sleepy.

I sometimes use the analogy of mindfulness being like a mirror. It reflects. It reflects whatever's there—beautiful things, unpleasant things, ugly things. The reflecting power of the mirror is not changed by what it reflects.

Then think about that mirror in the bathroom after a shower, when the mirror is coated with steam. You might be able to see a kind of hazy outline of yourself, maybe. We might think, "Perhaps I need to clear the mirror. The mirror is not doing its job. I need to wipe it off so that I can see myself, so the mirror can do its job." But the mirror is actually doing its job perfectly. It is reflecting every drop of water on the mirror. It's just not doing the job we want it to do.

And very much when the mind is sleepy, that's what's going on. There's a state of mind—foggy, dull, low energy, droopy, drifty, dreamy. The mind is not perhaps able to choose, "Oh, I want to look at that thing," or "I want to observe this or investigate that." But perhaps, what I've seen in my own experience, is that if I align myself in the moment with what's actually happening in the mind and get interested in what's most obvious—which is that state itself—there's often enough energy to know something about it.

And again, it's not a precise thing. The state of sleepiness, of low energy, is not something we can say, "This is where it is, this is the experience of it." It's a broad state of mind.

And we can get familiar with that. I've had a lot of practice with this. It was a couple of years that pretty much every time I went to retreat, the mind was very dull, very sleepy, very low energy. And again, it was like, surrender. This is what's happening. I learned so much from that time—so much about over-efforting.

Sometimes I think, especially as the retreat goes on, that a dull mind, a sleepy mind, an exhausted mind sometimes results because we've been trying too hard. And so sometimes it's a pointer to a way to pay attention with a little less energy. Can you meet the state of low energy?

Actually, I found that using the phrase "low energy" instead of "dullness" was helpful. I was doing walking meditation out here on one retreat during this two-year period, and I was noting the dullness of mind. I was like, "dull, dull, dull." And at some point I

recognized that even though I was noticing it as dullness, there was a little bit of a spin to it. It was a little bit judgmental. Dullness is bad. I could be kind of aware of it, but there was just this belief that dullness was not a good state.

And then when I shifted it—when I recognized, well, what's actually happening here is the energy is low—okay, low energy is happening. That had a more neutral feeling to it. And then as I explored low energy, I noticed that in the dull state, my mind had been going, "God, I cannot pay attention to hearing. I can't notice the sensations." But as I began to recognize, "Oh, this is actually low energy," and I just turned to the feeling of low energy through the body and the mind, I recognized, "Wow, hearing is already happening. I don't have to do that. I'm already experiencing body sensations. I don't have to do that either."

And so the practice helped me to see that there had been a little bit of over-efforting, trying to see experience that was actually already available.

We often believe that our minds need to be in a certain state in order to meditate. And this state of mind around low energy, thick mind, dull mind, sleepy mind—these tend to be states that we believe we cannot meditate or we cannot be aware in. Spacing out, for instance. We might think spacing out is inherently non-mindful. Isn't that the very definition of spacing out? Wouldn't that mean that you're not mindful? That's what I thought—until I began getting curious and let go of the idea that spacing out means I'm not mindful.

I was having breakfast one morning and noticing that the mind was spacing out, and at that period it was like, "Okay, spacing out. Okay, come back to breakfast." To me that's what being mindful meant: being mindful of eating, the physical sensations, and so forth. And so I was turning my attention back to the physical sensations of eating, and the mind would space out again. Okay, come back. It was this come-back, come-back approach.

But at some point during that meal, I began to see that while I was paying attention to breakfast, there was this pull, a feeling of the mind wanting to let go of paying attention so hard. And as I noticed that, I was curious: "Wow, I can see that. Why don't I just see where the mind wants to go?" Instead of trying to hold my attention on the physical sensations of eating, I watched the mind go into this very pleasant, vibrating, energetic space. I could be completely mindful of it. I was right there for it. It was very restful. And in about thirty seconds, it cleared. Then I was just very present with my food, my body.

And in that coming back after it cleared, I understood: the mind had been tired, exhausted. It wanted a rest. And it was taking its rest whether I wanted it to or not, but I could be there for it while it took its rest. It got its rest, and then it was available again. I was available to be with it while it was spacing out.

And so if there's ever a state of mind where you think it's not possible to be mindful while X is happening, don't believe that thought. Play with it. Explore. How might it be possible?

Maybe you could turn the question around: How might it be possible to be mindful while this is happening? Over and over again I've seen that it is possible—far more than we can fathom.

Another piece about sleepiness that I want to drop in is that so often we resist it. Sleepiness, dullness, low energy—and often the very resisting of it creates an unpleasant experience. Have you noticed that? When you're meditating and you're sleepy, the experience becomes so unpleasant if you're resisting it. The resistance itself is what creates the unpleasantness.

What I've discovered is that when that resistance goes, when I'm willing to just observe the sleepiness and watch without worrying whether I'm going to drop, but simply notice the sensations—oh, the feeling of the body getting heavy, the feeling of relaxation—it's really pleasant. It feels really good.

I spent one sitting at Yucca Valley in California where I had so much sleepiness, but I let that sleepiness happen and remained completely mindful of it. Then it would happen that I would drop, but I was sitting, so dropping woke me up, and I just sat up and did it all over again. In the course of that forty minutes, I never got past the sleepiness, but I was mindful for almost the entire thing, with the exception of very brief times when I dropped. So if you can let go of the resistance to sleepiness, there's a carrot waiting. It feels really good. See if you can be present for it.

Then there's restlessness and anxiety. Restlessness has both physical and mental aspects to it. Restlessness in the body is often very physically unpleasant—it feels sometimes like jumping beans under the skin, like you just cannot sit still. Restlessness in the mind is often like a whirling mind, a lot of thoughts.

What I found most helpful with restlessness, especially the physical side—well, both actually—is to let the attention get broad. With physical restlessness, if you're trying to hold the energy in the body or come in and be very precise about noticing all the various sensations of the restlessness, it's like putting yourself in a pressure cooker. All of that restless energy is trying to be contained in this tiny little space. But if you have the

sense of letting your awareness get as big as the room, letting the restless energy get as big as the room, it creates more space for it. This has been the most helpful instruction for me around physical restlessness.

Around restless mind, when the mind is just spinning and spinning, often there is some kind of emotion connected to it—maybe some kind of worry or anxiety. So again, seeing if you can let go of the thoughts and come into the energetic experience of how that restlessness is manifesting. It may feel like bees buzzing in the head, or whirling energy in the body, or a feeling like—at one point I felt like there was a pinball rolling around in my mind, in my head, just this swirling energy. If you can connect to the energetic experience and let go of the thoughts, the thoughts keep the state of mind stirred up. When we let go of the thoughts and connect with the energy, all of these states have their life.

Sense desire, ill will, restlessness—if we can open to them with mindfulness and not put the foot on the gas pedal with the thoughts, they have a life. They may last for a certain period of time, but if we're not fueling them, they will eventually dissipate.

It's kind of like a car going a hundred miles an hour down the freeway. The emotion—the sense desire, the ill will, the restlessness—is like the car hurtling down the road, and the thoughts associated with it are like our foot on the gas pedal. If we take our foot off the gas pedal and put the car into neutral—which is a good analogy for mindfulness, putting our minds into neutral—if you do that while going a hundred miles an hour down the freeway, the car doesn't stop immediately. It has momentum. But it will stop because you're no longer fueling it. You know it will stop. You can hopefully steer while the car's hurtling down the road as it's slowing down.

That's what we aim to do with our mindfulness. We aim to put our minds into a space that's more neutral, able to let these states flow through, live their life, and begin to dissipate. In the process, we learn something about the conditions that create the state of mind, about the experience of that state of mind. We learn about the dukkha. We learn about the dukkha of sense desire, of ill will, of restlessness. Understanding grows as we have the mind in neutral, allowing the state to begin to dissipate.

With restlessness we also need to learn when not to engage with it directly. Again, if we try to turn towards any of these states with mindfulness and we find that they're strengthening,

or that aversion is growing as we try to turn toward these states with mindfulness—when that happens, we may need to change the channel, put our attention on something else.

With restlessness, it can be helpful to go out, take a walk, be in nature, look at trees. I found looking at trees to be a really helpful way to work with restlessness. So open the eyes. See if you can again let the container get big.

Then there's doubt. Kamala talked so beautifully the other night about faith, and faith is the flip side of doubt—or rather, doubt is the flip side of faith. So much of what she talked about with respect to faith illuminates what supports us to release doubt. There's doubt in the same things that we have faith in: we have doubt in ourselves, in the teachings, in the practice.

I think with doubt, when it arises, one of the key things is that we need to learn to recognize it's happening. Because when we're caught in doubt, our mind is so far from mindfulness. If we can begin to recognize the stories that doubt tells, we have the possibility to turn toward it. Doubt cannot last long. Doubt doesn't last long when we turn to it with mindfulness. It really doesn't have a lot of traction when we can meet it with awareness.

Beginning to recognize the thoughts of doubt—for me, what I discovered most indicative of doubt was thoughts about the practice. Usually thoughts that it doesn't work, that I can't do it, or that the teachers don't know what they're talking about. If there are thoughts in your mind like that, see if you can recognize: doubt is happening. If you're having thoughts about the practice in that way, just play with it—okay, maybe doubt's here. Maybe this is doubt. Maybe I could notice this is doubt.

Again, there's often an underlying feeling. When I would turn toward doubt, when I recognized "oh, this is doubt," I would ask myself: What's here? What else is here? What does doubt feel like? It had different flavors and was often connected to some other kind of emotion—vulnerability, a feeling of inadequacy, a feeling of failure, a fear of the unknown. At one point I remember asking, what does doubt feel like? It felt like grief. And as I opened to that feeling, it was like, "Oh, I can be with this."

Learning to recognize the stories of doubt is probably the most powerful tool we have, because doubt is almost always manifesting as thoughts in our mind.

The piece I most want to leave you with is hopefully some sense of interest in the exploration of these states that can sometimes be so difficult. There's a lot of power that comes from being willing to have the courage to meet our challenging states of mind. It took a lot of courage for me to meet that self-hatred over and over again. And there were times when I had to set it aside. But the power of mindfulness—of wise mindful-

ness—to begin to transform these difficult energies is profound. Not that we do this transformation, but the understanding, the learning, the wisdom that develops as we meet these difficult states has the power to deeply transform us.

Sometimes Joseph says we want insight into suffering without experiencing suffering. These states are often experienced as suffering, and we have to meet suffering. Insight into suffering happens through connection, through contact with it.

So open to them. Be curious about them. Get to know them, understand them.

CHAPTER 56

Recognizing Delusion

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella examines moha (delusion) as the most fundamental of the three unwholesome roots, noting that both greed and aversion arise in dependence upon it. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's instruction to know when delusion is present or absent, she explores why delusion is paradoxically the most difficult mental state to recognize.*
>
> *Fella identifies two broad categories of delusion: the disconnected, foggy states where we're lost in thought worlds and not present to experience, and the more subtle form where we're aware but perceiving through filters, views, and biases. She offers vivid personal examples of how aversion can color perception, how cultural conditioning creates unexamined beliefs, and how selective attention causes us to miss obvious aspects of reality—illustrated by the famous 'invisible gorilla' study.*
>
> *The talk culminates in an exploration of the three fundamental perceptual distortions shared by all human beings: taking what is impermanent (anicca) to be permanent, what is unreliable (dukkha) to be a source of lasting happiness, and what is not-self (anattā) to be self. Fella emphasizes that while we cannot simply will non-delusion into being, we can cultivate curiosity about our delusion and learn to acknowledge when believing is happening —creating space around even deeply held misperceptions.*

In his teaching on freedom, the Buddha over and over emphasized that freedom was not freedom to do things, but freedom from ways that we get caught. And over and over again he said that freedom, Nibbana, is freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, and freedom from delusion.

Our practice is not—I mean, it would be nice if we could just simply hear that and go, "Oh, greed, aversion, and delusion, that's not helpful. Let's stop." That doesn't work that way, as I think you all are very aware. Our work is to understand. The Buddha said we need to understand our suffering, we need to understand the things that cause suffering, and let go of the causes of suffering. We move in this direction by studying how our minds get caught in greed, how our minds get caught in aversion, how our minds get caught in delusion.

We've been talking about working with these over the last couple of weeks. This morning Greg brought out the teaching on mindfulness of mind, which emphasizes these three: recognizing the presence and absence of greed, aversion, and delusion as a very big part of this aspect of studying mindfulness of mind. We get familiar with what the presence of greed is like, what the absence of greed is like, what the presence of aversion is like, what the absence of aversion is like, and what the presence and absence of delusion are like.

It's relatively easy to begin to recognize greed and aversion. It has been commented in the hall that they're at least recognizable, if not easy to be with. We can begin to recognize when we're caught by those energies and begin to learn some tools to allow us to open to them, tools that allow us to work with them. But delusion, by its very nature, is much harder to even recognize.

So how do we do this? How do we begin to know the presence of delusion? As the Satipatthana Sutta recommends, one knows delusion when it is present, one knows delusion when it is absent, when delusion is not present. How do we recognize delusion being present? That's the subject for the talk.

Delusion is more fundamental, in a way, than greed or aversion, in that greed and aversion arise in dependence on delusion. If delusion didn't exist, if we didn't have delusion in our minds, greed and aversion would not be arising. And so greed and aversion always exist simultaneously with delusion—some fundamental misunderstanding in the mind that leads it to want, leads it to want to get rid of.

There are different forms of delusion that I'd like to explore with you tonight. My aim with this talk is mostly to provide some information, some examples, and some stories that I hope will help you begin to be able to recognize delusion in your experience. To begin to follow that instruction: delusion is present, delusion is affecting the mind right now. That simple instruction of the Satipatthana is not so simple to implement, not so simple to recognize. But my hope is that with this talk there will be some understanding that allows you to begin to recognize this—that delusion is affecting the mind.

So, different forms of delusion. Two basic broad categories. One is simply the not-connecting form, the form of delusion that is checked out, lacking awareness. This is maybe the more obvious form of delusion. The second more general form of delusion is where we're aware, we're present, it's not that we're checked out, but we are experiencing things through some kind of filter, some kind of perspective, agenda, or view that alters how we take in information.

To begin with an example of this: greed and aversion, while they already have delusion at their root, can also create a form of delusion on top of themselves. For instance, with aversion, if we are caught in the field of aversion—some of you may have recognized this or noticed this, I certainly did at one point—I knew that I was in this aversive state, and everywhere my eyes landed, I saw things to hate. I was doing walking meditation downstairs in the walking room, and I was noticing that I was in this aversive state. As I turned around and looked at the other end of the room, my eyes landed on some shoes that somebody had left at the end of the walkway. And my mind just exploded with aversion. Who left those shoes there? This is a form of the aversion, but with everything being colored by that lens. It's like we only take in things from that perspective. That's the delusion.

At one point, in an early exploration of choiceless awareness, my teacher asked me just to notice whatever my attention landed on. I did that for a few minutes, and as I finished, I stopped and said, "Well, you said to do choiceless awareness, but this couldn't possibly have been choiceless, because everything my attention landed on was unpleasant." Again, that speaks to a filter, a kind of view that the mind is seeing through, pulling out of the environment, pulling out of experience, things that are in line with that view or that filter. This is the second form of delusion. It's not a form of delusion that prevents us from being present, but in our being present, we are not taking in information in an unbiased way.

There are three areas I want to explore tonight. One is this area of uncertainty, the lack of connection to experience—that part of delusion, the more cloudy, unconnected, disconnected state. Then, within the area of filters—of taking in information in a biased way—there are two ways I want to examine this.

First are views or perspectives that we grow up with. These are views and perspectives created because of our culture, our family, the way we interacted with people—basically because of our conditioning. As human beings, we have navigated this world carrying various views, perspectives, and agendas that we have lived with. Those views, perspectives, and agendas influence how we see the world and create a skew, a bias, in how we take in information.

The third category I want to explore is what I will call more human delusion—a kind of fundamental distortion of our experience that we share uniformly with all human beings. It is very deeply ingrained in our structure as human beings, not so particularly conditioned by our families, but simply part of our very makeup. These misperceptions are part of the structure of how we interact with the world because they are not seen as distortions.

This first one—not connecting with experience—we have actually talked about quite a bit: this form of delusion where we're in a fog, or lost in a story, in a thought world, a thought bubble, basically living in some world where we're not really connecting with what's actually happening here and now. These thought bubbles, these thought worlds we inhabit sometimes—when we get lost in thought, it's quite amazing sometimes when we come out of those thoughts to recognize just how much we might have believed the world that was created by them.

At one point, I had broken up with a partner several years before. I had pretty much gotten over any of the anger or hurt—it was all gone at that point. When thoughts about my ex-partner would come up, there wasn't any particular emotional charge anymore. One day I was walking down the street, and I woke up into this thought world. I had been lost in it for about five minutes, and in that thought world, I was back in relationship with that partner. As I came out of that thought bubble, awareness immediately arose. In that moment, I could see that what was being experienced was confusion—because the mind had so thoroughly believed the story that I was back in relationship with that partner. When I came out of it, it was like, "What? No. What? Where am I? What's going on?" It was really like a waking dream.

I think this kind of thing happens to us a lot. But often we have an emotional charge around those thoughts, so what's obvious to us when we come out of some of those thought worlds is emotional reactivity. In this case, it was really clear to me that the mind had been caught in this world and believing it, precisely because there wasn't an emotional charge. There was this recognition that the mind had thoroughly been believing something that was just a construction, something that had not been part of my life for years.

So this is the kind of disconnection from reality—taking birth into our thought worlds. This is a form of delusion. We can start to get familiar with this disconnection from experience. In the moment that we return back into mindfulness, when we remember, there can be—if you're curious about that moment, if you're curious about the re-arising of mindfulness itself rather than thinking, "Oh, I need to do something, I need to come back to my breath, or do metta"—rather, just: here I am, I'm aware in this moment. What is awareness like in this moment? In that moment, as we come back into mindfulness, there can be a lingering memory of what it was like to be lost moments before. We get a flavor of what that disconnected state is like in the moment that we come back.

We can also begin to get curious about those states that are habitually disconnected—as we've been talking about with the hindrances: sleepiness, dullness, fogginess, confusion. With many of these states, we habitually experience a disconnection from experience. But it doesn't have to be inherently non-mindful or unaware in those states. Again, we can begin to explore, to be curious about states that we think would be inherently non-mindful.

It is possible to be mindful when the mind disconnects from what we think we should be paying attention to—we can stay present for the spacing out itself. We can begin to get familiar with these foggy, hazy, confused states of mind. And in the very becoming mindful in those states, we are no longer in that condition of delusion where we are disconnected.

Habitually with spacing out, we're disconnected from experience, not even aware of what's going on. But there's the possibility of becoming aware of the spacing out. In that moment, we are aware of what's happening in the present moment, connected with the experience of spacing out. It's a very different relationship to that experience.

I think I said the other day that if there's any state of mind that you believe or think it's not possible to be mindful while X is happening, don't believe that thought. Rather, perhaps try exploring: how might it be possible to be mindful while X is happening? When I've explored it from that perspective, it can take some time—sometimes it can take some time to find the way to connect, to have the mindfulness kind of infuse that state. But the curiosity about how it might be possible is very supportive. You may not figure it out right away, but keep holding that question.

Now, in the terrain of the second kind of delusion—where we're not disconnected but we are seeing things in a biased way based on our personal conditioning, our cultural conditioning—how this becomes delusion is that we're immersed in a view, immersed in a perspective. Being so thoroughly immersed in a perspective, we are unaware that we're even holding a view or a perspective. It's simply the way things are. And because we don't even have a clue that we are holding a perspective, the way we're taking in information, we assume it's an accurate representation of reality.

These views in place, one of their functions seems to be to pull things out of the environment, have us find things that corroborate those views, and to conveniently ignore things that do not line up with those views, that do not match them. It's very hard when we're immersed in views like that to see evidence or information that would counter them.

I'm going to give you some examples of this kind of delusion. There's so many ways. But I want to give you a flavor of different ways that this kind of delusion works.

One is simply views that we have about ourselves—what we can do, who we are, what we can accomplish. "I'm good at this kind of thing, I'm not good at that kind of thing." We have these views of who we are, and from that perspective it's almost like we're limiting ourselves, boxing ourselves in. We do this to ourselves and we do it to other people.

There's one friend of mine who for a while I was noticing was late a lot. I began creating this view about her that she was always late. And I noticed the times that she was late. Then I began to get curious: am I just highlighting those? Am I just highlighting the ones where she's late? And then I discovered, actually, it was maybe fifty-fifty. She was sometimes late, she sometimes wasn't late. We create views of ourselves, of other people, and then we see our world in ways that support that.

One of my colleagues, Gil Fronsdal, tells a story that when he was young, maybe ten or so, he was in an art class drawing, and his art teacher came up to him, looked over his shoulder, and said, without any particular charge in her voice, "You have no artistic ability." He just took that in—okay, I don't have any artistic ability—and went through life thinking that. Then at some point in college, somebody convinced him to take an art class. He said, "I don't have artistic ability." But somebody convinced him to take an art class anyway. And it turned out he did have artistic ability. We can go through our lives with beliefs and limit ourselves based on those beliefs.

We notice when other people do this to us. Have you noticed sometimes when somebody says, "You're like this," and you bristle? It's like, "Well, yeah, I know I'm sometimes like that, but that's not who I am." We notice when other people do that to us, but we equally do it to ourselves—create these identities and limitations around who we are.

Our culture offers us many views. In American culture, one very predominant view—I certainly grew up with this belief—is that America, this country, is the land of opportunity. If you work hard enough in this country, you can get what you want.

So I grew up with that belief, and for me it happened to be fairly true. But the conditions of my life were really smooth. My family had enough money to send me to live in a place where I had really good schools. I felt safe at school. They had the money to send me to a good college.

In my case, yes, I worked hard and I accomplished many things, and I felt good about what I accomplished. But that perspective—that America is the land of opportunity and if you work hard enough you can get what you want, achieve your dreams, achieve

your goals—is based on a very limited perspective. It doesn't take into account certain segments of the population: people living in poverty, in slums, in areas that are not safe, drug-dealing neighborhoods where there's a lot of gang warfare. It doesn't take into account that for some people, working hard means they have to overcome so much. And the patterns of culture keep one really embedded and stuck in various ways.

This kind of belief, this view that America is the land of opportunity where anyone who works hard enough can achieve their goals—this is kind of the root of what we could call white privilege. And I have to acknowledge that as a child, and even more recently, some part of my mind still has this very deeply held conditioning, these beliefs. My mind still has this little subtle thought if I see somebody who's on the street—that they're just not trying hard enough. These views are, I know, delusion. I know it's delusion. And so now at least I can start to see it, see these little thoughts. This is a view. It's a perspective. It's not based in everybody's reality.

There's a saying in the circles that are exploring this terrain of white privilege and understanding—recognizing that the perspectives we hold as a white culture are not universally applicable. This is really the perspective of one segment of the population. So the saying is: some people are born on third base thinking they hit a triple. I was born on third base. I had a really fortunate childhood where my parents had funds to clothe me and feed me, and they weren't abusive to me. I was born on third base. And I know now that I didn't hit a triple.

This kind of delusion, these filters, these views that have us taking in information in a biased way, can also be amazingly simple. Just a simple agenda in our minds can create a filter that selects certain information out of the environment and not other information. This is actually a useful function of the way our minds work. There's a name for it in psychology—it's called selective attention. It has a purpose. When we have a particular goal, it helps us to find information that relates to that goal and ignore information that doesn't relate to that goal. So it's a useful feature of our minds.

But what happens with that feature is that we do not recognize that this selective attention is operating. And we think that our mind and our sense apparatus is recording reality completely. It's like we have cameras for eyes and microphones or receivers for ears, and we're taking it all in and it's all available. But that's not the way our minds work. Our minds selectively pull certain things out of the field of sight and don't see other things. Selectively pull things out of the field of sound and don't hear other things. It's mind-blowing, but it's true.

There's a very famous study—I think maybe some of you have heard it, but I'm going to tell it again because there may be some of you who have not heard this story about selective attention. There was a research study doing an exploration of this selective attention, examining just how selective it is, how much we might miss. People were given a task when they watched a video. The video was of people throwing a basketball to each other, and they were told to count the number of times the basketball passed between the people in the white shirts. They watched the video, counted the number of times the basketball passed, and at the end they were asked how many times the basketball passed between the people in the white shirts. Largely, people could do that task.

It took some degree of focus. You had to follow and count, so the agenda was very selective—following that basketball.

A few people after the study would say something like, "Was there a gorilla that went through the video?" And indeed, there had been a guy in a gorilla suit who walked through the middle of the people, kind of stood there for a minute dancing around, and then walked out. I've seen this video—it is so obvious. If you're looking for the gorilla, you are not going to miss the gorilla. Or even if you're not looking for the gorilla but you're not doing anything else, if you're just watching the video, you're not going to miss it. Most people did not see the gorilla. That's selective attention.

Now in and of itself, that is not necessarily delusion. It's a form of not taking in information. But to me, the real delusion came in what's almost a footnote at the end of the study: some of the people, when shown the video again to demonstrate that yes, there was a gorilla in the video, said, "That cannot be the same video. I would have seen the gorilla." That is delusion. That is the believing of our experience as the truth of reality.

This kind of thing happens a lot, in so many ways with little small agendas. We walk into the dining room getting ready to get some tea—a little agenda of getting tea—and we may miss something entirely. Again, it's not that we're trying to not have selective attention happen. But I would say we need to begin to have some respect for the fact that we are probably not taking in everything. And if someone proposes an alternative view of reality, rather than saying, "Nope, doesn't match my experience," you might think, "Huh, that's interesting. Somebody else thinks it's different. Maybe I could check that out."

Another very common way of having a view created is when a view gets created based on incomplete information. The classic story about this is the elephant and the blind people, where blind people are given various parts of the elephant to touch. Some

touch one part—the foot or the tail or the ear or the trunk—and then they're asked to compare notes about what an elephant is like. They have very different perspectives. This story is actually a teaching story from the time of the Buddha. At the ending of this story, after the blind people have touched the various parts of the elephant and they're comparing—"Well, an elephant is like this, it's like a trunk." "No, an elephant's like a broom." "No, an elephant's like a hose." "No, an elephant's like a storeroom"—they come to blows, saying, "An elephant is like this. It's not like that. I'm right, you're wrong."

Now, it's natural that we would create a view based on our limited experience, but to hold to that and say, "This is reality"—that's a very powerful form of delusion that works in our minds: not being aware that we're holding to views like that.

Views are useful. They help us to navigate the world. But often our views are below the level of our conscious awareness. We see somebody do something and we react. Sometimes in our meditation here when we're on retreat, we can recognize, "Wow, I see that person do that thing and I'm reacting, and I see it's completely out of line." All they're doing is getting a cup of tea and moving a little slowly. What is the reaction to? Often what's going on there is that there's some kind of belief operating, something that we believe that we're not seeing. And so it can be useful or interesting at times to check in.

If there's some kind of suffering happening, some kind of greed or aversion or confusion arising, and it's not clear to you what's going on, you could try checking in. Just ask the question—not trying to figure it out, but simply asking: What's being believed here? Is there a belief happening underneath this?

Then, rather than trying to figure it out, sometimes just opening the door to "Is there a belief here?" allows us to see something that was previously hidden. So check it out. Is there a belief? What might be being believed? Something about ourselves? Something about the other person? Something about the way the world works?

As we begin to see the way we believe things—one belief I had about myself for quite a long time was that I was a failure, that I was no good. This was a very subterranean belief for a long time in my life. It wasn't until I started meditating, actually until some of the three-month courses here, that I really began to see just how deep this pattern was, that I felt like I was a failure.

And so that thought, "You're a failure," at some point became such a refrain in my mind. I think I mentioned my self-hatred retreat a few weeks ago—just the mind that kept going back over and over again: I'm no good, I'm a failure, I can't do this, I'm a failure, I'm a failure, I'm a failure. Over and over again the mind was thinking that.

Sometimes when we see this, when a belief like this gets revealed—I mean, it was better to have it revealed than to have it be subterranean. It wasn't very pleasant to have it revealed, I'll say that, but at least it was seen. And when we can start to see these beliefs, what we can sometimes recognize is that it's a thought and it's being believed. "I'm a failure" is a thought. And the power we give to that thought is the belief we invest in it. It's simply a thought. It's simply a blip going through the mind. And yet when we are caught in the belief of it—and that being caught in the belief is the form of delusion—when we're caught in the belief of a thought like that, sometimes we might try to tell ourselves, "Oh, I'm not a failure." But what that's trying to do is deny the belief that's happening.

Something I found very helpful is to acknowledge: "Ah, 'I'm a failure.' Believing is happening." So when beliefs get revealed like this, we can acknowledge, "Oh yes, believing is happening right now. Believing 'I'm a failure' is happening right now." Acknowledging belief is a very powerful way to crack the door open around delusion, because it can take the experience from being something we take to be true—"I'm a failure, that's true"—to "'I'm a failure' is a belief that's arising in this moment." And again, there's a big difference between those two.

You're not trying to convince yourself not to believe it in that moment, but you're acknowledging: believing is what's happening right now. I've suggested this to some people, and the space this can create around even very powerful self-negativity can be quite helpful.

The most fundamental kind of delusion, the delusion we're all subject to as human beings, really the most insidious form of delusion—these are views that we share as a species, tend to share as a species I should perhaps say, that cloud accurate perception of experience and have us take in information in a very biased way. These views of taking what is impermanent to be permanent, taking what's unreliable to be a reliable source of lasting happiness, and taking what is not self to be self.

These are views that we are so deeply enmeshed in, they're very difficult for us to free ourselves from. Sayadaw U Tejaniya, in speaking of this form of delusion, says: delusion doesn't mask the object; it masks the true nature of the object. And so with this form of delusion, we can be aware, we can be mindful, and yet the very way that we're mindful, the very way we're taking information in, has a spin to it.

Beginning to see through these three very fundamental distortions of our perception, these distortions of the way we take information in—beginning to see through these is a lot of what our practice helps us to do.

There's so much rapidity of change in our experience that actually some of our perceptual processes work to slow down that change to some extent, to keep us from being overwhelmed by this massive amount of change. So we create concepts about experience.

Just for instance, looking out at this room, I'm seeing a room full of people and zafus and walls and lights. There's all kinds of concepts in this room. And largely, it's hard not to see experience through those concepts because it happens so fast. I've had some experiences at times on retreat when the mind got very, very still and I'd look out at something and all I would see would be form and color. It would be just like a blur of pixels. Thank goodness we don't have to walk through the world that way, figuring out moment by moment, "Oh, that's a person. Oh, that's a wall—don't walk into that." We need our concepts.

And yet, because we are unaware that we are living our experience through concepts, we take our concepts to be reality. It's actually the concepts that we take to be permanent. Concepts mask change.

The rapidity of change itself can also mask change. If you think about movies—they aren't like this anymore—but it used to be films with different frames, and the frame would go past the projector really quickly. Each frame is just a little still snapshot, but the rapidity of the motion creates the sense that there's some kind of continuity happening on the screen. So rapidity of change can create an appearance of solidity.

Another example of this is mentioned in the suttas, or maybe in the commentaries—a fire stick. If you have a stick with a burning fire on the end and you spin it around in a circle—we used to do this with sparklers when I was a kid, spin it around in a circle really fast—you'd see a circle in the air. The rapidity of the movement created the illusion that there was something hanging in the air. Our perceptual processes also mask the rapidity of change in just this way.

Our mindfulness begins to unmask this, to reveal that what we take to be solid and stable is actually very rapidly changing. A way to explore this is with anything that seems solid—I did this at one point on retreat—anything that seemed solid, I would put my attention there. "Wow, that seems like it's solid. What is that solidity?" Often it would actually start to break up as the attention actually met it and landed on it.

You can sometimes see this with pain. With the idea of pain, the concept of pain, it feels like in the knee there's a big block of pain. But if you can get past the aversion to the pain—which is contributing to that idea, "This is pain, this is a problem"—and get past that and just kind of hang out with the actual sensations, you'll see it is so rapidly

changing. There's almost nothing anywhere that you can say, "Well, that is the pain." It's just this little flash of sensation and then that little flash of sensation and then another little flash of sensation, just moving, dancing around.

So investigate: What appears solid? What are you taking to be solid? What are you taking to be permanent? We can begin to go below the level of our concepts and actually meet the direct experience.

Then we see what's unreliable as reliable, as satisfying. This is the story of greed, really. This is the delusion that underlies greed—that this thing will make me happy. This sense pleasure, this pleasant experience, this is what will make me happy. Greed is the actual reaching out, but it's motivated by this belief that something will make me happy. Likewise with aversion—the belief that getting rid of that thing will make me happy is the underlying delusion of aversion.

An exploration here is to begin to investigate, not to just try to tell ourselves, "Oh, I shouldn't want things. How can I stop believing that when I get this thing it will make me happy?" We can't stop believing that. We have to begin to investigate, to explore. One of the instructions the Buddha gave around this: he said, yes, there are things that are going to make you happy. Pleasure, sense pleasure will make you happy. But start looking at how long does it last? This points back to impermanence, because the belief that something will make us happy is based on the view that it's going to last.

And so as we begin to see these things that we think are going to be reliable, that they end, that they vanish, it begins to undermine this belief. It begins to help us to let go.

And this is a very, very deeply ingrained belief. It goes beyond simple sense pleasure. On one retreat, I had enough understanding to recognize that searching for happiness in something was not going to work. But at some very deep level in the mind, what I got to watch at one point was just the mind searching, searching, searching. It's like, there must be some place for happiness to be found. Just this restless quality—surely somewhere, surely somewhere there's happiness to be found.

Early on in this, as I saw this pattern start to happen, I thought, this is ridiculous. I know this is not going to do any good. And I would try to stop the searching and just come to some kind of more stability. But at some point it's like, wow, this is some deep pattern that just wants to be convinced. And so I just let it do it. I was very mindful. This is the searching. Trying to find something, trying to find something.

And lo and behold, actually, the mind would find something. It would create a state of peace that felt really good. And I'd think, ah, that's nice. And then that state of peace would begin to disintegrate, and there was an even deeper release that happened as the mind just saw that state disintegrate and there was nowhere to land. It was just disintegration. And there's a little bit of learning there. Right, even that, even that peace isn't the place to land.

And then the mind would do it again. And again and again and again, over and over and over again. It's like, well maybe it was just that state of peace or something. I don't know what the mind was thinking, but it was just this very, very deep pattern that was asking to be seen.

And so sometimes that's what we do with delusion. This, to me, was watching delusion at work. Watching the mind searching for happiness, having some kind of feeling that surely there's some belief somewhere, some happiness somewhere. Understanding at an intellectual level that it wouldn't find it, but at this very deeply ingrained level, just watching it.

Watching that delusion at work, just watching it. Each time the mind let go, there was a deep release, a very deep release. That was kind of a moment of the mind going, right, okay, yep, nowhere to land. Absolutely nowhere to land.

I don't have time to talk about seeing what is not self as self, but I know somebody else will talk about that.

Exploring delusion, exploring non-delusion, is not something we can do directly. But as we explore delusion, as we get familiar with it, there are times when there's a kind of state of insight where the mind lets go of some confusion. And it sees—oh right, sense pleasure is not the way to go. Or it sees, yeah, aversion around this situation, that's not helpful. Or we see how thoughts are just thoughts. And it seems so obvious to us at some point.

When we're in a state where the insight or the non-delusion is functioning, it often seems so obvious. Like, how can I not see this? When delusion falls away, there is such clarity about particular understandings. And yet it is not obvious. Minutes later, maybe an hour later, the delusion comes back. And then we see, ah, it wasn't so obvious. How was it that I was seeing thoughts? How was it that it was possible not to think there was something out there that would make me happy? We're confused again.

At that moment we might disbelieve the insight, or disbelieve that what we saw was real or true or really seen. But what that can do for us actually, over time, what we can begin to recognize is that delusion falls away and it comes back. It falls away, it comes back. When it's fallen away, we see something really clearly. When it comes back, we can know it's delusion operating.

At that point we can know: delusion is present in me. And we are often not able to simply say, "Oh, let delusion go away and let me see things clearly again." But we can at least know delusion is present. Delusion is affecting the mind.

Even that is incredibly powerful—to know there's a belief here, and this belief is affecting the mind. Again, it creates a little gap around that delusion so that we're not just taking that delusional reality to be truth. And so delusion unwinds in a slow process.

Patience. Patience with this.

But I hope that you get curious about your delusion, as opposed to being combative with it or frustrated by it. We're all deluded. It's the nature of our minds. I could even go so far as to say: enjoy your delusion. Not in the deluded way, but in the curious way—being curious about it.

Thank you for your attention. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 57

Investigation

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this three-month retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of dhammavicaya (investigation), one of the seven factors of awakening. She clarifies that investigation in Buddhist practice is not analytical thinking or figuring out why things happen, but rather a direct inquiry into what is happening right now. Drawing on the suttas' definition of wise attention, she shows how we can examine any moment of experience through the framework of the Four Noble Truths—recognizing whether suffering, its arising, its cessation, or the path is present.

Through vivid personal examples, including recurring embarrassment from a forgotten stage line and nightly loneliness traced to an unexpected memory, Andrea demonstrates how suffering is constructed in the present moment and how its causes can be discovered through patient observation rather than historical analysis. She emphasizes that wisdom—not our effortful doing—frees the mind, and that our role is to cultivate conditions for understanding to arise.

The talk addresses practical challenges in investigation: working with complex emotional patterns without assumptions or agendas, using questions as sparks for curiosity rather than analytical tools, and learning to receive subtle experiences rather than directing attention toward them. Andrea encourages patience with the gradual nature of practice, using the Buddha's analogy of a shipwreck weathering grain by grain, and Gil Fronsdal's image of chopping wood. She concludes by noting that investigation applies equally to wholesome states, helping us recognize even subtle craving within peaceful experiences.

The teachings of the Buddha offer us so many different tools and suggestions for our practice. There's a particular list that we're encouraged to cultivate—the qualities of the factors of awakening—which support us in this process of meeting experience, coming to understand our experience so that wisdom can grow.

This is really the purpose of our practice. We meet our experience, investigate our experience to cultivate wisdom and understanding. It's this wisdom and understanding that does the work of freeing our minds. We really can't do that work. It's more that we cultivate the conditions. We cultivate the conditions that support the development of wisdom, and then wisdom frees the mind.

It's kind of like creating the conditions for a beautiful tree to grow. We plant the acorn, perhaps, and then nurture the conditions. We offer it water and make sure it gets sunlight and make sure that the weeds are pruned away from it. We make sure we don't mow it over with a lawn mower. So we cultivate the conditions, but we don't make that tree grow. And so much of what the Buddha talked about was how do we cultivate the conditions for freedom?

One of the key supports for this is the seven factors of awakening. Tonight I'd like to explore one of those: the quality of investigation.

When we hear this word investigation—in the translation into English at least—we often associate it with a kind of thinking about or analyzing or figuring out. But that's not what this word *dhammavicaya*, which is the word typically translated as investigation, means. It doesn't mean figuring out or analyzing.

In practice, rather than trying to figure things out or figure out why things are the way they are—this is often what we're doing with investigation, we're in a mode of trying to figure out why something's happening—with the practice we turn towards a different question. And that question is: What is happening right now?

It's so simple. It is beyond simple in some ways. Our minds complicate things.

And so we're asked to look at what is happening moment to moment. In the texts it says that wise attention is the condition that supports the cultivation of all the enlightenment factors. And how does it support investigation?

One definition of wise attention is described in one of the suttas. It's a simple definition. It says: One who attends wisely attends to experience thus—this is suffering, this is the cause of suffering, this is the origin of suffering. One attends wisely: this is the cessation of suffering. One attends wisely: this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

This probably sounds familiar. It's a version of, a kind of framework—it's the framework of the Four Noble Truths. And yet when I first read this, it kind of glossed right over it. It's like, oh yeah, he's talking about the Four Noble Truths. Then in reading it again and really looking at what it is saying—one attends wisely: this is suffering, or this is the origin of suffering, or this is the cessation of suffering, or this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering—this teaching is asking us to explore our present moment experience from this perspective of the Four Noble Truths, from this perspective of this framework.

In any moment of arising experience, one of these four things will be what's happening. There will either be suffering, or suffering will be in the process of arising, or suffering will be ceasing, or we'll be cultivating the conditions that support our practice and support the ending of suffering.

So we can look at our present moment experience through this framework. This was kind of an eye-opening thing for me. It's like, right, he's talking about the present moment here.

So this is wise attention: bringing attention to the present moment and studying our relationship to suffering. This wise attention is contrasted with unwise attention, and this is how one attends unwisely.

One thinks: "Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?" Or else one is inwardly perplexed: "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?"

This is what we spend a lot of our time doing. These can all be thought of as variations on trying to figure out the *why* of experience, rather than looking right into the present moment and what is happening right now from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths.

Pointing into the present moment like this, as I began exploring this reflection, really began to show me that suffering is created in the present moment. I think it was my first three-month course—I had a lot of time, and I spent a lot of that time with my thoughts. Lots of those thoughts created lots of emotional storms. There was one particular pattern that came through repeatedly.

A couple of years before this retreat, something had happened that was a very embarrassing situation. I was in a play and I forgot my line. During this three-month course, I remembered that moment over and over again. I would be sitting, paying attention to my breath, and the feeling of standing on the stage and looking out at the audience and not remembering my line would come back. I'd be flooded with embarrassment all over again.

Over and over I saw this, and at some point it really sank in: this is not the same embarrassment that happened three years ago. This embarrassment is happening now. It is being created. The conditions include that event three years ago—that's one of the

conditions. But right now, in this moment, this embarrassment I'm experiencing is created because this thought arose and there's a reaction to that thought in the present moment.

This is our investigation—to begin to see that the present moment actually contains the information we need to understand why we're suffering. The *why* of the present moment, not the *why* of history. Yes, the *why* of history in that case involved the fact that I forgot my line on the stage. But in this moment, the *why* of the suffering was happening right here in the present.

This points us back into the present moment for an exploration, an investigation of our suffering as it occurs. Our suffering is created right in the present moment, and the origin, the reason for that suffering being created, is also happening in the present moment.

Another example from my practice: in the first few months after I began practicing, I was exploring a lot of emotional reactivity related to the breakup of a relationship. One of the patterns I noticed was that I would feel lonely when I went to bed at night. The *why* of this was not a mystery to me—at least so I thought. It made perfect sense that I was lonely when I went to bed at night.

And yet, because I was curious and interested in exploring my emotions through this new practice—a friend had sent me a book about practicing mindfulness with emotions—I started just exploring. This is a regularly occurring thing; what's happening? Each night I would watch this pattern unfold over and over again. Over the course of several weeks, I watched it. Each night I'd notice the loneliness and simply acknowledge: okay, this is loneliness.

This is what loneliness feels like.

And then one night I discovered—I don't even remember exactly how it happened—but what happened was that it became very clear that when I picked up my alarm clock to set my alarm for the morning, that was when the loneliness started. And it was like, wow, what is that about? That's kind of weird.

I kept watching night after night, seeing that very clearly: set the clock, loneliness comes.

One evening, as I was setting the clock, a memory flashed through my mind. I can only hypothesize that this memory had been flitting through night after night. This memory was of being with my ex-partner in Disneyland, looking up at a clock on a marquee in Tomorrowland. It was a digital clock. The clock that I was setting was a digital clock.

I could see that there was a connection between the sense impression of setting the clock and the memory. I could see this cause and effect relationship. And I could also see in that moment that the loneliness was a response to that memory. The loneliness didn't have much to do with the thing I thought it had to do with—which was going to bed by myself at night. Woe is me, I'm always going to go to bed by myself forevermore. This is what I thought the loneliness was about.

The simple investigation of just watching the experience led to the understanding that it wasn't about going to bed alone. It was about a memory that flitted through my mind. The memory didn't even have anything to do with going to bed. It had to do with having a fun time with my ex-partner. And again, I could see that the loneliness was a reaction to the memory.

That surprised me. This was probably two months into my practice. It surprised me that I could see something that clearly just by observing my emotions in daily life.

But the thing that surprised me even more was that the next night when I went to bed, I remembered the memory, of course. But having seen that hidden link to the loneliness, the loneliness did not arise again in the same regular way. That really surprised me.

This is the power of investigation, the power of seeing conditions, the power of being willing to just watch our experience. This is wisdom. This kind of experience where the mind sees something, sees a connection that's leading one to suffering—the mind saw this pattern, this unfolding that led to that suffering of loneliness. And seeing through that, the mind didn't go that direction the next night.

I'm not saying that I didn't get lonely again. I'm not saying that at all. But that regular repeating pattern of loneliness that happened every night as I went to bed—that stopped.

Suffering is constructed in the present moment. The causes of suffering are arising in the present moment. All the information we need to understand about what's happening is available in the present moment. We do not need to think back on history. We do not need to figure out how our upbringing influenced this kind of pattern in our

lives. There is a place for that; I'm not saying it's completely useless. But in terms of the practice, the power of the practice is to open into this moment and see what's available to be seen here and now.

And that is investigation. What is happening right now?

We look at the what of experience by simply meeting our body sensations. We know our body sensations as sensations arising in the present moment. We know our emotions as emotions arising now. We know our thoughts as experience arising now. All of the instructions we've been offering you is the exploration of what is happening in the present moment.

So we explore this, we investigate it, we get to know the nature of our experience in the present moment. This question of what is the nature of our experience is an interesting one for investigation. Whatever's arising—body sensations or emotions or thoughts—we get to know its nature as we meet it in the present moment. We get to know its specific nature, and we get to know its more general nature.

The specific nature is helpful for us to understand. For instance, regarding reactivity, it's really helpful to understand what is the nature of aversion. The nature of aversion is to separate. It separates us from things. It has a belief that separation will be a condition for happiness—a delusional belief. And it orients us toward looking for things to separate from. Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls this "aversion doing its job." This is the nature of aversion. When aversion arises, this is what it does. This is the job description of aversion. And he suggests we get to know the job description of aversion really well, that we should get to know the job description of greed really well.

The point of this is to understand it, to understand its nature. Again, the understanding. It's an understanding not to get rid of something. We're exploring: what's the nature of aversion? Not to get rid of aversion, but to understand aversion. And again, the understanding is what allows the mind to begin to release, much as that example of the loneliness showed. I didn't do the letting go of that loneliness. It was the seeing of the pattern. The mind released the loneliness. Wisdom released the loneliness. And so we explore the nature of our experience to cultivate this understanding. What's the nature of greed? What's the nature of confusion?

A curiosity about this supports what we would call a wise attitude, or a perspective that allows us to just watch what's happening so that we can understand it. As we get to know the nature of our reactive emotions, it creates the space for us not to be so entwined in them. The very act of investigation helps us to take a step back. Curiosity has us looking at something from the perspective of a naturalist again. We talked about the

perspective of the naturalist—just what's arising here? What's growing here? As we have that perspective, we can watch the pattern unfold without being so caught in it. The interest supports that. Disidentification helps us to meet the experience without being entangled in it.

In investigating our experience, sometimes we can use questions to help us investigate. When I ask myself the question, "What is the nature of aversion?"—it wasn't a thinking-about asking questions. Sometimes asking questions, and you can look in your own mind to see what happens, but sometimes asking questions tends to create a pattern of trying to figure out an answer. That's not the point of asking questions. Sometimes I like to describe the way questions work as if we have a still pond. That still pond is a somewhat quiet mind. The question is like dropping a pebble into that still pond, and we just see what ripples arise from dropping that question into our mind.

So we drop a question such as, perhaps while aversion is arising, "What is the nature of aversion?" And then you don't do anything in particular. You just keep looking at what's happening right now. What is the mind noticing right now? What's obvious here? The question is just a spark for curiosity and interest, and it can also organize the mind. It can have the mind naturally start to be interested in information that may be related to that question. Words are powerful in our minds, so we don't have to do a lot with them. Sometimes dropping a question in like that, you may have some response. When I explored this, it was actually quite interesting to really recognize the separating nature of aversion. It was an experience of separating.

What is the nature of aversion? And the feeling was separating, separating, separating. So it was an experience that answered the question, not a thought.

Often I encourage people, if you use questions in terms of evoking curiosity or orienting something to investigate: if the response arises as a thought, put it on a shelf and hold it lightly. If the response arises as an experience—that, in my experience, is the way questions really lead us into investigation. There's an experience in which we understand something about the question.

So we can use questions to help us explore our experience. How does this emotion impact the body? What purpose is this emotion serving? What is the nature of this experience?

As we explore and investigate our experience more, we begin to see into its nature as being impermanent, unreliable—a process, causes and conditions unfolding. Not a solid, stable self driving the show, but just a set of conditions unfolding. This is another aspect of the nature of experience that is revealed as we investigate. It's not always

about the specific nature of a particular experience. Sometimes what we see when we explore "What's the nature of this?" is simply change. A general understanding rather than a specific understanding about that experience.

And yet so much of our investigation happens around our conditioned patterns, the habits of our mind—often habits and patterns that are very old and deep. Ones that don't seem so simple as just loneliness arising in a moment, but feel like this big mess of layers: aversion and fear and anger and confusion and hostility and desire, all just in this tangled mass.

Sometimes we may create a theory about that big mess. Like, "Yeah, this big mess is about my deep inner fear of being intimate." Something like that. We're great analyzers in our culture, and we come up with theories about a lot of our patterns. And sometimes, as we see these big, messy patterns—these convoluted, multifaceted, many-layered emotional states—we might get the idea of needing to get right into the middle of it. "When I get right into the middle, when I know just what's right in the center, when I can really see that deep inner fear of intimacy—that's when this pattern is going to fall apart. That's what I need to find. That's what the investigation would have to do."

We have beliefs like that. But what I've seen is that this kind of investigation—where we're trying to dig and pull, where it's like we're trying to pry everything apart and put something under a microscope and see all the little pieces and bits—that's got an agenda to it. And often that agenda is based in greed or aversion, wanting to get rid of it, wanting it to go away. Sometimes I would feel like this pattern is wholly bad. "What I need is a scalpel. I need a scalpel to cut the whole thing out and just remove it like it's a tumor or something."

So we have these beliefs, these views about our patterns. And what is helpful—no surprise—is this: can you just notice and meet what's obvious in a moment, as opposed to having the idea that you need to pull it apart, need to figure it out? It's more like this big messy ball of mind confusion. Can you hold that with wide arms and just notice what's obvious? What's the most obvious bit of that mess in this moment?

Because the pattern is changing and evolving and shifting in moments, as you stay with it, different pieces of the puzzle, different pieces of the mess kind of rotate to the surface. We get a little flavor of that one, then a little flavor of that. "Oh, there's some anger in there. Oh, there's fear in there. There's confusion in there." Just settling back and being willing to have a wide view, as opposed to trying to dive in and figure out what's in the middle—that's really helpful.

It's helpful not to make assumptions about what's in the middle. The making of assumptions is often related to our habit of looking for the why. Why is this happening? If we have an assumption and we're looking for something—like, for instance, that deep inner fear of intimacy, which was a belief I had about myself—if I go looking in my experience for that, I'm likely to find it. Our minds will construct what we look for sometimes.

It's quite interesting when we are willing to set our assumptions aside, willing to just say, "Okay, that's a theory, I'll set that on the shelf," and just meet what is happening. Moment after moment, just the what. Over and over again I've been incredibly surprised by the way the whole pattern is put together. Like that example of the loneliness—I had no idea that loneliness was put together from a fleeting thought about Disneyland.

So if we make assumptions about our experience, about what's going on, the assumptions may or may not be true. Hold them lightly.

Just recognize whatever is obvious about the experience in the present moment. Patience. Patience with this investigation.

And likewise with that idea of some pattern being wholly bad that I talked about—just the idea of wanting to take a scalpel and cut something out and say, "Just get rid of it. That's what needs to happen with this." Many times when I've had that perspective on a pattern and I've been willing to hang out with it, willing to sit with it, willing to just open, open, open to depression—willing to just be with that depression, willing to see it there, watch myself get caught by it, see the patterns around it, notice that it came when I got really calm—it was just a whole variety of things over the course of weeks on one retreat where I had this low-grade depression.

And the willingness to just explore that... at one point I was feeling that depression in one sitting and it was like, "Oh, this wants to get big. This feeling of depression, it wants to get... wow, it wants to get really big." Let it get big. Let this depression just get as big as it wants to. And at some point in that experience of the depression growing and becoming vast, it turned inside out and became mettā. That was not what I expected to find inside of depression. More often than I ever would have expected, inside of some confused pattern is some flavor of mettā, some flavor of compassion that is confused—that is being repressed or having something demanded of it.

We find our way into the structure of our experience by being willing to meet it without agenda, without assumption. If we have assumptions—because we will have assumptions—know that it's an assumption. "Okay, yep, I have an assumption about that. Let's just see if we can not go searching for that assumption."

I think we have to have patience with these multi-layered patterns in particular because they grew over a long period of time. They came into being over years, if not lifetimes. And so one sitting, or even one three-month course compared to lifetimes or years of a pattern putting itself together... there's a very gradual nature to the unfolding of our practice. It's a gradual cultivation of the wholesome qualities, a gradual cultivation of the wisdom that allows us to let go of things, that allows us to see things, that allows the seeing then to help support the mind to release the suffering.

The Buddha gave an analogy around the gradual nature of the path. He compared it to a shipwreck. There's a shipwreck—you think about a shipwreck, the parts of the ship are strewn all over the beach. And he said those parts of that ship are daily being subjected to the sun, the sand, the wind, the water, the waves. Just to reflect on the analogy a bit: if you were to go to that beach every day and look at the rope, for example, the rigging, it's not going to look any different day to day. But the course of the inexorable nature of the sun, the sand, the wind is to wear away at that rope. And the nature of the mindfulness, the investigation, the wisdom, the wholesome qualities that we cultivate is grain by grain to begin to release our suffering. Maybe not seen day by day.

Sometimes patterns can just let go so gradually that we don't even see them disappearing. I think I told the story of that—I'm not sure, I'll just briefly mention it—a pattern of anger around this same relationship. Just watching this anger over and over and over again. And at some point recognizing that trying to bring mindfulness to that pattern was creating the conditions for me to spiral in and just get lost in the anger. So I began setting it aside. I think I did talk about this in the hindrance talk: "Not now, not now, not now," over and over again. And that pattern disappeared while I wasn't looking. I began noticing it getting more and more spaced apart, that anger arising less and less, and then one day just realizing, "Wow, it's gone. When did it go?" So sometimes our patterns disappear so gradually we do not see when they disappear.

Other times there's an experience of a kind of rapid disappearance of a pattern. It feels like that moment of insight is so clear. And sometimes that happens—a clarity of seeing into something, and there's an experience of release in the moment. You really, in that moment, know the ending of suffering. You see the mind release. But those patterns too often happen after a long time of gradual cultivation.

Gil Fronsdal gives an analogy for this kind of moment where suddenly we see something so clearly and the mind just releases. He talks about chopping a piece of wood. You have a hatchet and you hit at that piece of wood. The first time it's probably not going to just split. Or the second, or the third, or the fourth. And we might think, "Well, I just haven't quite got it in the right place or something."

But every time you hit that log, the fiber of the wood is weakening inside. And at some point, the fiber is weak enough that the log splits. We think it's all due to that one chop, but it's the whole gradual wearing down of the fiber that allowed that to happen.

So much of this is what happens in our practice. Really, the gradual nature of the practice is where it's at. We like the big flashing insights—they feel good, they're like, "Oh great, this is working!" But it's working anyway. Really, it's working anyway for every single one of you. You are being steeped in the Dharma here, and it is working you.

Sometimes we have a tendency to create meaning related to the assumptions that we make. Our minds are meaning-making machines. That's really helpful to know as we explore investigation.

For example, there's such an interconnection between our minds and our bodies. As an emotion arises, physical sensations often arise with it. And because of that back-and-forth pattern, sometimes we can attribute a particular emotion to a particular constellation of physical sensations. Again, it's a meaning. "Ah, my heart feels heavy. I must be sad." Maybe, maybe not. When the heart feels heavy, notice the heaviness, the pressure, the tension, the weight. Explore what's actually going on before making this attribution of emotion to physical sensations.

Sometimes, because we've explored a particular pattern so much in our lives, the body can have a habit of going into a particular constellation of physical symptoms even if the emotion isn't there yet. For me, efforting was one of these. I tended to effort so much, and it created this kind of tight band around my head—the efforting to really look at things closely would create this tight band and pressure. Then at some point, I began noticing there was just this tight band of pressure, but as far as I could tell, I wasn't making effort. It was almost like the body saying, "Okay, we're used to doing this now. You sit down. This is what we do." At that point, I realized, "Oh, this is just sensation. This is just sensations. I don't have to attribute that I'm over-efforting here. This is just sensation happening right now."

Sometimes particular states arise or experiences arise in the practice that we attribute meaning to. The thought, for instance, not wanting to practice. "I don't want to practice right now." When I first started experiencing that thought and was conscious of it, I felt betrayed by my mind. It's like, "Oh no. Oh no, I don't want to practice. What does this mean? It means I'm a bad yogi. It means I'm a failure. It means I have to reorient my whole life." It's just an arising mind state. The next time you notice that you don't want to practice, you don't have to convince yourself that you want to practice. Just notice: not wanting to practice is arising. You don't have to create meaning around it. It's just an arising mind state. It happens to all of us.

Another piece—and this is the last piece that I'll mention—that I wanted to explore with you: as the mind settles more, there are periods of time where the mindfulness is pretty stable. Perhaps not for days at a time, but for ten minutes in a sitting, or maybe even a whole sitting. And then suddenly it seems like the mind just starts wandering. What happened?

My mindfulness was so strong, and now it's wandering. I've seen my mind do things like this—creating stories about how there's something I want to avoid, something I'm afraid to see. Again, creating ideas, creating meaning, creating beliefs. Why is this happening? There's got to be some meaning, some reason, some deep meaning, some historical meaning, some pattern about my life that explains why the mind is wandering right now.

What I've often seen happening as the mindfulness starts settling is that there's something being missed. That is true. When the mind wanders, we haven't noticed something. And the investigation can be simply: What is being missed?

As the mind is settling in this way, there's been a period of continuity. If at that point the mind starts wandering, rather than doubling down and saying, "Gotta keep the mind present, gotta force the mind to stay present," get curious about what you're missing.

As the mind settles, when the mindfulness is more continuous, the mindfulness and what it's knowing are kind of in sync. It's familiar in a way. And at some point, with the settling of the mind, experience gets a little more subtle. But our intention of being mindful is still looking around up here—and the mind wanders, because it's actually interested in something more subtle.

In that kind of place, rather than trying to force yourself to stay present, it's more like asking: What is actually happening here? With this kind of experience, where things are getting subtler, we don't know what we're looking for. We can't have an agenda and say, "I'm going to see that thing that I'm missing." By very definition, when we're missing something, we don't know what we're missing.

So what might it mean to settle back and be curious? What's happening here? Sometimes the very act of trying to find something will obscure the thing that's happening.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya was visiting here a few years ago, and somebody was driving him around the country roads. They were talking about the deer that run out into the road, and the driver said, "I have a deer alarm on my car." Sayadaw asked what that was, and he explained, "It's a very high-pitched tone. The deer don't like it, so they stay away from the car." Then he said to Sayadaw, "You might be able to hear the tone."

Sayadaw tried to listen but couldn't hear it. He was listening, trying to find the tone, and he couldn't hear it. Then he gave up. He relaxed. And there it was.

The very act of looking had obscured what was happening.

Sometimes investigation is like that—settling back with curiosity. What's here? Being willing to be present and available for something you don't know. This kind of investigation, by definition, cannot be directed. We cannot choose what to look for. We have to receive what's happening. Where's the mind right now?

As the mind settles more and more, this kind of investigation supports us—rather than the kind where we're directing the attention, saying, "I'm going to look at this right now, I'm going to look at that right now." That can serve us, and boy did it serve me for a long time. But at some point in the practice—and it will come and go—there's a time when we have to stop that directing and settle back and receive what we don't know.

It can take some courage to not know what we are going to be seeing.

It really doesn't matter what's happening in your experience.

We say that a lot, I know. But we really mean it. We do.

Just keep noticing. Just keep observing. What's happening? What's happening? Moment after moment.

Wholesome mind states too—investigating wholesome mind states. What's the nature of peace? What's the nature of calm? What's the nature of love? It's so easy to get caught with very subtle craving for wholesome mind states.

At one point on a retreat, I was watching—I was in a pretty quiet, very quiet state—and at some point the mind, I don't remember whether I did it intentionally or whether it just arose: "Oh, what's my relationship to this state?" And it was wanting it to continue. Trying to make it continue. Subtle, subtle. Then that fell away. And there was fear that it's not going to continue. I felt the fear. And then joy, because it was like, "Wow, I had no idea there was defilement in the midst of that. That's so great that the mind could see that."

I think this is a hallmark of investigation too—the joy that can come just from whatever we're looking at. Just moment by moment knowing: this is what's happening. Setting aside ideas, setting aside agendas, setting aside assumptions, setting aside meaning, and just being with what's actually here.

This will lead us to freedom. Moment by moment, grain by grain, very gradually most of the time.

Let's just sit for a moment. I'll read a poem—a Fernando Pessoa poem:

The mystery of things, where is it?
Why doesn't it come out
To show us at least that it's mystery?
What do the river and tree know about it?
And what do I, who am no more than they, know about it?
Whenever I look at things and think about what people think of them,
I laugh like a brook cleanly plashing against a rock.
For the only hidden meaning of things
Is that they have no hidden meaning.
It's the strangest thing of all,
Stranger than all poets' dreams
And all philosophers' thoughts,
That things are really what they seem to be.
There's nothing to understand.
Yes, this is what my senses have learned on their own.
Things have no meaning, they exist.
Things are the only hidden meaning of things.

CHAPTER 58

Perception and Papañca

Andrea Fella · 53 min

In this dharma talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a detailed examination of perception (saññā), one of the five aggregates (khandhas), and its intimate connection to papañca—the process of mental proliferation and distorted perception that underlies much of our suffering. Drawing on the classical analogy that perception is like a mirage, she illustrates how we constantly mistake our mental constructs for reality itself.

Fella explains the layered nature of perception through vivid personal examples: mistaking a clod of dirt for a dead porcupine, or hearing bat sounds and perceiving pigs being slaughtered. These misperceptions reveal how our minds create objects, overlay emotional associations, and then respond to these constructions as though they were objective truth. She traces the process described in the suttas: contact leads to feeling, feeling to perception, perception to thinking, and thinking to papañca—where the mind runs riot with proliferating concepts that then color all subsequent experience.

The talk explores various translations of papañca—mental proliferation, objectification, reification, distorted perception—each illuminating how we create themes and beliefs that fragment our experience into self and other, us and them. Fella connects this process to real-world suffering, noting how constructed concepts like race, though having no biological reality, create devastating consequences when believed. The teaching points toward recognition rather than elimination: we cannot stop perception, but through continuous mindfulness we can begin to see it as process, as appearance, loosening the grip of clinging and opening to wisdom.

Last week, Guy explored the topic of the five aggregates—these five areas of experience. Heaps of stuff, I think he called them. The teachings highlight these five aspects of experience as places where we tend to get caught, places where we tend to cling and create a sense of self. And so they're worth exploring in some depth. It can be useful to get to know these processes in our experience, to begin to recognize how they work and to see how the clinging and craving and selfing manifests around these areas.

Earlier this week, Sally talked about vedana, the process of feeling and the experience of feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—and the way we get caught around that through craving and clinging. Vedana is one of the five aggregates, but it's also found in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, so she explored it from that perspective.

Tonight I'd like to pick another of the five aggregates to highlight: the topic of perception, the process of recognizing what's happening in our experience.

On the surface of it, this seems like a really simple process—this aspect of experience of recognizing something, knowing something's happening, and then recognizing it from the past. It's almost like a process that goes into our memory banks and retrieves: this shape, this form, oh that's that thing. Or this sound, that's that thing. It's this process by which we recognize experience.

So it seems like a fairly simple part of our experience. And yet the suttas point to ways that not understanding this simple aspect of experience leads to so much suffering—not only in our own lives but also in the world. The suttas point to misunderstanding around this process of perception as one of the sources for conflict. So it's very useful to begin to get familiar with this process and begin to see: how does this confusion happen? What goes on?

Perception is this very simple function of mind that, based on sense contact, takes that contact and then identifies it. It's a very natural function of mind that happens in every moment of experience. And so we meet our experience, and the process of perception—though it sounds simple at the beginning—is actually a layered process.

Initially we may meet our experience through the sense of sight, the bare kind of sight. The mind recognizes shape and color, form and color. And then from that form and color, the mind begins to make sense of the objects. So the mind might first recognize flat and brown, looking at the back of the room, and then recognize that's a wall. It's got this layered nature to it. Recognizing round and brown, and then recognizing it as bell. This all happens so fast that we don't have to think about it.

It's a very useful function of our mind to do this recognition. If we had to, every time we walked into a room, figure out what people were and what zafus were and what floors and walls were, it would exhaust us. The brain power, the amount of mental energy it would take to do that every single time—I think it would exhaust us. And so this function of perception, I almost think of as an energy-saving device. It helps us to move more quickly through the world.

We can actually start to see this process at work in this simple way as we explore, as the mindfulness gets more continuous. On one retreat I remember I was sitting on the porch and I just turned my head, and my eye landed on this patch of nature on the side. And I watched the experience being categorized and figured out. There was green. And then there was the recognition of jagged. And then the mind recognized it as leaf. In

three discrete steps: green, jagged, leaf. I watched that happen in the mind. I wasn't trying to see it. And so again, it's the continuity of mindfulness that can start to reveal the subtler processes at work in the mind.

Sometimes we can also see this process at work when the mind isn't quite sure of what something is. If the light is dim or you're looking at a distance at something, you can sometimes see the mind trying on various perceptions for what you're looking at. At one point I walked into a room, the sitting area at a retreat center. I think it was a two-week retreat I was on, and it was pretty quiet. The light was pretty dim in the room.

As I walked into the room, there was this form, a large form across the room. The very first thing my mind did was identify it as a deformed being. And my mind then said, no, it's not a deformed being. But it took a while. It kept looking at it, looking at it. And finally it recognized it as a vase of flowers.

So you can begin to see this process at work at times if the mind isn't quite recognizing what's happening. I saw this happen the other day. I was walking down the road with Greg and we were looking into the distance. There was a lump on the road and my mind went, dead animal. We talked about it. He said, "It's pretty big. It's probably not a squirrel." And I thought, porcupine—I had seen a porcupine. But when we got up to it, it was a clot of dirt.

Again, the mind will make these attributions. Perception is very prone to making mistakes. And herein lies some of the issue with perception.

This process of perception is a very normal, very natural function of mind, but it can get us into trouble. It can take us out into delusion, into confusion, when we don't understand it—when we don't understand the process of perception.

Each of the five aggregates that Guy described has an analogy that the texts associate with it. The Buddha was a master of analogies. It's really quite amazing, the evocative power these analogies have. In the case of the aggregates, the commentaries say that the analogies used for each aggregate point to the ways in which we get confused or deluded by that particular process.

For the aggregate of perception, the analogy is that it is like a mirage. I actually looked up what mirages are because I think often we use the word casually to mean a hallucination—somebody's seeing a mirage, they're seeing a hallucination. But what mirages actually are—and I'm sure the Buddha was aware of this—is something like the classic mirage in a desert of seeing a lake. What's actually happening there is that the

desert and the air and whatever moisture there is or isn't in the air is acting like a reflector. What you're seeing when you see a lake on the desert is the reflection of the sky on the ground.

So a mirage is a reflection of something that is there, but it's misconceived or misconstrued as being something other than what it is. And this aspect of perception is a place where we tend to get caught. We take in experience, we meet experience, we perceive something. We perceive a dead porcupine on the road and we respond to that image or that perception. The perception is a reflection of what's out there, but it's not what's out there. It's a reflection in our minds. And so often what happens is we respond to the reflection thinking it's reality or truth.

Very often we relate to our experience through perception as being an accurate representation of reality. But perception very easily gets distorted, it very easily makes a mistake. It's often also distorted by interpretation. And so if we don't understand perception, this is a major area where delusion enters into our experience. We believe our perceptions to be accurate representations of reality.

Now, perceptions are very useful. It's not that we're trying to stop perception—we couldn't do that anyway. Perception is said to be one of the seven universal concomitants for every moment of consciousness, seven universal factors that arise in every moment of consciousness, and perception is said to be one of those. So we're not going to stop perception. But we can learn to understand it as perception and learn not to be fooled into believing our perceptions are truth. They are our perceptions.

The first place to begin to explore is simply whether we can start to recognize this process at work. It's possible to recognize this process with the mindfulness getting stronger. I wouldn't say this is something to try to do. What I'm going to describe in terms of the ways I've experienced this—generally, these experiences have come because I've been available. Well, not just that I've been available, but that I've heard people talk about this process, I've heard it described, and then, in being available for my experience, I can begin to see it.

And that's part of the function of this kind of talk. It's not to tell you, "go find this in your experience," but the description of it may unlock a little possibility in your mind, and then it might be possible for you to see it. So it's not something to do. It's more of a description of something that might be experienced.

For me, the place that has been the most easy or natural to recognize this process of perception is in the avenue of hearing. When I'm sitting with my eyes closed in meditation, there are all kinds of sounds arising. There's the pings of the radiator, the sounds

of cars on the road, sounds of construction, birds, coughs and sneezes—all of those things. There's the sound that hits the ear, and then the mind identifies it. It happens so fast. We hardly even think about it. We hardly even think that it's a process. It's just, "Oh, we've heard a sneeze." That's what we think—we've heard a sneeze or we've heard a car. But actually, we've heard the vibration, and the mind has recognized it, interpreted it, categorized it as sneeze or as car.

And it does this often, at least in my experience, through thought, a form of thought. So I'll be sitting in meditation and I'll hear the car and the mind will go, "Car." A thought, "car," will appear. Or maybe I'm sitting there hearing, and there's the sound of the drill out on the roof, and my mind will create an image of a person on the roof with a drill. This is perception at work—this creation of an identification or recognition of what's happening.

So it's easiest for me—one of the easiest avenues for seeing it is with sound. I think partly because the avenue for recognition for many of us comes through image or often through words in the mind. And so there's a distinction or a contrast in a way. We recognize something, the sound arises, and then we might hear our mind say the word: car, or truck, or drill, or radiator. This is perception. And this is this process.

Some of you have talked about recognizing this—recognizing this mind that's identifying or naming experience. So this naming is one way that perception works. It's one kind of perception. Perception is actually responsible for many ways we recognize experience. Just a simple identification of objects through naming them is one way, one form of perception. Perception also creates space, location, direction, time.

One example of this around space and location: I was meditating in Hawaii for six weeks earlier this year. Birds rule in Hawaii. There are so many birds there. And for days, actually, sometimes there would be hours on end where the only sounds I heard were the sounds of the birds. There wasn't much else. So there are all of these bird sounds, and I began to recognize that the sense of space was created with the hearing. I would hear a sound and the mind would create an idea—ah, that sound is over there, in that location, in that direction. So it created this three-dimensional experience through the recognition of sound. Sometimes I've had the experience of, when hearing a sound, it's almost like my mind moves out into space, up in the air somewhere, in the direction of where that sound was. That's perception creating that sense of distance and location.

I would say the easiest way to recognize perception is through this naming, but I just wanted to put out there that it also is responsible for these other forms of recognizing various aspects of our experience. Perception is what allows us to walk up the stairs without falling over—the distance and height of a step.

So we can begin to see this identification as a process. When it's not recognized, this identification of a perception—often, again, as I said, it can come as a thought. This name perception can come as a thought.

And so close to thought, if we don't notice this, if we don't see the mind recognizing "sound, car," we may start thinking about cars. We may start thinking about where that car is going.

So many times, sitting in this hall, I have heard the sound of a car driving down Pleasant Street. My mind would create an image of the car driving down Pleasant Street. When I saw that, I could just recognize it as seeing, as an image, as the process of perception recognizing that sound. When I didn't recognize it, the likelihood would be that there was the perception, the recognition of it as car, and then the image of the car driving down Pleasant Street, and then there's the notion of what's down at the end of Pleasant Street? Oh, that's Barry. What's in Barry? Oh, there's that... I won't say what's down in Barry.

So the mind can quickly move from perception to thinking to getting lost. I would say this is one of the main avenues through which our mind wanders. We do not recognize that perception has happened, and the mind slips out into thinking about it. As Guy mentioned the other day, also with perception there are often emotional associations that come along. And this is another avenue from which we can get lost. As a perception arises, if it comes with emotional overtones and those emotions aren't recognized as coming with the perception, we can slip out into the emotions.

Perceptions very naturally impact our experience. How we perceive our experience has a huge impact on how we respond to it. This is highlighted sometimes when we misperceive something. A classic analogy about this is misperceiving a rope as a snake. Walk into a room with dim light, a coiled form in the corner, and the mind might misperceive that as a snake and become frightened. As soon as the mind recognizes it's not a snake but a rope, the fear vanishes. So we see that how we perceive, what we're perceiving, can have an emotional impact on us as well.

I had a really clear example of this that unfolded over several days in Burma. Each evening when I was meditating, I was hearing a sound—a kind of high-pitched squealing sound. And my mind identified this high-pitched squealing sound as a pig. The mon-

asteries often are very close to villages, and this was pretty close to the wall of the monastery. In Bagan, I was always hearing sounds from the village coming over the wall—from loudspeakers or whatever else noise there was. The noise of the village was around. And so the sound of a pig squealing, I interpreted as a pig in the village.

But the sound had a kind of—what I interpreted, and I recognize this as an interpretation—a distressed quality to it. And I began to create this notion that these pigs I was hearing each evening squealing were being slaughtered by the butcher for the next day's sale. And so compassion was arising in me regularly each time I would hear this sound. Now I knew that this was an idea in my mind, but still it was compelling to me. The sound sounded so distressed—the pig squealing sounded so distressed—that the response was this feeling of compassion.

So this went on for some days, maybe even weeks, of hearing the sound and feeling this compassion when I heard the squealing. And then one evening, instead of sitting in my room at that time of day, I was out walking. And I saw these bats flying in the air. And they were squealing, these bats. That was what I had been hearing.

It had not crossed my mind at all. It had not at all crossed my mind the possibility that I had not been hearing pigs. It was a complete misperception. And of course the compassion vanished. There's no need for compassion when there are no pigs being slaughtered.

So the mind created the perception. The mind responded to that perception. And the mind believed it. The whole thing was believed. This is often how perception works in our minds. It's easier to see when perception makes a mistake how our responses are to something constructed in our mind. It became fairly easy to recognize at that point—oh my gosh, that whole thing, that whole notion that it was a pig, that it was a pig being slaughtered, the compassion—it was all a construct of the mind. It was fairly easy to see that when perception made a mistake.

It's harder to see that we are responding to our perceptions and not to what's actually out there with all of the perceptions that we're having. We so easily take our perceptions to be reality. So little examples like this, where perception makes a mistake, can begin to highlight and show us how we are attributing reality to our perceptions.

So the teachings in the suttas connect this process of perception particularly closely with a deluding or deceiving influence in the mind—that process of *papañca*. The texts don't really give a clear definition of papañca, but they describe its function, they describe how it works in the mind. There's one particular sutta that goes through how perception leads to this process of papañca, and then feeds back in a cycle.

Here's the process at work. This first part simply describes how perception functions. Dependent on the eye and forms—and this is repeated, of course, with all six sense bases—dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. So this is simple: something, sight, the eye—they meet and there's the knowing of it. The meeting of the three is contact. So there's this contact of the experience. With contact as condition there is feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. What one feels, that one perceives. So we have this contact, there's a feeling and a perception. These two can occur pretty close together—the contact, the feeling, the perceiving. What one perceives, that one thinks about. So this is like recognizing it as a car and then thinking about the car going down Pleasant Street. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates.

That is one translation for this word papañca: mental proliferation. One way this might be understood is the mind starting to run riot. We experience something, we perceive it, we start to think about it, and then the mind goes crazy with thought.

We see this happen in sitting a lot. We may experience a little twinge in the knee or somewhere in the body and then feel that. There's the unpleasant feeling of it. There's the recognition of it as an unpleasant experience in the knee, maybe a sharp pain. And then the mind starts thinking about it. What's happening? I've been sitting. I've been sitting now for four weeks and the knee is starting to bother me and oh my goodness, four weeks of sitting like this may create a crippled leg. I'm not going to be able to walk again. Things like this—I know you all know what I'm talking about. We go from a twinge in our knee to cancer in seconds. This is one way that the mind moves from a recognition to the mind proliferating, spreading, running riot. The mind runs amok.

Then the description continues: with what one has mentally proliferated, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye. That's what the texts say—it's a little complicated. I'll read it again and then give you a sense of how I understand this. With what one has mentally proliferated, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable by the eye.

So we have some idea—pain equals crippled leg—something like that. And then that idea of crippled leg gets overlaid on our experience of the pain. Every time we are experiencing that pain, it's coming through that lens of "crippled, oh no, oh no," and aversion just mushrooms.

Here's another example of how this works. Suppose you're walking down the street and you see somebody—that's often a kind of neutral experience, just seeing a person walking down the street. But in this case, perhaps this person has an appearance that reminds you of someone who has harmed you in some way in the past. You may recog-

nize consciously that it's not the same person, but at the same time, that notion of having been harmed by somebody with a similar appearance can come into the experience and create a feeling of fear with that perception. This kind of thing happens to us a lot. Our past comes into our present through the workings of our mind, through the workings of papañca, and distorts our perception of the present moment. One person actually translates this term papañca as "distorted perception."

So this distortion of perception, this papañca, is one of the ways that delusion begins to enter in, connected with perception. This definition of papañca as mental proliferation—this is how Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it in the texts—is sometimes described as a mind full of thinking or the mind that runs riot with thought. The Pali itself for the term papañca means something like "spreading," and so there could be some justification for this translation.

And yet I've grown interested in this term because there are various places in the texts that speak of freedom from Papanca in a way that suggests something far more fundamental—a deeper freedom than simply not having the mind thinking all kinds of thoughts.

In one sutta, for instance, the text describes the goal of this practice through perhaps eight different qualities: the goal of this practice is for one who is free from delusion; the goal of this practice is for one who is free from clinging; the goal of this practice is for one who is free from Papanca. It includes that among the most essential freedoms. To me, this implies something deeper than simply attaining quietude in the mind through concentration. That kind of mental stillness is not yet the freedom being pointed to.

So I've been curious about this term and have done some exploration, reading various perspectives on it. Thanissaro Bhikkhu has been particularly instrumental in my reflection here. He explains how the term was used in early India to refer to the elaboration of a theme in art. In music, for example, you might pick up on a theme—several notes repeated in different ways at different times—and your mind hooks onto that theme. An emotional resonance develops. The term Papanca referred to this creation of a theme for the evocation of a response.

So the term in our minds may also refer to something along these lines: the creation of a theme, the creation of an idea, the creation of an object even. We take things in with perception. If we return to the sutta—what one perceives, that one thinks about; what one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates, or creates ideas about, or creates

concepts around. We take things in with perception and then we create an idea about that. We believe that idea. And with that belief, we overlay it on our experience and view everything through that belief.

This may be what is meant by Papanca: the creation of a theme, the creation of an object. We take in experience, we perceive it, and our minds turn it into an object. This is a person, this is a wall, this is a floor, this is a dead porcupine in the road. The mind, through perception, creates the idea of an object and then believes that object to be reality.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu actually uses the term "objectification" to translate Papanca—the creation of objects and the believing of that creation. Rather than understanding that what's happening is a process in our own minds, that we're relating to a perception, we relate to what we have perceived as being something true, something real.

Another possible definition might be "reification." I appreciate this term. The definition of reification is the error of treating as a concrete thing something which is not concrete but merely an idea. This is exactly what happens with perception in our usual way of relating. We don't recognize that we are relating to perception. We take it to be relating to something real, something concrete.

This becomes more poignant when we reflect on how the suttas teach that this process of Papanca—of distorted perception—is intimately connected with conflict and suffering in the world. Our beliefs, our taking in information and believing our perceptions to be reality, create the conditions for people with different perceptions to hold different views of reality and to meet in conflict there.

If you recall the story of the blind people and the elephant from a couple of weeks ago, this is precisely that dynamic. People bringing in a perception and creating a reality from that perception: an elephant is like a post, an elephant is like a hose—and then coming to blows over it. This is Papanca at work. That process of believing our perceptions to be some kind of reality.

In our culture, the notion of race has been responsible for so much conflict and suffering. There is very good scientific evidence that race as a biological phenomenon is non-existent. It is a construct of mind. There is nothing real about it. And yet the power of the delusion, the mind believing its reality, creates very real suffering in this world.

We cannot, I think as a culture, afford to dismiss this with "Oh, it's just an illusion." We really need to look at how we are perceiving things and recognize them as just processes, just perceptions—and to recognize when they are being believed in ways that create suffering in the world.

There's a very powerful film I watched a couple of years ago whose title encapsulates this notion: *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. The title itself speaks to the illusory nature of race and how much suffering it has created in the world—the power of our beliefs.

One scholar, Professor Padmasiri De Silva, says that the process of distorted perception—his translation for papañca—the process of placing every bare perception into a framework of emotions and beliefs that have come out of our past, our history, our conditioning, robs the freshness out of our experience. But we are not aware of this constant interference of the past. Because of this unawareness, which is our ignorance and our delusion, we see humanity fragmented as "me and others," "us and them," and in various stereotypes—skin color, ethnicity, language, ideology included.

This process of papañca is said in the texts to have its root in the thought "I am." This creation of a sense of identity, a sense of self. And what does that do? The creation of a sense of "I am" creates a subject, but a subject doesn't exist without an object. And so the creation of "I am" creates "us and them," "me and that." This process of papañca is in this area—this creation of separation in the world.

Through this exploration of perception, of seeing just how the examples of misperception really give us the sense of how mental creation has a huge impact on how we navigate the world, how we feel about the world. This exploration begins to point us to what Guy was pointing to this morning in the guided meditation: every experience is appearance. It's all appearances, all reflections. We reify it into something solid rather than knowing it as appearances. When we can know experience as appearance, wisdom can help us not make mistakes—not make the mistake of taking something to be real that is simply an appearance.

It's kind of mind-blowing when we start to feel into this and recognize this. Everything we experience is a creation of our minds. There is nothing that we experience that is not a creation of our minds. I happen to be of the belief that there are things out there. I think you're all out there. I don't think I'm sitting here giving a dharma talk in my mind with no one out there listening to it. But my experience is mediated through the mind. All that I can know of experience is mediated through the mind. Everything we experience is appearance.

It doesn't mean that we don't engage skillfully, or that we have free rein to do whatever we want. But we begin to recognize that we misunderstand appearances as reality. And therein lies a lot of our suffering and a lot of suffering in the world.

Suffering is created by clinging in the mind. The clinging itself is a pattern in the mind, that holding on. But what we actually want, what we're clinging to, is also nothing more than something created by the mind. Seeing this is quite freeing—when we recognize that all of it, the suffering, the clinging, what we are clinging to, is all created by the mind. In that recognition, the mind begins to understand it doesn't need to do that process. It doesn't have to create that suffering.

When we actually witness this process at work, the mind begins to learn. It gains the wisdom that allows it to let go—allows it to let go of those processes that create the suffering in our minds and allow it to ripple out into the world and impact other people as well.

We can't stop perception. We don't even want to try to stop perception. But what is helpful is to begin to recognize perception as a process. To recognize that this is a creation of mind, that what I'm responding to is a creation of mind. If we really understand this, the mind loses its traction for clinging.

I find this to be a very interesting exploration and experience, and yet it's not something—as I said earlier—to try to do. Just observe. Just watch your experience. Simplicity, simplicity of just observing. The processes can begin to become apparent. We begin to recognize experience as just appearance through the meeting. There's just a simple meeting of our experience. We don't have to believe this. We don't have to try to do it. We don't have to try to find it. Just keep observing in a very simple way.

Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 59

The Experience of Wisdom

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this profound talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella investigates wisdom not as an abstract concept but as a living, recognizable quality that arises in the mind. Drawing on teachings from Sayadaw U Tejaniya and her own practice journey, she explores how wisdom develops from initially borrowing the Buddha's perspective to experiencing direct insight that spontaneously frees the mind from reactive patterns.*
>
> *Fella explains that wisdom (paññā) is one of the five spiritual faculties (indriya) and, like mindfulness and concentration, is a conditioned quality we can cultivate. She traces wisdom's development through three stages: hearing the teachings and reflecting on them, engaging with practice to test their validity, and finally knowing directly through experience. The talk illuminates how wisdom functions in understanding the Four Noble Truths, recognizing skillful and unskillful mind states, and perceiving the conditioned nature of all experience.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is Fella's detailed description of how to recognize wisdom at work in the moment—from the subtle shift when we see frustration simply as frustration arising, to the profound insight that causes a pattern to simply vanish. She shares personal examples, including her early discovery that anger causes suffering to oneself rather than others, and how wisdom eventually arose spontaneously to prevent her mind from moving toward anger. The talk emphasizes that wisdom develops through contact with dukkha, that insights are themselves impermanent, and that our work is not to "do" wisdom but to create conditions through steady mindfulness and wise view.*

Tonight the topic is wisdom.

The word wisdom might have a range of meanings, a range of things that we can have wisdom about. But the wisdom of the Buddha is quite specific. When he began his own exploration, the question he asked was: Why do we suffer, and is it possible to be free of suffering? And so the wisdom that the Buddha teaches, and that develops in our minds as we practice, is related to understanding dukkha, understanding suffering—how we suffer and why we suffer.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya actually says that the purpose of practice is to develop this kind of wisdom, that this wisdom is what allows the mind to let go. Wisdom is what allows the mind to release the ways that we cling, the ways that we are confused, the ways that we push away, the ways that we hold on. We sometimes think we're doing a letting go, but that letting go happens with the presence of wisdom.

When I first started really tuning in to the word wisdom—and in particular for me this happened through Sayadaw U Tejaniya's teaching, as he uses the word wisdom more than any other Dharma teacher I had heard up to that point—at some point he suggested that I notice wisdom at work in the mind. This was a little mystifying to me. What does that mean? What did he mean by that? And so I began trying to explore that, to answer that question for myself.

I think I had the idea initially that either wisdom was something very grand that would be out there someday in the future, or that wisdom was something abstract and not really relevant moment to moment in experience. What we see as we begin to explore wisdom directly in our minds is that it is a factor, a quality in the mind that is conditioned—much as mindfulness, concentration, energy, and confidence are also conditioned wholesome qualities that arise in the mind. We can create supportive conditions for the cultivation of these qualities.

These qualities I just named—confidence, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom—are what are sometimes called the five faculties, the five faculties that support our minds waking up. Wisdom is one of these faculties. So it is a conditioned arising in the mind. While we can't actually do wisdom, we can cultivate conditions that allow for its arising. And we can begin to recognize it when it is arising, when it's present in our experience.

This is really what I'd like to explore this evening. What is it? What does it feel like? What is the experience of wisdom? Not an idea of what wisdom is, but what is the experience of wisdom? How can we begin to recognize it when it's working?

As with any wholesome quality, mindfulness is a great force in our minds. It has this amazing capacity: when we turn our attention to hindrances or reactive states of mind, when we turn our attention to the kilesas, the factors of mind rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion, mindfulness creates the conditions for them to appear less in our mindstream. But when we turn our mindful attention toward wholesome qualities, it creates the conditions for them to grow, to increase. And so if we can begin to recognize the experience of wisdom—not just let it slide by us, but truly recognize it—this supports it, nourishes it, to be mindful of it.

In the texts, the Eightfold Path begins with wise view. We could say that the path of practice begins with some kind of wise understanding. Understanding of what? How to orient our practice. Sayadaw U Tejaniya has said that mindfulness alone or awareness alone is not enough, that we have to have wisdom with that awareness. And so the path begins with an orientation around some wisdom teachings. We don't start in the abstract, thinking, "Oh, let me pay attention." There's an orientation that helps us look at our experience from a particular perspective.

That perspective—the most common way that wise view is described in the texts—is as an understanding of the Four Noble Truths: understanding that there is suffering, the truth of suffering; understanding the cause of suffering, recognizing the cause of suffering as craving in the mind; having a sense that there's the possibility to be free of that suffering; and recognizing the path that leads us to the ending of that suffering.

I like to simplify that to a rephrasing of the Four Noble Truths, of this wisdom that the Buddha offered: The feeling of offness in our experience, that things just aren't quite right, is created by our own minds—and it's possible to change our minds.

Embedded in this teaching of the Four Noble Truths is an understanding of states of mind that lead us towards suffering and states of mind that lead us away from suffering. Skillful qualities of mind that lead us away from suffering: the Brahmaviharas—love, compassion, joy, equanimity—the five faculties of mindfulness, faith, concentration, energy, and wisdom, the seven factors of awakening. All of these qualities that we cultivate to support freedom. And the unwholesome qualities of mind, all of those different reactive emotions, basically filter down to states of mind rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion.

As we start to explore our practice, we see this very simple, in some ways ethical, distinction of our states of mind. And that ethics isn't about right and wrong, but about suffering or not suffering. Our heart wants to orient more and more towards not suffering.

So this understanding of what is skillful and what is unskillful is another way that wisdom is framed in the teachings of the Buddha. This definition or understanding that certain actions, certain mind states, when acted on, lead us to suffering—they have that consequence. Other actions, other mind states, when acted on, lead us more towards happiness—they have that consequence. There's a cause and effect recognition built into the wisdom of the Buddha. Suffering is not random and freedom is not random.

The cause and effect nature of experience both works to catch us up and keep us hooked, but when we begin to see how this cause and effect relationship works—and see that cultivating mindfulness, wisdom, compassion, and love supports moving us away from suffering—cause and effect works in our favor to free us.

These basic definitions of wisdom are where we begin. We begin our path by having an understanding, by hearing these teachings. We probably would not find the way ourselves without hearing this perspective. It's said to be highly unlikely. The Buddha found the way; the rest of us need help. And thank goodness we have that. We have the teachings.

The path of practice, which begins with wise view, begins with hearing the teachings. We start there, but then for those of us in this room, it's not just, "Oh, heard that. That sounds like a good idea." We actually start reflecting on it. We may begin to think about whether this makes sense. Does this work? How might this work in my life? Or perhaps, "This sounds like something different."

My own experience when I met the teachings of the Buddha went something like this. I was really suffering. Somebody sent me a book that pointed out the teachings of the Buddha. I read the book, understood very little of it, but got one little piece out of it, something like: try just knowing you're having reactive emotions instead of acting on them. I thought, "Well, what good is that going to do?" Anger was my issue. If I look at anger, isn't that just going to make me more angry? But I was willing to engage, to try it.

This is how the practice begins. We hear the teachings, and something in us—perhaps some conditions in our lives—in my case, it was a condition of feeling like I'd hit bottom. I'd tried everything I could think of to find happiness in my life, and none of it had worked. And here came this very unintuitive suggestion, and I thought, "Well, nothing else has worked. Why not try this?" There was that engagement with the wisdom, engagement with trying it on.

This is the next turn of the wheel of wisdom. We reflect on it, we're willing to engage, so it's bound up with trust and confidence and faith. In my case, I didn't have any kind of outward faith in the teachings but was willing to give it a go because it sounded like something I could just try. Like running an experiment. I could try running the experiment. And lo and behold, in a very short time, I had some confirmation that this experiment is really useful.

This is the next turning of the wheel of wisdom. We start by hearing the teachings, and then we may begin reflecting on them, thinking about them, trying it out.

And then we start to know for ourselves that this is useful. That knowing for ourselves—seeing how the practice helps to free the mind—this is wisdom at work in the moment.

Most of you have probably had some kind of experience that solidified this for you. I mean, you're all sitting here in a six-week retreat. It's not just that you think this might be interesting. I certainly wouldn't have considered going on a six-week retreat after reading that first book. It took quite a bit for me to actually gain enough confidence to even sit a day-long retreat. And all of you are here in this room. There's some degree of wisdom that has you here—some experience of wisdom that has you sitting in this room.

As I started to read about all the teachings, I discovered that the suttas, if we stacked them on the stage here, would probably be three stacks of books about this high. There's a lot of teachings in the Pali Canon. And so, as I started studying and learning, I thought, wow, there's a lot of stuff here. We might think we need to understand it all.

But actually, what it feels like to me—and what I think I saw in that very first book I read, where I got this one little nugget—is that you don't need everything at once. Try looking at your reactive emotions instead of acting on them. That little nugget was enough for a tremendous amount of learning to happen simply by turning to my experience with that question: What is it like to be experiencing this reactive emotion?

In my sense, the wisdom of the Buddha is really dense. It's like the most rich, dark chocolate possible. One little tiny bit of it on your tongue and you're going to taste it. The wisdom of the Buddha is like that. One little bit that you can understand, one little bit that you can turn and apply in your experience, will take you a very long way. So you don't have to understand all the links of dependent origination and how the seven factors of awakening work with the four brahma-viharas to lead to awakening. You don't have to know all of that. When you find some wisdom that resonates, use that and look at your experience.

I think in many ways this wisdom of the Buddha comes into our system, into our organism, and works in conjunction with the way our organism functions. Our organism, like any living organism, tends towards well-being. Only delusion in our mind has us operating with a layer over that direction towards well-being, and this delusion puts on a very short-sighted perspective of well-being. If I get this next little hit, that'll be well-being. This next little hit of happiness, this next little hit of getting rid of that thing—we end up with this idea or belief that this very short-sighted way of navigating the world is as good as it gets.

But what happens as we start with this perspective, with this wise view that the Buddha offers, bringing our attention to our experience? Those two together—mindfulness and wisdom—even at the beginning when it's simply the perspective of wise view rather than the inner experience of wise view, where we're just borrowing the wisdom of the Buddha, as I did when I said, well, okay, let's see what happens if I look at my emotions instead of acting on them—as we start to do that, our system, the organism, gets a whole different set of information. It begins to recognize that the continual grasping for something in the future, the continual grasping of "I need that hit, I need to get rid of that thing, get that thing"—that the very grasping, the very aversion itself, is not well-being. The delusion of those states obscures the non-well-being of the greed and aversion itself. But when we bring mindfulness and wisdom to that perspective, the organism gets different information and begins to orient towards how to let go of those states that are very clearly not well-being.

So many of you in the interviews have talked about this—seeing how much suffering it is to want something to be other than it is. The good news is that as you're seeing that, your mind is getting an education. We can't skip over that education. We wish we could. We wish we could say, "Oh, I saw that once. I've seen that feeling of craving, that feeling of wanting things to be other than they are. That's suffering, so why do I need to keep feeling it?" But the patterns of clinging and craving are so deep that it has to be seen over and over again. And the wisdom develops in contact with that dukkha.

It's not a mistake when we are experiencing dukkha in our practice. It's the process of the mind beginning to learn. The way it thought happiness was found—it's not going to be found in that way. Over and over again this lesson needs to be relearned. So wisdom develops through contact with dukkha much of the time.

As the practice develops, there are different ways that wisdom comes into play.

can be aware of what's happening. Just in that example I gave where we're caught by something, we're sitting there—I remember so many times sitting in this hall feeling the suffering of something, and the mind saying something like, "I'd let go if I knew how. I don't know how to let go of this."

Well, in that moment the mind is essentially getting the education about the dukkha, the suffering. And that's what we seek. Can we meet that? Can we be with that? There are times when we're in that space. In that time, wisdom is not strong enough to free that moment of contraction. But we can borrow wisdom in that moment. We can potentially bring it in.

So we're aware of some kind of struggle, and we can use reflection—reminding ourselves, "Right, this is impermanent," or "This is dukkha." I love that reflection. When I finally started recognizing that, it was a great reminder for me that what I'm experiencing right now, this struggle that is being experienced—this is dukkha. And that became shorthand for me, reminding me that the Buddha asked us to understand dukkha. Again, wisdom develops in contact with dukkha. So that very reminder—"Ah, this is dukkha"—kind of let my mind settle: "Ha, right, that's what's happening. Okay, the practice is to be with it. It's not a problem. This is what we open to."

We can drop in these reminders. Sometimes even consciously using mental reminders, like little wisdom nuggets that we drop into our meditation, can be very helpful at times when we're struggling. I have some favorites. "This is dukkha" is one of them. "This is nature"—we've talked about that. This is one that Sayadaw U Tejaniya offers: "This is nature, what's happening right now. Of course this is what's happening right now. It really couldn't be any other way."

Again, a kind of orientation to the cause-and-effect nature, the conditioned nature of what's arising in this moment. It's been conditioned based on—well, actually the entirety of the universe up until this moment. What's arising right now is what's arising. It's not random. And it's conditioned based on our experience, how we're relating to it right now. This is nature. This is what's growing in this moment. Can I know that?

At different times we may be able to see through certain kinds of struggle, certain contractions. We're experiencing something—for instance, we might be seeing something happen and recognize that there's a relationship of aversion to it. Over time we begin to see there's a skill that develops. "Oh right, I can check the attitude. Oh right, what's happening is there's aversion going on." The mind begins to be able to have the skill not only to remember the tools, but in that moment the tools kind of draw the wisdom to the surface, and experience shifts.

This is a kind of intermediate time where wisdom is beginning to operate. We see there's a kind of intuition, or we've practiced certain ways for a while using the tools that we offer—checking the attitude, for instance, or just meeting experience. And those tools become kind of intuitive. As we see a struggle happen, we remember, "Oh right, there's struggle happening. What's my relationship to what's happening? There's some relationship. Oh—I want it to be different. That's what's going on right now." So we see that.

And in the very seeing of it, there's a little space that's created. And it's not so much of a struggle anymore. So we see the little space created. Oh, this is what's happening. That's wisdom at work in that moment.

There can be a kind of feeling that we're consciously drawing on our tools and practices at that point. But in the moment of orienting to, "Oh, let me look at it this way," suddenly there's a feeling of freedom, a feeling of at least loosening or letting go around the suffering. And then there's a kind of wisdom that we don't even have to try to make work. It's like when wisdom gets very strong, when the conditions in the mind are right, sometimes wisdom just comes in—you don't even have to think about what to do. Wisdom just comes in and makes a choice.

An example of this from my own practice: I think my very first example of this unfolded over the course of a number of weeks. I had been observing anger in my experience for many, many weeks. And one bit of wisdom that was developing during that time was that when I'm experiencing anger, I'm suffering. That kind of took me by surprise. I think I mentioned the other day in the metta session that sometimes I've had the idea that I want somebody to suffer from my anger. In my first few months of practice, I really saw that when anger was coming up, some part of my mind believed that the person I was angry with was going to be suffering because I was angry.

And then came the recognition: they don't even know I'm angry. They're 7,000 miles away. I'm in the middle of the South Pacific and that person's in California. That person is not being touched by this anger, but I am burning up. This is suffering. So there was a very clear understanding and a kind of mind-blowing recognition: oh my gosh, I thought this was supposed to be making that person miserable, and it's making me miserable. I mean, it's kind of like, "duh," but it's amazing how deluded our minds are.

So in any case, there was that recognition, that seeing of "anger is suffering," over the course of a number of weeks of just being curious about it—being curious about what it's like to be experiencing anger.

And then one day I was doing something, and as I was doing this thing, a thought arose in my mind about the person I was angry with. In that moment, the mind started heading towards—as the person arose in my mind, it started heading towards the anger. But in that moment the mind saw it was headed towards suffering. In that moment the mind knew: that way lies suffering. Enough experience, as I said—part of what our practice is, is to really get that the reactive states are dukkha. And so as the mind saw the thought and saw the kind of inclination to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry, as that inclination was seen, wisdom came in and said, "That way lies suffering. I don't think so."

I was stunned. I did not try to not become angry. Wisdom arose in that moment. It was years before I knew that was what happened. But that's an example of wisdom coming in and taking the lead. Wisdom knows: that way lies suffering, don't go there. I didn't have to do it. And so this is where wisdom can become very strong.

Now, it may sound like we start by thinking about or reflecting on and bringing in and borrowing wisdom, and then there's this period of time where we're able to navigate and bring in our practices, and wisdom just gets deeper and deeper and deeper. It doesn't quite work like that. There are certain—it seems to me that there are certain—well, there are conditions. Wisdom is a conditioned factor of the mind. There are times when that wisdom is available and times when conditions don't allow for it to be there.

Just a simple example that you all recognize: there are times of the day when the mind is more tired. Conditions such as how much food you've had or how much sleep you've had affect how much connection there can be to the present moment experience. So various conditions make the wisdom more or less available at times. And so the very same kinds of things—patterns, especially our habitual patterns, the ones we see over and over again—there are times when we see them and think, "Oh, there's that pattern. Hi, pattern."

We just get a different perspective on it, and the mind is pretty balanced about it. Another time later that same day, maybe we're completely caught by that pattern. This is not some kind of personal failing. This is really just the conditioned nature of wisdom. Sometimes the conditions are such that it's more available than others. And we just keep doing the best we can.

So sometimes we have to go back to drawing on borrowed wisdom. "Oh right, right, this is just anger." Okay. And whatever we try doesn't seem to have inroads into the experience of the dukkha. "Oh, this is dukkha. Okay, this is dukkha." Again, borrowing the wisdom, drawing on the wisdom that we know but maybe don't have experiential access to in that moment. It's not a failing when this kind of cycling happens. It is the nature of the mind.

And then there are times when certain kinds of patterns are more seen through. We may see through a certain pattern completely. At one point I had an insight around a particular anger with a particular person, and that pattern fell away. So there was some wisdom that developed around that particular pattern. But that didn't mean that all the anger went away. Wisdom seems to drop particular kinds of delusion, and we have many, many ways the mind holds delusion.

So we learn. Just like sometimes we gain little bits of wisdom, and then that wisdom gets obscured, and then it comes back. There are a few ways I've already been describing how we might experience wisdom. That little shift of "oh, this is just frustration"—when we see something just as something arising in the present moment, that's wisdom at work. When we can see, "Oh, this is just frustration arising," there can be a shift of perspective around a pattern that allows us to just watch it as a pattern instead of being caught by it or believing it means something about us.

This kind of shift sometimes feels like we've put our mind into neutral. If a car is traveling really fast down the freeway and you put the car into neutral, the car doesn't stop. But you know it's going to stop, because you're no longer giving it gas and it's just in neutral. This shift of perspective—"Oh, this is just..."—you can just watch a pattern unfolding and not be caught in it. That's like the mind is in neutral. It allows the pattern to unwind in its own time. This is wisdom at work. This is a form of wisdom at work. When you have that capacity, wisdom is present in the mind.

Part of my aim, I think, the purpose in offering this talk, is to help you recognize that you all have a lot of wisdom. It works in your mind a lot. That simple experience of "oh"—wisdom at work.

Sometimes we have maybe a little bit stronger wisdom that sees something in the moment so clearly. The mind is just so interested and curious and right there with it, and the experience vanishes. Again, that's wisdom at work.

I remember one time on my first three-month course, during the transition between the first half and second half. My first half teachers left, and the second half teachers came in. I felt abandoned by my first half teachers. I was sitting in the yoga room feeling really sorry for myself, feeling abandoned. I felt like a three-year-old. I was just feeling that. I was aware of it. I was feeling it, and I was practicing compassion for myself, so I was kind of feeling into it.

But at some point the mind got really curious. "Well, what is this? What is this feeling of abandonment anyway?" And it's like I turned to look at it and it was gone. "What? Where did it go?" I was very confused at that moment.

When my second half teacher came and I reported this experience to her, my original interpretation was that I must not know how to investigate emotions, because it disappeared when I tried to look at it. So I reported to her, "I don't know how to investigate emotions."

And she says, well, tell me what you saw. And I say, well, I saw when I turned to look at it, it disappeared. And she said, trust your experience.

So that was a case where wisdom was at work and I thought it was delusion. When I described the experience to her a little more clearly—that I was being with it with compassion, and then there was this real interest that arose that said, "Well, what is this anyway?"—and then poof! She said that's wisdom at work. The curiosity.

She said sometimes when we're hanging out with emotions like that, being with them with compassion, there's a little bit of a hook into it. And this just little bit of curiosity lets that hook go. If we go back to the car analogy, in that kind of scenario, it's like the car doesn't go into neutral—the car just disappears. It doesn't come to a stop; it just vanishes, that pattern. It just goes. That's another way that wisdom can be seen.

And there's another form of wisdom that many of you have talked about in interviews, and that is recognizing essentially when reactive emotions are not happening—the non-arising of reactive emotions, the non-arising of the hindrances. We've talked about this, recognizing when the hindrances are absent.

There are certain ways this non-arising of reactive emotion might be experienced. We might recognize that at particular places in our day, we tend to get caught up in reactivity, and we learn how to navigate that time or place in order to avoid that hindrance from arising. An example of this would be something like noticing that going into the dining hall, judgments tend to arise. Many of you have talked about this also—just how much judgment arises there. It's like the dining hall is a sea for judgments: self-judgments, other judgments. Am I taking more food, less food? It's a minefield of judgment in the dining hall.

If you notice that going into the dining room involves a lot of judgment, you could think, okay, let me avoid going in the dining room. Well, that might not work because you need your food. But you could also explore bringing mindfulness to the seeing process. Joseph gives this suggestion that if you notice there's judgment for you walking into the dining room, as soon as you cross that door, start noting seeing. Know that seeing is happening.

That very orientation towards knowing that seeing is happening begins to short-circuit the movement to reactivity. Because the reactivity, the judgment, arises because we don't recognize that seeing is happening. Thought arises from seeing, and then the idea of more or less arises from that thought. So when we can just be right with the seeing, it can avoid the arising of that defilement.

That's one way we can know the non-arising of defilement. We can be practicing in a particular way—we learn what leads to the defilement and learn how to avoid that.

Another way that many of you have talked about in the last few weeks is beginning to see that whatever's going on right now, three or four weeks ago when this kind of thing was happening, you were way more reactive. So you start to see a lessening of reactivity. The conditions are such that you almost should be reactive, but you're not. Another way that we can see the non-arising of defilement. Again, wisdom at work there. Wisdom is present in that time.

It's a quieter kind of wisdom. It's not like the kind of wisdom that's big, mind-blowing, earth-shattering. We think of wisdom or insights as being these big kabooms. I certainly thought that was the way it was going to be. I was going to have one big insight and then I would be done. But it's much more these small, little shifts of understanding that happen. And this is one way we begin to see—oh, wow, I'm not as reactive as I was. A whole pattern of reactivity that I know would have made me really crazy here, but now it's just a little bit of agitation. There's not a whole big pattern of aversion and going off the deep end.

So we see the weakening of the defilements, the weakening of reactivity, as an increase of wisdom. We can also know the mind is free of reactivity when we see calm, equanimity, the brahmaviharas. When those are present in the mind, these also can indicate that wisdom is present. Balance of mind.

We recognize that when the mind is free of reactivity, wisdom is often present—though not always. Sometimes the mind can be temporarily free of defilement through suppression, through concentration. We can have these periods of calm and peace that arise simply from being very concentrated. But at the same time, there's the possibility for wisdom to grow there, because in that state we see just how optional our reactive patterns are. We're in a place where we're not reacting to things through concentration, and the mind learns that the reactivity actually doesn't add anything useful. So wisdom can grow in that situation too, even if it's concentration that's keeping the hindrances at bay.

And then there are moments of insight, moments of wisdom that happen around clear seeing of impermanence, the unreliable nature of experience, the conditioned nature of experience, seeing the not-self nature of experience. As the mind begins to see just how rapidly things are changing, at a very deep level it understands there's no point in clinging to this. It's just going to vanish. That's the wisdom around impermanence.

There are times when we see some perhaps beautiful emotion, a beautiful state of mind. Sometimes I find after an insight, after a clear seeing of dukkha, there can be this feeling of bliss—*oh, I figured it out, I understood something*. And there can be a kind of sinking into that bliss. But that bliss will bite you at some point.

I had one really clear recognition around this. I saw a very strong pattern—just the conditioned nature of it and how it was simply a creation of the mind. It was like self-hatred just *poofed*. And the next moment was *oh, bliss, no more self-hatred*. And the next moment was *no, this is just for this moment*. This seeing, this insight, this recognition, this moment of wisdom is conditioned in this moment. Insights are impermanent.

That recognition matters, because insights can lead to some beautiful states of mind, and yet we can cling to those. When we cling to something wholesome or beautiful, we will suffer when it goes. As the mind begins to deeply understand the impermanent nature of those pleasant experiences, it understands the dukkha of holding to that, the suffering of holding to that. And it just doesn't do it. Wisdom simply says there's no point. There's no point in holding on to that. It's dukkha to hold on to that.

When we see a pattern as conditioned, as simply an arising phenomenon, we watch it arise. Sometimes we can see the conditions themselves arising. A thought arose in the mind, and that thought led to this feeling, and that feeling led to this belief. It's like watching dominoes fall. And we see—*who did that?* This is just conditioned unfolding. Not me, not mine. The mind just lets go. These are deeper levels of wisdom at work in the mind.

Deep insight can happen around a pattern in a moment, and then the next day it sometimes seems so obvious—seeing through something, wisdom at work in the mind. When wisdom is present and we're seeing through a particular kind of delusion really clearly, it seems so obvious. How could we not see it? We've figured it out. It feels like we've figured it out.

It's really helpful to recognize, rather than *oh, I figured it out*, that this is wisdom at work in this moment. To acknowledge that this is wisdom at work in this moment. This helps us recognize the impermanent nature of understanding. It comes and goes, conditioned, based on conditions.

We have an insight into something, and it seems so obvious. Then two hours later, we think, "Wow, I guess it wasn't so obvious, because I have no idea why it seemed so clear." The veil comes back. The delusion returns.

Again, this is not a personal failing. It's just the practice. It's the conditions of the mind.

Learning to recognize these moments of wisdom, learning to recognize when wisdom is at work in the mind—this will strengthen wisdom. Wisdom is at work in all of your minds. These insights, when we see them, when we can recognize, "Oh, this is wisdom at work," it inspires some confidence.

It works in a spiral nature. As we see something clearly, it encourages us to keep looking, to keep exploring. Trust and wisdom feed off of each other. As we see something clearly with wisdom, it feeds the trust. And then when we're no longer in that place of seeing clearly, we can draw on that trust. The practice spirals deeper.

Our work is not to *do* wisdom, because we can't do it. Our work is not to *do* insight. Insight arises based on conditions. And the conditions are the steady mindfulness, the simplicity of meeting moment-to-moment experience with the perspective of wise view—this curiosity about how suffering is created in the mind, and how it is possible for it to release.

CHAPTER 60

Crossing The Flood

Andrea Fella · 55 min

In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella examines two of the Buddha's most illuminating analogies for the spiritual path: the simile of the raft and the teaching on crossing the flood. The flood represents the torrents of greed, aversion, and delusion that keep us submerged in suffering, while the near shore symbolizes our identification with self and the far shore represents Nibbāna—freedom from clinging.

Drawing from the Alagaddūpama Sutta (MN 22) and the Ogha-taraṇa Sutta (SN 1.1), Fella explores how we build our raft moment by moment from present experience, bound together with mindfulness and wisdom. She emphasizes that crossing the flood means direct contact with our difficulties—we don't float above them but meet greed, aversion, and delusion with the Eightfold Path. The Buddha's paradoxical instruction to cross "by neither tarrying nor hurrying" becomes a practical guide: when we tarry (through dullness, indulgence, or clinging), we sink; when we hurry (through restlessness or aversion), we get swept away.

Fella offers personal reflections on identity formation, self-hatred, and the subtle ways we cling even to wholesome states and the practice itself. She explains how suffering becomes our guide for recognizing when our relationship to practice needs examination. The talk culminates in understanding that the fully awakened mind doesn't carry the Dhamma as a burden but naturally embodies the tenfold path, living freedom in every moment—whether at a retreat center or in daily life.

When I reflect on the Buddha's teaching, the way it's presented in the suttas, I'm amazed at the brilliance of how he portrayed the teachings. In particular, I love the way he uses analogies. He seemed to be a master of analogies. I like analogies because they can speak to us really directly. And yet when I spend time with the Buddha's analogies, not only do they speak to us directly, but they also bear a lot of fruit in unpacking them a little bit and exploring them in some depth.

That's what I'd like to do tonight—to look at an analogy the Buddha used for the path of practice: that of crossing the flood. To do this I will explore two different texts that use this analogy of crossing the flood as representing what we do when we engage in this path of practice.

In one of the flood analogies, the flood being an expanse of water, the Buddha talks about needing to cross this expanse to get to the other side, where this side represents where we are now, our ordinary everyday life, and the other shore represents freedom. We have to cross this difficult flood to move from our ordinary everyday way of being to freedom.

The Buddha equates this flood with the floods of greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind. There's actually one list that the Buddha talked about called the four floods: the floods of sensuality, of existence, of views, and of ignorance. These inclinations in our everyday mind tend to keep us swept away, tend to keep us submerged, caught in our patterns, caught in our habits, caught in the ways that we struggle and suffer.

In my own understanding of this flood, it does connect back to the patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind—all of those *kilesas,* those patterns that arise, the many forms of patterns that arise from those basic three roots. We get swept away. We drown, literally almost a feeling of drowning in these states of mind.

We try to arrange things to suit us. That's our way of dealing with things on this shore—trying to figure out how we can arrange the world so that we'll have this little moment of happiness, get rid of this little moment of aversion. We try to arrange things to suit us but it doesn't last long. We get submerged again. We struggle, we swim a little bit, we come up for air, we maybe get things arranged for another few moments, we get a gasp of air, and then we're submerged again. Because it's just not possible to do this arranging. It's a kind of endless running just to find these little moments of happiness.

We're under the delusion that this is as good as it gets. If I could string together moments of happiness, even though I know that they go away, but if I can just create the situation where I have this moment and this moment and this moment of happiness, then that would be what happiness was. That would be as good as it gets. But it takes so much work to do that—endless arranging. As soon as we arrange something, it's already falling apart.

In *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, there's a part where Alice meets the Red Queen and suddenly the Red Queen just starts tearing off at a run. Alice struggles to keep up with her, but as she's running, she realizes they're not getting anywhere. And the Red Queen says, "Yes, now here you see it takes all the running you can do to stay in one place." That's the way we actually operate. We try to accumulate and grab on, and it takes so much effort to do this.

This is the flood—the flood of greed, of aversion, of delusion. And how do we cross this flood? There are two similes for this, two texts that explore this.

The first is very famous. I'm sure most of you, if not all of you, have heard of this simile: the simile of the raft. I'll read it to you and we'll explore the various parts of the analogy together.

The Buddha said: "Bhikkhus, I shall show you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping." And I'll come back to this point. "Listen and attend closely to what I shall say."

"Yes, Venerable Sir," the bhikkhus replied.

The Blessed One said this: "Bhikkhus, suppose one in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water whose near shore was dangerous and fearful and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferry boat or bridge for going to the far shore."

This is the near shore of our usual way of being. In another version of this text, the Buddha equates the near shore with identification, with identity, with selfing. This near shore, the way we typically engage in our lives, is so much bound up in this process of creating identities—many identities. We actually don't just have one self; we have many selves, which we begin to see as we explore what's going on in our minds. Our senses of selves are ways that we arrange ourselves in order to meet the world in certain ways, ways that we try to make ourselves feel stable, secure. And yet they're anything but stable and secure, these identities that we have.

As we cling to an identity, as we orient around an identity, we find that we must make sure other people agree with that identity—that they see us the way we see ourselves. And if they don't, we have to convince them to see us as we do. There's an endless need not only to arrange our world but to arrange ourselves in order to prop up these identities. Even identities that are uncomfortable. We spend a tremendous amount of effort propping up the identities of self-hatred, for instance. I have a lot of personal experience with that as an identity. The familiarity of those contractions around self-hatred—somehow it's like slipping into an old glove. Even though very uncomfortable, it feels somehow like, "Yes, I know this at least. I don't have to jump out of this familiar glove to be in a different way."

And so there's this endless need to prop up identity, and we suffer when others don't see us in the way we want to see ourselves, or when experience intervenes and we see ourselves clearly—"Oh, I'm not the perfect yogi. I'm not the one who's the best at everything." This was one of my patterns: a back and forth between feeling like, "Yes, I can do this, I'm good at this, I'm probably the best yogi here," versus those moments

when experience obviously proved that I was not always continuously perfectly mindful—unable to meet my own standards of perfection. And so I would spin into self-hatred.

It doesn't just take others to burst these bubbles. Our own experience will burst the bubble of our identity. And then we feel like we've failed, we've done something wrong, we're bad, we're hopeless. This is the near shore: identity, the way we typically and habitually engage with others, with ourselves, with the world.

And then the expanse of water being the floods of greed, aversion, and delusion—back to the analogy—and the far shore: safety, freedom. The Buddha equates this with Nibbāna in his teaching. He actually unpacked this analogy himself, saying, "I'll give you this simile and then I'll tell you what the parts mean." And he said the far shore is Nibbāna: freedom from clinging, freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion. This is the most simple definition of Nibbāna found in the texts: "Freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, freedom from delusion—this indeed is Nibbāna," the word of the Buddha.

I particularly like that framing of freedom, because I can envision the possibility of life here and now without greed, aversion, and delusion. It doesn't necessarily feel like it needs some transcendent, otherworldly domain. In this very life, this possibility of freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, freedom from delusion.

So the analogy continues. This person in the course of a journey has seen this expanse of water. That person thought, "There is this great expanse of water whose near shore is dangerous and fearful and whose further shore is safe and free from fear. But there's no ferryboat or bridge for going to the far shore. Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore." And then the person collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with hands and feet, got safely across to the far shore.

The raft in this analogy is how we cross the flood. The text says, "Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft"—just gathering what's nearby to create something with which to cross the flood. We build the raft out of what's very close at hand.

Ajahn Sumedho, in discussing this analogy, said, "The Buddha referred to his teaching as a raft which you can make out of the things around you. You don't have to build a special motorboat or a submarine or a luxury liner. A raft is something you make from the things around just to get across to the other shore. We're not trying to make a super-duper vehicle. We're able to use what's around us for enlightenment."

And so what are the grass, the leaves, the twigs, the things that are in the immediate environment? This is our present moment experience—just what's here now. We gather it, we bring it together with mindfulness and wisdom. To me it's as if mindfulness and wisdom are the binding that puts together all of the grass and leaves and twigs and allows us to get across to the far shore. We build our raft out of our sense experience together with the Eightfold Path. In another teaching, the Buddha equated the raft with the Eightfold Path.

So the teachings support us in building this raft. The raft is built not simply with teachings, though—it is the meeting of those teachings and the application of those teachings to our direct experience. Really, it feels like we build our raft moment to moment as we cross greed, aversion, and delusion. Actually, the raft is built by meeting greed, aversion, and delusion. We don't cross the flood by magically elevating somehow and floating over the surface of it. We are right in contact with the flood as we cross it.

In this analogy, we build a raft out of leaves and twigs. If you imagine yourself floating on such a raft, you are not going to be dry. In fact, you're using your hands and your feet to propel the raft. That's the effort that we make. We meet the flood in order to cross the flood. We meet greed, aversion, and delusion with mindfulness, with wisdom, with concentration, with wise view, with wise intention, with a non-harming attitude, with kindness.

It's not a mistake when we turn with mindfulness to our experience. Meeting the flood, it's not a mistake when we see suffering. It's not a mistake—it's how the path unfolds. We meet the suffering and understand it in a different way. If we didn't have the Eightfold Path, we'd be stuck on the near shore.

So we see the layers of anger, aversion, hostility, frustration, confusion, desire, pride, longing. Some things we know are there, and other things we are taken aback by as we see them. That self-hatred that I ran into—I had no idea that I had so much self-hatred in my mind until I started looking at the mind.

Being on the raft doesn't create all of the things that are revealed. It reveals them. It reveals the deeper undercurrents of the flood. And because it's revealing them with some degree of mindfulness and wisdom, some degree of ability to meet them, we are

not pulled under. These patterns, these habits, come into consciousness and have the possibility to be released. Brought into consciousness, they have much less opportunity to make our choices for us. If they're making our choices for us, we'd be submerged again. We have the Dharma to help us stay afloat with all of the difficulties.

I'm going to leave this analogy for a little while. I'll come back to it and move to another one.

This is another sutta where the Buddha talks about crossing the flood. In this sutta it's said that a deva, a heavenly being, came to the Buddha while he was meditating and approached him. This heavenly being approached the Buddha and began a conversation with him, saying, "How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?"

"By not halting, friend, and by not straining, I crossed the flood."

"But how is it, dear sir, that by not halting and by not straining, you crossed the flood?"

"When I came to a standstill, friend, then I sank. But when I struggled, I got swept away. It is in this way, by not halting and not straining, that I crossed the flood."

Another translation of this uses language I particularly like. These are all Pali words being translated, and so different English words can be used to convey the meaning. The translation that I used over and over again in my practice, this image, this analogy: "By neither tarrying nor hurrying, I crossed the flood. When I tarried, I sank. When I hurried, I got swept away. And so by neither tarrying nor hurrying, I crossed the flood."

The commentaries say that this image of neither tarrying nor hurrying and crossing the flood is meant to be somewhat paradoxical. Because if you think about how you might cross a flood—if it's a flood of water across a wash—you might find a foothold on that flood, find a place where you can stand firmly, then get both feet there and stand, then search for another place and move to that one quickly. The commentaries say that this is meant to make us stop a little bit. It's like, well, that's not how you normally would cross a flood, a raging stream. It's not how you would cross it, by just slowly, methodically moving.

I love this part. It can slip right by you. "When I tarried, I sank. When I struggled, I got swept away. In this way, friend, by not tarrying and not hurrying, I crossed the flood."

The Buddha says, "When I tarried, I sank." He sank! He sank in his practice. He didn't do it perfectly. It wasn't one easy thing from one end of his path to another. He had to experiment. He tarried, he sank. He hurried, he got swept away. He learned from that.

And so I take inspiration from this. The Buddha too tarried and sank. The Buddha too hurried and got swept away and learned from that. He tried different things and noticed what was helpful, what wasn't helpful.

So tarrying—what does it mean to tarry in our practice? What does it mean to tarry as we cross the flood? There are a number of different ways that this image of tarrying might resonate.

Sleepiness, dullness—when that part of the mind is present, when we have those states of mind, we sink into oblivion. Laziness. Indulgence in thought. Sometimes it feels like we're caught in whirlpools of thought, another way of sinking, tarrying.

When we get greedy for something, we latch onto it, we hold onto it thinking, "This is it!" And what are we doing? Basically we're grabbing onto a heavy rock and we're sinking in our flood. We're tarrying with that sense desire.

Aversion is a similar kind of thing actually. At one point I recognized—and I'm a self-professed aversive type—what I recognized for myself around aversion is that I would get stuck to something. If I didn't want this thing, I would be like stuck to it with sticky glue trying to get rid of it. Not this, not this, not this, not this. And in that way, we are stuck, we are sinking, we are tarrying when we're aversive also. Again, it's a form of clinging, this aversion. Clinging to "not this."

Stuck to views—a very powerful way of tarrying. Some idea or other we have: it's like this, it needs to be like this, it's supposed to be like this, this is wrong, this is right. All of those keep us stuck in one place, not able to just meet this moment and move to the next moment.

Hurrying. How do we hurry across? Where do we get swept away?

Restlessness is the obvious analogy for this—the mind not able to meet experience moment to moment. But also anxiousness for results, over-efforting. When we're trying so hard, running so hard to stay in one place.

Aversion and greed can also have this quality. Aversion and greed are not always tarrying. Aversion and greed can be rushing over experience. Greed rushing not to this experience but to the next experience where pleasure will be. Aversion: don't want to be with this one, let's get to the next one.

So depending on how we hold in our minds, how we are relating to greed and aversion, it may be that we're just skimming across experience. Sometimes we get stuck to experience. Sometimes we skim across experience.

And the Buddha suggested neither tarrying nor hurrying. Meet each experience.

Give each experience its due. Contact with it. But not sticking to it and not slipping off of it.

For me, this image of neither tarrying nor hurrying—just meeting each moment of experience, really meeting each moment, and then the next moment, and then the next moment—this sutta provided me with a little mantra for my practice: Neither tarrying nor hurrying. Just this moment. Am I mindful? Am I here? And this moment, and this moment, and this moment.

Giving each experience its due, meeting it, but not clinging to it. We can't really cling to it. It's already changing. It's already slipping away. The next moment is arising. Meet that moment. It's already slipping away. Every moment, neither tarrying nor hurrying. Meeting things we like with balance of mind—not holding on to them, trying to keep them, or getting lost in thoughts about how to control it or fix it, how to keep it, always have it, get more of it. Meeting things we don't like with balance of mind. Really meeting it. Not rushing over it to cover it up. Not trying to get rid of it by using the practice. Really meeting it. Understanding it. Not by trying to stop and fix or change it. Moment by moment. Each moment, neither tarrying nor hurrying.

This analogy of crossing the flood has us in direct contact with the flood. There's no raft. We're just right there walking with the water. And so to me, these two analogies come together where it feels like what we're doing as we cross the flood, if we bring the analogy of the raft back in, is building the raft out of the stream with the Dhamma.

So back to the raft analogy. After having made an effort with hands and feet and gotten safely across to the far shore, one might think: "This raft has been very helpful to me. Since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it onto my shoulder and then go wherever I want." Now Bhikkhus, what do you think? By doing so, would that man be doing what should be done with the raft? "No, Venerable Sir." By doing what would the man be doing what should be done with that raft? "Here, Bhikkhus, when he had got across and arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me. Since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to haul it onto the dry land or set it adrift in the water and then go wherever I want.'" Now, Bhikkhus, it is by so doing

that that person would be doing what should be done with the raft. "So I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping. When you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings, how much more so things contrary to the teachings."

And so this famous statement: letting go even of the Dhamma, letting go even of the teachings. In some translations it says let go even of wholesome states, how much more so unwholesome states. Let go of clinging to the teachings, let go of clinging to the wholesome states. It's not that we have to push away the wholesome states, it's not that we push away the Dhamma, but carrying around the Dhamma with us as if it's a raft on our head—it's like holding a view and saying, "This is the Dhamma, this is the Dhamma, this is the Dhamma," instead of just living life freely.

So the Buddha points to not clinging even to wholesome states, not even to the Dhamma. But in this analogy, the person has crossed to the far shore using the Dhamma. You can't let go of the raft in the middle of the flood. We do have to use the teachings.

Even sometimes we cling to the teachings while we're crossing the flood. We can't let go too soon. This is sometimes a danger of seeing or hearing this kind of teaching—we think, "Oh, I want to be mindful. I'm clinging to mindfulness, therefore I shouldn't be mindful." That wouldn't get us very far. We can't think that way. We have to build the raft.

So we use the teachings. We use the teachings to cross the flood. And while we are using the teachings, while we are engaged with the practice, there may be times that we are actually creating identities as a meditator. There's likely to be some clinging in the way that we use the practice as we are crossing the flood.

I've certainly seen this in my own practice. In my very first meditation retreat, my very first ten-day retreat, I recognized that I was creating an identity of myself as a meditator. And yet there was at least some amount of wisdom that could see this. I saw, "Yes, I'm creating this identity." And I realized from hearing the teachings that this too would have to go someday. But I saw that this identity was really helpful right now. It was helping me overcome things far more problematic, far more submerging, than an identity as a meditator—self-hatred, for example.

And so we use the teachings. We may be clinging to the teachings, or craving, holding on to those teachings that will help us let go of more unwholesome things. There's actually one sutta that speaks to this. It talks about different ways that we use things

that seem unwholesome to overcome their very nature: "This body comes into being through craving, and yet it is by relying on craving that craving is to be abandoned. By relying on craving, craving is to be abandoned. Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? There is a case where one hears, 'This person named such and such, they say, through the ending of fermentations, has entered and remains in the fermentation-free awareness release and discernment release, having known and realized them in the here and now.' When hearing that, the thought occurs to one, 'I hope that I too will, through the ending of the fermentations, enter and remain in the fermentation-free awareness release and discernment release, having known and realized them for myself in the here and now.' Then at a later time, one abandons craving, having relied on craving."

And so craving to move to the far shore supports us to get there. And in the process, we do have to begin to recognize when the craving for the practice, the craving for the path, the craving for freedom is in our way. When is it in our way, and when is it not in our way? I would encourage you to use suffering as a guide there.

At times early in our practice, dukkha is really obvious. It's afflictive emotions—it's anger, it's hostility, it's self-hatred, it's pride, it's all of the variety of difficult states that we go through in our daily lives. And as we practice, as we meet that with mindfulness, as we engage in the work of the path, some of those may start to settle down. They may begin to fall away. Some parts may let go and release. And at that point, some subtler kinds of craving may become obvious. As the mind settles down its ways of craving in the world, we begin to see how the craving is operating in the practice itself. We begin to see some stress in those states that have supported our ability to meet experience. There's not stress in the wholesome states themselves, but in our clinging to them, our doing of them.

Here are some examples. Probably the most obvious one that we meet early in our practice is an agenda around mindfulness—wanting something painful or difficult to go away. When we practice for a little while, we begin to see, "Oh, when I meet something difficult with mindfulness, it doesn't hurt as much anymore." And so then we start turning toward painful experience. I remember turning my attention to very painful experience, thinking, "Oh, if I just get in there close enough, it won't be painful anymore"—basically using aversion in the mind to try to get the mind close to the experience. And there was a lot of suffering in that.

So some of these agendas—we'll start to see agendas around mindfulness. This is a form of clinging to mindfulness. When we start to see suffering around the practice, we turn to that too. It doesn't mean to abandon the wholesome states; it doesn't mean to

abandon mindfulness. It means to look at how we are engaged in the practice. What is our relationship to the practice? We don't have to let go of mindfulness—only the agenda.

Another example, this one from a more recent time in my practice: my mind has a very strong capacity for investigation. It sees things very clearly, with very little work on my part really. I can't take any credit for this investigative mind—I came into the world this way. And yet there's been a lot of identification around that, a lot of *doing* of the investigation. And boy, it served me really well for many, many, many years. Even in propping myself up, thinking "I'm really good at this kind of mode," it was still serving me in so many ways.

At a certain point in my practice, the suffering around the investigation, the doing of it, began to be very painful. When I would try to turn my attention and practice by doing the investigation, there would be so much suffering. And this was a real conundrum for me. It's like, how do I investigate investigation? How do I deal with this? What do I do here?

The understanding around that happened slowly over maybe eighteen months of just beginning to try, exploring, tarrying and hurrying around this pattern of investigation. And at some point the mind recognized: this mind investigates. Let it investigate. But don't jump on the bandwagon of investigation and try to do it. And so that was my clinging—I had owned the investigation.

It's not that the investigation stops. That's needed. Mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, equanimity—the seven factors of awakening, beautiful states of mind that are necessary for our path—and yet we can cling to every one of them. And again, sometimes that clinging will be supporting us to let go of something more painful, more unwholesome. At some point, the suffering of that clinging will begin to be obvious, and that's when we need to turn to it and explore, understand: what's that suffering about? So let suffering be your guide around that.

The Buddha actually talked about this kind of staged release in his own practice. He said: "Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisatta, I too clearly saw, as it actually was with proper wisdom, how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them. But as long as I did not attain to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I could still be attracted to sensual pleasures. But when I clearly saw, as it actually is with proper wisdom, how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, and I at-

tained to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, the rapture and pleasure of concentration, or to something more peaceful than that—freedom—then I recognized that I was no longer attracted to sensual pleasures."

And so we can use, in some ways, the pleasure of concentration to help us let go of the pull towards pleasure in the sense realm. We see there is no comparison in terms of the pleasure and peace that are available from the practice.

So the teaching of the simile of the raft points us to eventually letting go altogether of the raft, letting go of the teachings altogether. But what is the mind of someone who has completely liberated themselves? The mind of someone who's free from greed, aversion, and delusion.

There's a description in the suttas of such a person. There are different descriptions; I'll just read this one: "In one of right view, right intention comes into being. In one of right intention, right speech comes into being. In one of right speech, right action comes into being. In one of right action, right livelihood comes into being. In one of right livelihood, right effort comes into being. In one of right effort, right mindfulness comes into being. In one of right mindfulness, right concentration comes into being. In one of right concentration, right knowledge comes into being. In one of right knowledge, right release comes into being. Thus, the path of the disciple in higher training possesses eight factors. The path of the arahant possesses ten factors."

And to me what this says is that an arahant, someone who is fully awakened—the word is *possesses* this tenfold path, the eightfold path plus right knowledge and right release. It is in someone who is free, in their very being, that they are living the Dharma. They don't have to hold it up on their head and say, "This is the Dharma."

They are the Dharma. They are living the path very naturally.

And so, letting go of the Dharma—someone who has crossed the flood, they don't need the teachings. They are living the life of freedom. Very naturally, the awakened mind chooses skillfully.

Transcending the teachings, transcending virtue, doesn't mean that we wouldn't behave ethically. The expression of someone who is free walks in the world with compassion, with wisdom, with love, living in the world in a very ethical way.

And so crossing the flood—this is what we're doing here, participating all together as a community in this process. This community will be going our separate ways in a couple of days, yet we continue wherever we are. The flood crossing does not just happen here in this room at IMS. Every moment of our lives we can build our raft, whether we're here or in our workplace, meeting our flood moment to moment.

CHAPTER 61

Supports for Continuity

Andrea Fella · 57 min

> *In this talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers practical guidance on establishing and maintaining continuity of mindfulness—what the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta describes as the 'establishing of mindfulness.' She explains how this continuity supports both concentration (samādhi) and the development of insight into impermanence, unreliability, and not-self.*
>
> *Fella introduces the metaphor of a child's hoop-and-stick game to illustrate the 'light touch' approach to effort: rather than trying to grip mindfulness for an entire sitting, we can gently tap our attention moment by moment, allowing momentum to build naturally. She distinguishes between 'prompted mindfulness'—when we consciously remind ourselves to be present—and 'unprompted mindfulness'—the effortless return of awareness that happens thousands of times daily, offering a taste of what non-doing feels like.*
>
> *The talk explores common 'rabbit holes' where mindfulness gets lost—certain locations, activities, physical discomfort, and habitual mind states like the hindrances. Rather than doubling down with forceful effort, Fella encourages curiosity about these patterns. She shares a personal story about discovering that her mind's tendency to space out during meals was actually the mind seeking needed rest. Through investigating these moments with interest rather than judgment, we learn about our conditioned patterns and glimpse the uncontrollable, not-self nature of the mind itself.*

I appreciate in the moments before the talk, sitting here and listening to the rustlings, the sounds of people coming in and finding their place. It gets to be almost quiet, and then somebody adjusts their posture, shifts in the chair, and then it goes a little quieter, and then there's a little shift. Just hearing it gradually get quiet. Something about that I really appreciate—just hearing the natural movements of humans as we do our thing.

In the instructions and in the talks in the last days, several times we've mentioned this encouragement towards continuity of mindfulness, encouragement towards the sustaining of mindfulness over time. I wanted to speak about that this evening: the importance of it, and how to encourage it, really. What are some supports for that aspect of mindfulness?

When the Buddha talked about this in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, that phrase that Greg mentioned the other night—satipaṭṭhāna can mean the establishing of mindfulness. And to me, what the establishment of mindfulness is, is this coming into the continuity of mindfulness. Mindfulness is established when it is moment to moment present in our experience. And this is a form of concentration, this establishment of mindfulness, this continuity of mindfulness.

It can express itself in different ways. Continuity of mindfulness might be happening as we stay with one experience, like the breath, and that produces one form of concentration, a kind of one-pointed concentration—maybe the kind of concentration we're more familiar with, this focused concentration. But a different form of concentration happens as the mindfulness becomes stable, as we are not pulled out of the present moment by reactivity, by thoughts, by slipping out because of inattentiveness or boredom. This is another form of concentration, in the Pāli called khaṇika samādhi, momentary or moment-to-moment concentration.

This continuity of mindfulness is essentially how concentration gets established. As we encourage that continuity, as we encourage the stability—either through the one-pointed concentration or through this moment-to-moment concentration—in the moment-to-moment concentration there's a stability of mindfulness, not necessarily a stability of objects, a stability of experience. We may be aware, continuously aware, moment to moment, of changing experience. Now a body sensation. Now a sound. Now a vibration. Now a thought. Now an emotion. Just moment after moment, knowing what's happening. In a way, it's the stability of mindfulness itself rather than the stability of an object.

This continuity supports concentration. It is also where mindfulness gets its power from. As mindfulness becomes more continuous, this is how we begin to really see very deeply into our experience, to understand our experience as impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable—not me, not mine, not who I am. We begin to understand the conditioned nature of our experience through this continuity of mindfulness. And so continuity of mindfulness is really important.

Many of my teachers have said this: we practice mindfulness from the moment we wake up until the moment we go to bed. This is our practice. And yet, as Greg said the other day, we're probably not going to be mindful from the moment we get up to the moment we go to bed. There will be gaps. What I'd like to really explore this evening are ways to support continuity.

So, a couple of shorter tools or reflections to start. One way to support continuity, or really engagement with our mindfulness practice, is understanding the value of practice. Sayadaw U Tejaniya says that if we understood, really, really understood the value of practice, we wouldn't stop practicing. Clearly you all understand the value of practice or you would not have signed up for this retreat. And yet sometimes we can forget. Sometimes, especially in a long retreat like this, it can start feeling almost like rote. It's like, okay, this is what we do. Our job is: I get up and I'm mindful while I get dressed and I'm mindful while I go to breakfast. We lose a sense of the connection or the juice with the value.

If we find ourselves taking the practice for granted, or feeling like we're getting up to go to work today, it can help to reflect a little bit on what benefits you've gained from the practice, to recognize how the practice has supported you. Also reflect and recognize that you can practice right now. We do not know how long we'll be able to practice. We actually don't know whether today's our last day here, today's our last day alive. So while we are alive and have energy—

while we have our minds. We don't know whether, in our aging process, our minds will shift into dementia, losing the capacity to choose to practice. So right now, in this time, you have chosen to be here. You have this capacity. Using it, remembering that we won't always have this possibility—this is one way of remembering the value of practice.

Another exploration around continuity: when we talk about practicing in a continuous way, bringing mindfulness moment to moment, often that calls up the idea that what this is about is trying to do it. Bringing effort into the practice. Trying to be mindful. I remember many times sitting down thinking, "I am going to be mindful for this whole sitting," almost trying to muster the energy to be present for the entire forty-five minute sitting in that first second. This is perhaps a familiar way of applying effort in our daily lives and in other things.

But in our practice, we can really only be mindful for a moment or a few moments at a time. So exploring how we use our energy in this encouragement towards continuity, rather than that mode of sitting down and trying to pick up mindfulness for forty-five minutes—all that's necessary, actually, is to notice in this moment: right now, how hard is it for you to be mindful of the contact of your hands? How about the sound of my voice? The contact of your hips against the chair or cushion or bench. Usually it's not so difficult. When I name each of those things, it often just pops into awareness. You don't have to struggle and rouse the mind, saying, "Okay, go to the hips." It's just—oh, it's there.

And so that kind of noticing—for a moment, in this moment, what's most obvious? Maybe a breath, half a breath. For a moment, it's not difficult to be mindful. The investigation or exploration might be: enough effort or energy to be mindful in this moment.

Maybe let's explore this with the breath right now. Can you be mindful of an in-breath? That's it. That's all the energy you need—just an in-breath. And as the in-breath ends, how about enough energy to be with an out-breath? And enough energy to be with an in-breath. That's all. Just a light touch of mindfulness. In being with the breath, just enough energy for half a breath at a time. Can I be mindful for half a breath? Usually. And then do it again, and again, and again.

As we do that—just that light touch, just a gentle connection, light touch of mindfulness, moment after moment after moment—it creates a kind of momentum. It's like the ball of mindfulness begins to get rolling.

There's a game that some children play. You have a hoop and a stick. You rest the hoop on its side and tap it gently with the stick. The gentle taps get it rolling. If you tap it gently a couple of times, from one side or the other, you can get the momentum of that hoop going so that for a while—and you have to run next to the hoop, that's part of the game—as the hoop gets rolling, you run with it. Then after a little while, when the hoop gains momentum, you don't have to tap it anymore. You run with it, and when you see it start to get a little wobbly, you tap again. Tap that hoop again to keep the momentum going.

That's kind of how the light touch of mindfulness works. Just enough energy to connect with half a breath or connect with this moment of experience—this body sensation, this sound, this thought, this emotion. Just enough to connect with that, and then do it again. Gentle, that gentle tap, tap, tap, that gentle connecting.

At a certain point, when the momentum gets rolling—as with the hoop—if you keep tapping it when the momentum is going, it's going to get in the way of that momentum. So we begin to learn in our mindfulness how frequently we need to remind ourselves: oh, next breath. Maybe we can, just in a gentle way, connect with half a breath and discover that with ease we're with a breath or two.

So it's this beginning to recognize the experience of the momentum of mindfulness, like the momentum of that hoop. And then we might begin to even recognize that, like with the hoop getting a little wobbly, needing to tap again to keep it going, we might begin to recognize when the mindfulness gets a little wobbly. Oh, I need to remind myself—just a touch, this light touch of mindfulness moment after moment.

In the walking practice this can also be helpful. At one point, one of my teachers said he had done the walking practice. He said he couldn't do the walking practice by saying, "I'll start at the beginning and I'm going to be present for the whole 45 minutes of walking." Just like I said about my sitting—that was too much. He said, "So I set the intention to be mindful for one path." He was doing the back and forth walking, so about ten or twenty paces. "I set the intention to be mindful for that length and then to do it again when I went back."

And I played with that, and it was like, that was too long for me. That was too much picking up of "I'm going to be mindful till I get to the end." And so instead I started looking about two feet out and saying, "Can I be mindful till I get to that spot on the carpet?" A step and a half. Yep, made it. Okay, how about that spot? Oh, made it to that one too.

So just, if the mind is really restless or really sleepy, sometimes just picking off little bits—just enough, just enough effort to get to the next step or the next half a breath. Light touch of effort, moment after moment. This is a gentle persistence, a very gentle persistence. It is a persistence, but it's not a gripped kind of energy.

Given that continuity is really encouraging this becoming continuous with mindfulness, I think one of the main ways that I have explored this aspect of the practice is rather than using—well, I have used this kind of very light touch, I use that a lot actually—but quite often what I explore is just noticing the comings and goings of mindfulness.

Mindfulness, as we've been talking about, is a quality in the mind. It's like metta, it's like concentration. It's a quality in the mind that can be cultivated, that has conditions that support its cultivation. And one of those conditions that supports its cultivation is noticing when it's present, noticing when it's here. So being cognizant of the comings and goings of mindfulness.

We usually call this the mind that wanders, or the mind that gets lost. When the mind is getting lost, we don't usually think about it as mindfulness disappearing, but that's what's happening. And so we can turn this aspect of the wandering mind or the thinking mind on its head and instead reflect on exploring the coming and going of mindfulness itself.

The first place, probably the easiest place to begin to explore this, is when it comes. I've had people at times say, "Well, I can't see when mindfulness gets lost. It's either here or it's not. So the only thing I can see is when it comes back." And that's often true—that's one of the easiest places to begin to see the difference or the shift between non-mindfulness and mindfulness, when mindfulness returns.

But it is also possible to begin to get familiar, as I was speaking about with that hoop—the momentum of the hoop, seeing it get wobbly—we can also start to get a sense of this quality of mindfulness itself and begin to see it get wobbly. Begin to see the connection with experience get weak. And so we can start to see the mindfulness getting lost.

Now we'll start with looking at, exploring something about seeing it return. And we've all mentioned this—I think almost all, I've heard many of us mention this moment of mindfulness returning. It is a great moment, noticing it when it returns.

This noticing of mindfulness returning is another way that we can cultivate continuity of mindfulness. We usually think of cultivating continuity of mindfulness in the way I spoke about, with that gentle reminding, the gentle prompting every half breath, every few steps. And that works as long as we are mindful. The kind of mindfulness we explore in that case is called prompted mindfulness—when we are mindful, we remind ourselves in that gentle way.

This re-arising of mindfulness, when our mindfulness has been lost, that is called unprompted mindfulness.

Because it just happens. It's a great recognition, actually, if we are interested in the moment of mindfulness returning in and of itself, and not so hooked into an idea or a self-judgment. Often in that moment when mindfulness returns, we can have a kind of judgment: "I wasn't mindful." But that thought, in the moment, isn't actually true—because we are mindful right now.

If we can be really curious about that moment itself, about the mindfulness returning, we notice something remarkable: we didn't have anything to do with that moment. It was completely effortless. This is one of the great things we can begin to taste in that moment of mindfulness returning—what it means to be mindful without trying to be mindful. Because that's so often a place where we get caught up, in the churning and doing of mindfulness.

That moment when mindfulness returns is an effortless moment. We didn't have any say over it; it just happened. Conditions came together for that mindfulness to return. And this kind of mindfulness actually happens a lot. Especially on retreat, you have an opportunity to see it probably thousands of times a day. Thousands of times a day you get the opportunity to taste that effortless mindfulness and to be curious about it.

That moment is also really useful in terms of beginning to recognize what it is like to be mindful—what the quality of mindfulness itself is like. Because in the moment of mindfulness returning, if we're curious about it in and of itself, and not thinking about the fact that we weren't mindful a moment ago, but curious just about this—wow,

mindfulness is back, what's that like?—there's an interesting contrast. Between what it feels like now, in this moment, for mindfulness to be back, and what it was like seconds before, or half a second before, when mindfulness was lost. We get a taste of the difference between mindfulness and non-mindfulness in that moment. We get a felt sense of what it's like to be mindful. This is really useful.

Because this moment actually happens a lot—way more than we think. As we develop a taste for it, as we attune to that quality of mindfulness returning, we recognize it. And as we begin to recognize what that moment is like, it essentially begins to point itself out to us when it happens. Often that moment of mindfulness resurfacing gets hooked into something like, "Oh, I wasn't mindful a minute ago," and we just get lost because we haven't actually taken in, "Oh, I'm mindful again." If we can take in that we're mindful, it begins to sensitize us, to tune us to the quality of that moment. We begin to notice that it happens more. The feeling or the flavor of it begins to point itself out to us, and we see more of those moments—more and more of those effortless moments of mindfulness all day long. What a celebration that is.

So in that moment when you remember, when mindfulness returns, simply recognize that you're aware now. That awareness has returned. I actually use awareness and mindfulness synonymously—I just like to let people know that because sometimes they seem like different words. But for me, I like the word awareness for mindfulness. It's actually more evocative for me of the quality of what it is like. There's more of an evocative sense to the word aware.

Notice that you've become aware. Then you might notice whatever's obvious in that moment—maybe not rushing back if you have a particular anchor that you're using, or a primary experience that you're gathering your attention around. Just take in what's here now.

The mind hasn't been present in the moments before, and often the mind has been off getting up to something—thinking about something, or just spacing out, whatever it's been doing. It's been doing something while you haven't been mindful. And often that has an effect on us in the present moment when we return. So noticing that quality: how is the mind now, in this moment, with the mind not having been present in the moments before? What is the effect, essentially, of what the mind had been doing while it wasn't mindful, on my present moment experience?

To my surprise, especially as my practice has continued over the years, quite often when mindfulness returns there's maybe even a little bit more settledness, more calm than was there before. So it's not always that the mind gets up to hindrances when it's not mindful. Sometimes the mind wanders into metta and we're not aware of it. Or it wanders into peace or calm and we're not aware of it.

In the waking up, yes, sometimes the mind will have gotten into an argument with a friend, and that will have an effect on our present moment too. Useful to notice that. And yet sometimes our mind will kind of find its way into more ease and peace. So it's really useful not to have an a priori idea about what might be there—just, "Ah, I'm back. What's here? What's here?"

I find that curiosity is, I think one of the other teachers also mentioned this, such a good tool in our toolbox. It's not always available, but it is a very powerful motivator of energy. When we're curious, there's a natural engagement with the present moment, a natural inclination to keep being present. Curiosity is a really great support for continuity.

Curiosity is also a really helpful tool when we're exploring the comings and goings of mindfulness—particularly the goings of mindfulness. Curiosity about how do we lose awareness? Where do we lose awareness? This curiosity is not intended to be an encouragement for judgment, but more a genuine wondering about what the mind is doing, what it's getting up to. Be curious about where the attention wants to go, and see if possibly mindfulness might be able to follow it.

So, exploring how do we lose awareness? Where do we lose awareness? I'm going to go through several ways that in my own experience I've seen the mind lose awareness. You may have your own ways. I tried to put them into general categories, but I don't think this list is all-encompassing.

One of the ways to explore where we lose awareness is just to be curious as we go through our day. Where are the rabbit holes of mindfulness in terms of activities? In what kind of activities or locations do we tend to lose awareness? We might tend to lose awareness when we go to our yogi jobs, or when we go into our room and close the door—it's like, "Finally, nobody's looking. I do not have to be mindful right now." We might be more inclined to lose awareness if we go on the loop. Just noticing if there are places. Or maybe going into the dining hall—that's often a rabbit hole of mindfulness, the dining hall. Curiosity about what happens.

The encouragement here, again, is to explore through curiosity. Going through the day, at the end of the day you could reflect, or begin to recognize over these days that you see some patterns. "Yes, in my yogi job I lose awareness. When I go into the dining hall for lunch, it's gone until I'm doing my dishes." You might begin to notice some of these patterns.

The encouragement here isn't about doubling down and trying to force the mind to stay mindful all the way through that dining room line, but rather to be curious about what happens there. Something's going on in the mind that causes you to lose mindfulness. It's not random. Something happens. So what is it that happens?

The encouragement is this: once you've seen some patterns, once you've seen, for instance, that the dining hall or taking a walk on the loop or going into your room are places where mindfulness gets lost—often as we're heading to those places we have some mindfulness. Here at noon there's mindfulness, and the bell rings. Curiosity about when is it that mindfulness gets lost. Maybe it actually carries all the way until you cross that door and then start looking at the board with the dedications. Where does it happen? When does mindfulness get lost?

When you have the understanding of, "Okay, it's likely mindfulness is going to get lost when I head to the dining room"—let's see what happens.

Our minds get into these kinds of stories, and the mindfulness gets lost.

So be curious about where the sticky parts are. What happens in there? Add some interest, some curiosity about this—not trying to say, "Can I be mindful all the way through lunch?" but rather, "Let's see if I can notice where I get lost."

If you're curious about that, you might begin to see, if you're tracking it—kind of like, "Okay, yep, mindful here. Mindful as I'm walking. Mindful as I'm standing in line. Mindful as I pick up my dish"—knowing, you can track where you are. And then you're eating. So somewhere between picking up your dish and eating, that's where it happens. The next day you can add a little more interest after you pick up your dish. Again, curiosity around this is really helpful.

I'm going to skip a couple of the ones I had on my list to get to some of the others, but I'll mention two of them briefly.

It's really common for us to lose mindfulness when there's uncomfortableness in the body—pain or discomfort. And so again, rather than trying to force yourself to be with the pain, be curious about what happens. What does the mind do?

I found at one point that my mind had a strategy of spacing out and daydreaming when pain was happening. When I noticed that, when I woke up in the daydreaming, I recognized that the pain wasn't bothering me. It wasn't that it was gone, but it wasn't bothering me while I had been daydreaming. I just hadn't been mindful. And so I got curious about the fact that the mind knew how to not be disturbed by the pain. It didn't have to be disturbed by the pain—it just didn't know how to do that mindfully.

What that began to instruct me in was how I might be able to just kind of set the pain aside. I didn't have to zero in on it and focus on it, which is what my mind had been doing. Sometimes we can learn from what our mind does around particular difficult experiences. I learned that my mind knew how to let go of a kind of magnetizing to pain, and it didn't have to be disturbed by it. So I could kind of ignore it in my mindfulness.

Pain is a big one. Looking at what happens there as the mind gets lost—most of us do have strategies for navigating pain, and a lot of them include non-mindfulness. But they don't have to include non-mindfulness. So curiosity about that: What happens there?

We also tend to lose awareness in very habitual states of mind. Jeannie gave the talk on the hindrances the other night. Those are five very habitual states of mind that we tend to lose mindfulness in. The exploration is really about whether we can bring the mindfulness into these states.

Often we recognize that we have been lost. We sometimes recognize that we've lost awareness when we're waking up. In that moment of remembering, we see essentially that we got lost—"Wow, I got lost in boredom," or "I got lost in this habit of anger," or "I got lost in this spacing out, this habit of spacing out." In the waking up, sometimes we can see that we are habitually waking up in some kind of familiar, old patterns.

Again, we may have some capacity to know when those patterns come up—"Oh, boredom's coming up." When we see that we tend to habitually get lost in boredom, we can add some interest there too. Add some interest, as Jeannie was talking about—being curious, being interested in the hindrances themselves, or any habitual pattern.

One of the main ways that mindfulness gets lost, and I think this is a pretty common way, is that we are paying attention to something in our experience—noticing the breath, for example, or doing walking meditation outside at night and noticing the cool air and the movement of the body. And then there's a sound. These past nights, as we've left in the evening, there's been a very cool owl sound. So maybe you're doing walking meditation and you hear that sound. Then you start thinking about the sound, then you start thinking about owls and what kind of owl it is, and the mindfulness is gone.

Much of the time that happens because we haven't actually noticed that the attention shifted from what our kind of plan was.

I'm going to be paying attention to the walking and the movement, and that's where my attention is, and oh, hearing, and oh, owls... and it's out.

We haven't noticed that the attention has shifted from what we had the intention to pay attention to. So this is a really helpful thing to begin to see—when the attention shifts from one experience to another, we can begin to get familiar with this attentional shift.

One place that this can be really fun to play with is in walking. Perhaps not in the formal walking such as Bhante described, but if you're taking a walk, you might explore noticing: seeing is happening, knowing seeing is happening, or hearing is happening. And then be curious about when the attention shifts. You could do a walking practice for a few moments, shifting between seeing and hearing, body moving through space, and feet touching the ground. This is one alternative walking practice, actually—seeing for a few paces, hearing for a few paces, body moving through space for a few paces, feet contacting the ground for a few paces. You can do that while taking a walk. It's a great kind of more everyday life or ordinary movement practice.

In the seeing and hearing, you could be curious, while the seeing is happening, about when the attention might shift between seeing—just kind of taking in the flow, like a movie camera moving through space—and when it shifts from seeing to looking. That will happen very naturally. Maybe a bird or a squirrel runs across the path. The movement catches the attention and we are looking at that. This is a shift of attention.

Likewise in hearing, we might be taking in ambient sound and suddenly a particular sound catches our attention. Noticing this shift between a more general awareness and a very pointed awareness—noticing that shift, we don't have to stop the looking, but we can begin to get familiar with that shift of attention.

As we get familiar with that, it can carry into our meditation practice, our sitting practice, our more formal practice. Sitting in the hall, paying attention to the breath, and then hearing the sound of a car drive down Pleasant Street. The attention shifts, and we may begin to be familiar with what it's like for that attention to shift. We're with the breath, with the breath, and then we feel the attention kind of let go of the breath and move to something else. If we can notice that, then we're just hearing. Hearing is happening. Hearing is happening. If we don't notice that, then we may be in that car driving down Pleasant Street, leaving IMS, going to Boston.

So noticing that attentional shift—this is a really useful exploration. Noticing this shift between seeing and looking, hearing and listening, can be a great place to get familiar with that quality, the quality of attention shifting.

And then there are certain states of mind where each of us may have a kind of habit of non-mindfulness. We have some in common, often. Spaciness is often a place where we're not mindful. Low energy sometimes is a place where we're not so mindful. Sleepiness or drowsiness, a daydreaming kind of state of mind—often not so mindful. So there are certain states that the mind can go into where awareness will habitually not be there.

But it is not an inherent part of that state of mind to be non-mindful. Thinking about something like spacing out—it almost seems by definition that spacing out would be non-mindful, as part of the very definition. We might think, "Well, I guess that meant I can't be mindful of that, so better try to be present with the breath again."

Well, at this point in my practice, if there's any state of mind where I think I can't be mindful of it, I don't believe that thought. It is possible to be mindful of any state of mind—except potentially non-mindfulness. But even that we can begin to recognize the quality of it as mindfulness returns. States of mind like spacing out or sleepiness or dullness or even falling asleep—it is possible to be mindful through the process of falling asleep into sleep. It's possible.

And so again, this exploration—for me, there began to be a curiosity about exploring these states that I thought I couldn't be mindful of. One of the best ways to begin seeing that or exploring that is in the moment when mindfulness returns. If you wake up into daydreaming, for a few moments you are aware of daydreaming. That gives you the flavor of what it's like to be mindful of daydreaming. If you're spacing out, when you come back into mindfulness, for a few moments there's this recognition—that's the mind spacing out. That is the mind being aware of that state of mind.

I've told this story quite a lot, but it's a useful example, so I'll tell it again. I was exploring this at one point. I was eating a meal and kept noticing the mind spacing out.

And at first I was exploring being mindful during eating. When I noticed that spacing out and came back into mindfulness, the intention was to pay attention to eating. Okay, I'm back. Be mindful. Lifting up the fork, putting it in my mouth, chewing, tasting. The mind would space out again. I'd come back and bring that mindfulness in, paying attention to all of that, and it would space out again.

At some point, I got curious about the spacing out. And this, again—it was curiosity that really fed this investigation. Having seen that it happened a number of times, I began to notice the mind letting go of eating breakfast, letting go of paying attention to taste and lifting and sensations. There was this feeling of mindfulness releasing its hold on the physicality of the sensations. But there was an awareness of that. So rather than bringing attention back to the physical sensations, there was more of a sense of, "Oh, okay, I'm aware—let's see what the mind is doing."

There was an ability to be aware of the mind as it kind of went and hovered up to the right-hand side of my head a little bit. It felt very restful. It felt very pleasant. It was disconnected from the field of physical sensation, but I was very aware. There was full awareness of the state of mind. And in that experience, there was this real sense of rest. The mind was tired. It wanted to rest, and I wasn't letting it rest. I kept dragging it back—be mindful of the breakfast. And my mind basically said, "Forget it. You are not doing this right. We are going to take a rest." And it took its rest.

When I let that happen with mindfulness, the mind rested. It was so restful for that time. It lasted about thirty seconds, and then that state was released and I was eating breakfast and present with the body sensations very easefully.

This connects to what I was saying earlier—that sometimes when the mind loses mindfulness, it's not necessarily getting up to hindrance; it may actually be helping you. This has been my experience. Sometimes when the mind wanders, it's trying to help us let go. If we can be curious in that moment, seeing that the mind's letting go of something rather than having the agenda of "Oh, come back," if I'm aware in that letting go and able to be present for it, sometimes the mind is wandering into a new space.

I mostly want to encourage curiosity about exploring this. Curiosity is a support for continuity, rather than doubling down when we notice places where mindfulness gets lost. I certainly was trying to double down when I kept dragging my attention back to eating breakfast. That wasn't so helpful. But it was helpful to start to see the mind and think, "Let's be curious about this. Where's the mind going? Oh, it's resting. Resting feels very good."

In this curiosity around seeing the coming and going of mindfulness, there's so much to learn. We learn a lot about our conditioned habits and patterns of mind, because often where our minds wander is around those conditioned habits and patterns. We also learn about our beliefs about meditation and mindfulness—what we think we can be mindful of, and what we think we can't be mindful of. Sometimes we might have this

idea that we can't be mindful of something. If I ever have the thought "I can't be mindful of this," I just say, "Really? If you're even thinking that thought, you already are mindful of it. You're aware enough of it to name it in that moment."

So, curiosity. We also start to see something about the uncontrollability of our mind through looking at this coming and going of mindfulness.

Being mindful—that's kind of the main yogi job. That's our intention. We sit down thinking, "I'm going to be mindful." And how long does it last? A couple breaths, maybe a few minutes, then the mind wanders.

Who did that? Who decided to make the mind wander? You probably didn't decide to make the mind wander. Sometimes we do—sometimes we kind of check out intentionally. But mostly it happens just because conditions come along. It's not self that the mind wanders.

And then that moment of mindfulness returning—who did that one? You weren't in charge of that one either.

So this exploring the comings and goings of mindfulness—every day this truth of not-self is staring us in the face, very obviously. And we usually kind of miss it, because we think we're supposed to be in control of the mindfulness.

If we're curious about the comings and goings of mindfulness, as opposed to judging ourselves about non-continuity, we can get this awe of the mind—this mysterious mind.

So let's just sit for a couple of minutes.

CHAPTER 62

Exploring Vedanā (Feeling Tone)

Andrea Fella · 1h03

In this three-month retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of vedanā (feeling tone), one of the four foundations of mindfulness as taught in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). She illuminates how the simple quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant accompanies every moment of experience, and how our habitual belief that obtaining pleasant experiences and eliminating unpleasant ones will bring happiness creates the conditions for craving and suffering.

Fella draws on the Buddha's teaching of the two darts—how an awakened practitioner feels only the bodily feeling of pain, while an uninstructed person adds mental suffering through reactivity, creating a feedback loop of escalating distress. She shares compelling research demonstrating that even physical pain perception is shaped by mental expectations, and offers personal examples of how careful investigation revealed that apparent unpleasantness in sounds or situations actually originated in subtle fear, thoughts, or beliefs rather than the sensory contact itself.

The talk also distinguishes between worldly (sāmisa) and unworldly (nirāmisa) feeling tones—the ordinary pleasures of sense contact versus the spiritual joy arising from presence, concentration, ethical conduct, and insight. This distinction proved pivotal in the Buddha's own awakening when he recognized that the pleasure of concentration could serve the path. Throughout, the instruction remains beautifully simple: just recognize what kind of feeling is present, without judgment, allowing this clear comprehension to gradually weaken the reactive patterns that bind us to suffering.

This evening I'd like to explore a little bit more around the topic of feeling tone that Greg and Jaya spoke to the last couple of days.

It is such an important area of our practice, of our awareness—this exploration of the quality of whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. So important that the Buddha put it into its own foundation in terms of the four foundations of mindfulness, really highlighting its importance in our understanding. It comes up a lot in the teachings, being aware of and understanding the nature of feeling tone.

Part of the reason for that is because when we are motivated by our habitual tendencies, when our belief structure is oriented around believing that when we get things that are pleasant, we'll be happy, and when we get rid of things that are unpleasant, we'll be happy—this is a fundamental, very human belief structure. When we are oriented in that way, we act. Basically what happens is that the craving that Jaya spoke about last night arises in dependence on feeling tone. When something is pleasant and this belief structure is in place—that getting something pleasant will make me happy—craving arises. When something is unpleasant and this belief structure is in place, then craving arises that leads us towards aversion.

This mechanism of how our suffering begins, how our suffering arises with this underlying belief structure around having pleasant things making me happy and getting rid of unpleasant things making me happy, is a fundamental delusion that we tend to share as human beings. That ignorance, that delusion, is often an unseen motivating force that leads pleasant on to liking, to wanting, to greed; and leads unpleasant on to not liking, to not wanting, to wanting to get rid of, to aversion.

Beginning to explore the feeling tone itself helps us to see this pattern of how the mind moves in this direction and also begins to help us see something about that underlying belief system.

I'm going to read what Greg read the other day, the beginning of the section on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta:

And how does one abide contemplating feelings as feelings? Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel a pleasant feeling." When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel an unpleasant feeling." When feeling a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling."

It's so simple. It sounds simple. It's actually not that simple. But the encouragement here is not, "Oh, something pleasant is happening, hold on to it," or "Something unpleasant is happening, push it away or figure out how to get rid of it." Rather, it's just this very simple, non-judgmental awareness. This is what we've been practicing with—this simple receptive awareness: this is what's happening in this moment. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta as a whole has this flavor of just noticing, this is what's happening right now. And so it is with the feeling tone.

Feeling tone can be kind of subtle sometimes. Sometimes it's more obvious. If we fall down and bruise our knee, the unpleasantness of that can be kind of obvious. But we may not be so oriented towards the simple unpleasantness of it. We're probably more interested in telling stories about this, in figuring out what we need to do about it, rather than just recognizing, "Oh, this is unpleasant."

Not to say that figuring out what we need to do when we've fallen down and bruised our knee is not useful and necessary. But we often skip over the actual experience of the unpleasantness and start reacting to it. Again, because of this underlying belief structure: this unpleasant thing is a problem, this unpleasant thing is something I need to get rid of—how am I going to do that?

In terms of beginning to understand this pattern, this underlying belief structure and that movement from feeling to craving, craving, as Jaya pointed to last night, is already suffering. Often we don't quite notice that in the moment, but already as soon as craving springs up, as soon as that wanting something arises—we want something that's not here, we want to get rid of something that is here—there's some imbalance. We are not simply recognizing the unpleasantness or the pleasantness of the experience. Beginning to get familiar with feeling tone can help us to see these patterns and see how the habitual movement of our minds leads us from feeling to craving.

As Greg mentioned the other day, feeling is arising with every single sense contact—every single sight, sound, smell, taste, touch sensation. Everything arising in our mind has a feeling tone. It's a basic aspect of human experience, and it's conditioned. The texts tell us that dependent on the eye and sight, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. And then there's feeling. Feeling and perception arise.

With contact as condition, there is feeling. With every sense base, when there's contact with that sense base—that sensitivity that Greg pointed to—when there's contact with that sensitivity, feeling is there.

And yet so often we don't notice it. We don't see the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral aspect of experience because our habit is to try to arrange the world around the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. We're more in our minds reflecting on or thinking about the world. We've kind of taken birth in the world of what it's going to be like either when I get that thing or when I get rid of that thing, rather than really being aware of what this experience is. What is this experience of pleasant or unpleasant?

And so we tend to habitually and automatically react to feeling because of this underlying belief structure. But we don't really notice it. This feeling tone, as I said, tends to be where the reactivity is born when we have this ignorance or this delusion underlying our minds. And we all have this. It's not some unique thing to you if you find that you tend to shift from pleasant to greed, from unpleasant to aversion. It's very human.

This morning I was speaking about intention and how those intentions are connected with motivation. These responses to feeling—whether we like it and want more of it, or don't like it and want to get rid of it—that's very commonplace. That's where often our motivations arise from: not clearly seeing the feeling tone, instead being motivated by this underlying view or belief, this need to get or need to get rid of.

The Buddha pointed out that this habitual movement, the habitual way that we tend to respond to feeling tone, is not necessary. It's optional. He described this in a sutta, where at the beginning of the text he said that ordinary people—the translation here is "the uninstructed worldling"—the uninstructed worldling feels things that are pleasant, feels things that are unpleasant, and feels things that are neutral. And then he says, "And so too does an instructed noble disciple." Someone who is fully awakened will experience things that are pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

So right there, that pops the bubble—the belief that if we get fully awakened everything will be pleasant. He says right here that people who are awakened will experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience.

But then he goes on to ask: what's the difference? And basically, what he describes is that for an uninstructed worldling, for an ordinary person, when a pleasant feeling arises, they want more of it. They gravitate to it. Desire springs up for it. Craving arises. When an unpleasant experience arises, aversion springs up in relationship to it.

He gives an analogy for unpleasant feeling. He says, "When an uninstructed worldling is contacted by a painful feeling, they sorrow, grieve, and lament. They weep, beating their breast, and become distraught. They feel two feelings, a bodily one and a mental one. Suppose one were to strike a person with a dart and then strike them immediately afterwards with a second dart. That person would feel a feeling caused by two darts. So too, when the uninstructed worldling is contacted by a painful feeling, they feel two feelings, a bodily feeling and a mental one."

This is what happens to us a lot, especially around painful feeling. Unpleasant sensation arises and aversion arises. We don't like it. We sorrow, grieve, lament, weep, beating our breast, and become distraught. And it says here that we feel two feelings, a bodily one and a mental one. But my experience is that it's not just like they're added to-

gether. It's more like it's multiplied, because of this feedback loop. Like when you take a microphone and put it up to a speaker and the volume just goes crazy. It gets really loud because of that feedback loop. It's kind of like that with unpleasant feeling.

When we experience an unpleasant feeling and there's aversion, then our experience of the unpleasant feeling gets more painful, which creates more aversion, which makes us feel more pain, which makes us feel more aversion. It's just feedback—a feedback loop. That's a very common pattern. When we're not able to be mindful of either the unpleasant feeling or the aversion, that kind of cycle will tend to happen.

And the Buddha goes on to describe what happens when an instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling.

They do not sorrow, grieve, or lament. They do not weep, beating their breast, and become distraught. They feel one feeling—a bodily feeling, not a mental one. Suppose one were to strike a person with a dart, but not strike them immediately afterwards with a second dart. That person would feel a feeling caused by one dart only. So too, when the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling, they feel one feeling—a bodily one, not a mental one.

This really points to the possibility, through instruction, through training, through practice, through the work that we are doing, of transforming our relationship to feeling. Basically, it's touching into that underlying belief structure. Through witnessing feelings, seeing the reaction to feelings, seeing how this plays out over and over again, we begin to understand that the movement towards pleasant, the movement away from unpleasant—the greed, the aversion—are not very useful.

Greed has its delusion embedded in it. When we are caught in the mind state of greed, there's a delusion embedded there. The greed itself is the wanting of something pleasant. But the delusion embedded in greed is the belief that having that thing will make me happy. Having that pleasant thing will make me happy. And when we're caught in the mind state of greed, we are buying that belief. We are caught by that delusion. The mind tends to orient towards greed in relationship to pleasant things.

Similarly with aversion, there's a delusion embedded in it that says getting rid of that unpleasant experience will make me happy. When that belief system is in place, feeling becomes like a springboard—we leap right from feeling into craving.

But as we begin to explore feeling, begin to get curious about the experience itself, start seeing how this process unfolds, that belief structure begins to weaken. And we can in that moment simply be with what's happening: "Oh, this is feeling. This is the

feeling that's arising." Sometimes the clear mindfulness of it can short-circuit our habitual movement into craving. We get a taste of the possibility that it's not necessary to follow through on that belief.

This leaping from feeling into craving is a very human, natural kind of movement. It's almost organic. Even single-celled organisms move towards food, away from noxious chemicals in the environment. It's a very natural movement. And yet this movement towards pleasant, away from unpleasant, and the mind states motivating it—the mind states of greed and aversion—are really where the suffering is. In the craving. That's where the suffering is.

The suffering isn't in the pleasant or unpleasant itself, or in responding to pleasant or unpleasant based on compassion, kindness, or wisdom. Because we can, in seeing pleasant experience, understand a skillful response. This isn't about sitting here being a lump on a log. But it is about noticing the habitual response of greed and aversion, and recognizing the suffering found there.

Feeling tone is experienced around both bodily feeling and mental feeling. All physical contacts have a feeling tone and all mental contacts have a feeling tone. Both kinds of feeling tone—those connected with physical experiences and sense impressions, and those connected with the mind—are all mind-created.

This can be a little hard to understand in the realm of physical sense experience. It seems as though certain kinds of contact would be inherently unpleasant or pleasant. It feels like it's physically unpleasant or physically pleasant, so it may be difficult to grasp this point.

But I will say that I read a recent report of a study that corroborates this—that feeling tone, even physical feeling tone like physical unpleasant sensation, is a mental experience. I'll read pieces of this article:

"Pain isn't always a pain. Sometimes it can actually feel good. People experienced pleasure during a painful stimulus if the stimulus turned out to be less bad than they were expecting. The researcher said, 'It's not hard to understand that pain can be interpreted as less severe when an individual is aware that it could have been more painful. Less expected was the discovery that pain may be experienced as pleasant if something worse has been avoided.'

To see how people perceived pain, researchers hooked participants up to a device that applied variable levels of painful heat to their arms. At the same time, researchers measured their brain activity using magnetic resonance imaging scans. In the first scenario, participants either experienced a series of slightly or moderately painful stimuli—about as painful as grasping a slightly too hot cup of coffee—or no pain."

In this scenario, participants rated that painful experience of the warm contact as unpleasant. They described the experience as unpleasant. In the second scenario, the participants experienced either a series of that moderate pain or a more intense pain. On a screen, they were warned which kind of pain was coming. The moderate pain was the same as the moderate pain in the first experience that they had rated as unpleasant, yet participants rated the moderate pain as pleasurable in the second scenario, when the alternative was the intense pain.

During the moderate stimulus in the second setup, participants' brain activity also showed less activation in the pain region of the brain and more activation in the region associated with pain relief and pleasure. So it wasn't only their report—the brain actually felt it as pleasurable. The researcher said the likely explanation is that the subjects were prepared for the worst and thus felt relieved when they realized the pain was not going to be as bad as they had feared.

Mental conditions and expectations can condition how pain is felt, how that stimulus is experienced, whether as painful or pleasant. The same measurable level of heat, the same level of "pain" applied to the arm, yet a completely different experience. The feeling tone, as Greg pointed out the other day, is not in the object. It's in our experience. It's created by our mind and is often created based on expectations, views, ideas, and beliefs. It's not as simple as saying that thing is always pleasant or that thing is always unpleasant.

Getting familiar with feeling tones is really helpful in terms of exploring this process of the mind that reacts to feeling tone. We need to become familiar with the feeling tone itself, because we so quickly react to it. Exploring it in sitting, in walking, in our daily activities—we can begin to recognize that certain sensations are unpleasant. We may simply notice something as an itch, for instance, but not really notice the quality of the itch, the unpleasantness of it, and what happens to that unpleasantness.

When I've really explored what an itch is, it has a kind of zing quality to it. It's like one tiny spot on the skin that zings and then stops, then zings again and stops. The unpleasantness of it feels unpleasant in that moment, but the unpleasantness comes and goes.

Likewise with pain—often there's a shifting landscape, different sensations arising and passing. We create a whole block around it, looking at it as one solid thing. But if we start to be curious about what's actually unpleasant here, we sometimes find that certain sensations of pain, even in our sitting, aren't quite what we assumed. Maybe there's a little twinge in the knee, and this is where we can learn from that pattern of reactivity. If we notice the unpleasantness, maybe we discover that it's not so unpleasant right now, in this moment. But what our mind has done is pick up the rest of the sitting and project the entire sitting where that pain is getting steadily worse. That's what we're reacting to.

Being curious about what the sensation actually is and what its pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality might be—this is the practice. We can notice pleasantness in our sitting too, perhaps the physical pleasantness of the breathing. The feeling tone is most easily seen at first in the physical realm, in the physical sense realm. Our skin in particular, our touch sense, seems very attuned to this quality of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. It's a really easy place to begin exploring, to really recognize it.

Playing with this in our daily activities, in our yogi jobs, in eating—just seeing that there's a steady stream of experience, and every single experience has pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral qualities to it. We can begin to be curious about that flow. Washing dishes, for instance. Maybe we have the idea of it as an unpleasant thing, but as you're standing in line, noticing: what's unpleasant here? Is the actual standing unpleasant? Maybe there's a little ache in the back that's unpleasant. Okay, so that's unpleasant. Then you get up to the place where you're actually washing the dishes and you put your hands in the water—maybe it's a fresh thing of water and the experience is actually pleasant. Just seeing how this flows: pleasant, unpleasant, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral.

If we see that flow clearly, then we may not immediately leap to the reactivity.

And in this exploration, it's really helpful—and somewhat interesting, I think—to begin to notice what our habitual responses to feeling tone are. We may have somewhat different responses at different times. Different people, for instance, may have more habitual relationships to pleasant and unpleasant. For me, when I experience something unpleasant, I would get stuck to that unpleasant thing, trying to push it away. It would be like I was glued to that unpleasant thing, trying to figure out: How do I get rid of this? What do I need to change? What do I have to do? What do I have to figure out here? So there would be a stuckness to the unpleasant thing. The aversion was experienced as being stuck to that unpleasant thing.

A friend of mine said, "Gee, when I experience something unpleasant, immediately my mind goes, 'Oh, let me find something pleasant.'" It just unsticks from the unpleasant and goes to greed immediately. It starts searching for something pleasant. That's a different strategy: ignore the unpleasant, find something pleasant. Just don't look at that elephant in the room. And so we can begin to see what our habitual strategies are for being with feeling tone.

And then there's the feeling associated with mental experience. This sometimes can be more subtle, although certain kinds of feeling associated with mind states—for instance, happiness—we tend to recognize as a pleasant experience. Anger, often unpleasant. Fear, often unpleasant. Calm and ease, maybe pleasant, maybe somewhat neutral even. There's a little less of an obvious feeling tone with ease.

So everything in our mind, all arisings in our mind, have a feeling tone. It can be interesting also to explore—both in physical feeling and in mental feeling—how feeling tends to change over the experience of it. Sometimes this can be surprising. At one point I began to notice, I was curious about the feeling tone connected with anger on one retreat. I was experiencing a tremendous amount of anger, and so I got very familiar with it, pretty much noticing the unpleasantness of it. But then at one point I began really seeing just the very beginning, just the very beginnings of the arising of anger. And to my surprise, it was really pleasant. It was just this beginning—a sense of warmth and fullness and power. It was a sense of aliveness. That quickly flipped into pressure and heat and unpleasant. But it was so interesting to see how the feeling tone at the beginning—my mind was kind of recognizing, "Wow, that may be some of the hook to anger." It's that initial feeling of aliveness and power that quickly flips.

So we can start to see this. Not only do emotions have feeling tone, but thoughts can have a feeling tone as well. Often thoughts may have a feeling tone based on an emotion that they're connected with. So for instance, a thought like "that person doesn't like me"—the thought itself might just be a neutral thing. There were certain points in my meditation where I saw certain thoughts that were habitually experienced as unpleasant. At one point I came on retreat right after the Twin Towers attacks, and on retreat there were a lot of images from that experience, that situation, coming up in my meditation. Typically the experience was unpleasant. And yet at a certain point, the mind, in seeing some of those images, just saw them as images. That felt a little odd because there was no feeling tone—it was just neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It felt a little odd to have that content not be landing in a way.

But then in a few more moments there was the recognition of the meaning of those images. And the emotional response was not that of aversion but really of compassion. So the image itself still didn't have a flavor of pleasant or unpleasant, but the meaning of the image was touching the heart with the recognition of suffering and compassion. And so thoughts may be kind of neutral themselves, but then they quickly bring in emotional tones, beliefs, and views that have feelings. So the thought that somebody doesn't like me—we might have a feeling of rejection that feels unpleasant.

And this points to something really important about feeling tone: beliefs, views, and thoughts are a primary shaper of feeling tone.

What we believe, what we think about—that shapes how we receive experiences as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

In fact, the commentaries to the Abhidhamma have a teaching around feeling tone that I don't know if I believe actually, but I found it really interesting to hold as a question. The Abhidhamma commentary says that in terms of our physical senses, the touch sense of our skin can be pleasant or unpleasant, that it's just very attuned to that pleasant-unpleasant quality. But our other four physical senses—seeing, smelling, hearing, and tasting—the commentary says that the initial contact is neutral, that any pleasant or unpleasant experience we have in those other four physical senses is a result of something going on in our minds. Some view, some belief.

We might be able to touch into this around seeing. We go outside perhaps and see a beautiful flower. I was appreciating these flowers—they're beautiful, and the sense of them is pleasant. The beauty and the pleasure of that. But what's happening really at the first contact is that there's just color and form in the eye. Very occasionally in my meditation, I've looked out of a window or something and there have been no objects. It's just been color and form. It's neutral. Color and form is neutral. It's when they become objects, when we see them as things that we have associations with. I have associations with flowers as beautiful—some flowers as beautiful. There's a flower that sometimes appears in meditation halls that has a very strong scent, and it's very hard for me to be near. I see that flower and it's not so pleasant because of that association.

So curiosity around exploring this has been a big part of my own practice. When there is something in the physical realm that I'm taking to be unpleasant or pleasant, I get kind of curious about it. Where is the pleasantness actually? Where is the unpleasantness?

One night I was having difficulty sleeping. Often when I'm having difficulty sleeping, I'll just meditate. So that evening I got up to sit in the middle of the night and was sitting there, just being aware of my experience. There was this quiet little tapping, kind of scratching sound that came and went. When I noticed, heard that tapping or scratching sound, my experience was: I don't like that. Unpleasant. That tapping sound is unpleasant. For a while I just worked at it, looked at it that way—unpleasant sound is happening.

Continuing to explore it, as I looked at the experience, when that tapping sound happened I noticed there was tension in the body. The tension is not the tapping sound. The tension is unpleasant too. At that point there was still the sense of the tapping being unpleasant, the tension being unpleasant.

Then at some point in hearing the tapping sound—this went on probably thirty, forty minutes, coming and going—there was just a quick rush of fear through the body. That was startling. I hadn't seen that actually before. I hadn't seen that there was just this subtle flush of fear through the body. The fear was clearly unpleasant. As I began to notice the fear with clarity, the next time the tapping sound happened, I realized that the tapping sound itself was neutral. The experience of the fear had kind of imputed or put its unpleasantness into the sound.

This kind of thing happens a lot in our experience. It's very similar to how the expectation of something being more unpleasant creates conditions for it to be experienced as unpleasant. The state of our mind will affect the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality.

So curiosity about when you're experiencing a reactivity—if there's a persistent reactivity, a persistent aversion—it can be really useful to explore what is actually unpleasant here. What is the mind actually reacting to? What is it responding to?

Most of our reactivity actually comes off of mental thoughts, beliefs, views—a mental unpleasantness, rather than a physical unpleasantness. Now, in terms of the touch sense, that's not necessarily as much the case. Again, you fall down, you hurt your knee, you cut yourself with a knife—there is physical unpleasant sensation there. But a lot of what we react to is, "Oh, what am I going to do? I've cut myself with a knife." So begin to be curious about it. If you're experiencing a reactivity, in particular Carol Wilson gave the instruction: if you're experiencing aversion, there's some unpleasant experience you didn't notice. So what is it? What was that unpleasant experience? What is the experience? What is the unpleasantness there? Sometimes it can be surprising. If you're hearing somebody rustle in the hall and you're experiencing that as unpleasant, it's

probably not the sound itself that's actually unpleasant. It's more likely to be an idea about somebody disturbing my practice. So that curiosity—what actually is happening here?

At one point, after I'd heard Carol give this instruction about if you're noticing a reactivity there's something unpleasant that you've missed, I was doing some walking meditation in the upper walking room here and it was pretty full, pretty crowded. I tended to notice a lot of unpleasant and a lot of aversion in walking meditation in general, so this was not an uncommon experience for me. As I was doing the walking meditation and kind of feeling like I've got a pretty narrow lane here, but pretty okay with this, somebody else came into the room and started walking next to me. I got even more squished. And boy, the aversion went through the roof.

Remembering Carol's instruction, I got curious. Okay, what is unpleasant here? I cycled through the senses. It was pretty clear—okay, there's no physical contact, it's not physical unpleasant. Check, that one's not the one. They weren't making sound, it wasn't unpleasant sound. There was no unpleasant smell. Taste was not an issue. So I went through all the physical senses and realized, okay, it's not in the physical realm. There must be something going on in the mind.

I didn't see anything in particular that was unpleasant in the mind that I was averse to. I just felt averse there. So I was just walking back and forth, keeping my mind attuned to what's going on in the mind. And then I saw a thought. The thought was, "They're weird." I was kind of like, "Huh, well there's a thought." I still didn't quite get it—I didn't quite see the connection between that thought and the aversion yet. And then on the next pass through, there was this explosion of a thought: "They've got bare feet and it's freezing cold out." That was my mind's justification for "they're weird"—that they were in bare feet and it was cold out. Cold to me. My experience was cold.

In that moment of recognition, seeing that explosive thought helped me to see that there was reaction to the thought "he's weird." There was fear about "he's weird." And the fear was what was unpleasant. That whole complex of reaction was based in "they've got bare feet." The mind just saw it was ludicrous. There was not really a basis for the reactivity once it was seen.

Once it was seen, then the next pass in walking meditation, it was just this well-wishing: *May you be happy.* I didn't try to do that. It's just what happened. And so this exploration around feeling tone can help us to see how this whole complex of reactivity unfolds.

The second part of this sutta talks about a different aspect of feeling tone. It uses a kind of funny word for us. It talks about worldly pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, and unworldly pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. It says: when feeling a worldly pleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel a worldly pleasant feeling," and so forth. When feeling an unworldly pleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel an unworldly pleasant experience."

So what is this worldly and unworldly? The word being translated as worldly is *sāmisa*, which basically means something like "connected to the flesh." This refers to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience connected to our sense realm. The unworldly—sometimes the worldly, the *sāmisa*, is translated as "of the flesh" or "carnal," sometimes as "not connected to the path," or it's pointed to by some translators as our ordinary kind of pleasure. The unworldly kind of pleasure, *nirāmisa*, is often translated as "spiritual pleasure" or "connected to the path." These are feeling tones that come about as we practice, that tend to be connected to the path of practice.

The Buddha is pointing to the usefulness of understanding the difference between feeling tones that are ordinary, related to sense experience, and feeling tones that are related to practice. This was a major understanding in his own practice. At one point early in the night when he sat down under the rose apple tree, he remembered back to states of concentration that had spontaneously arisen when he was a child. He had been practicing a lot of ascetic practices at that time, basically believing that unpleasant experience would support the mind to let go of the body in some way. And that night he remembered those states of pleasurable concentration and is said to have thought, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure which is not connected with this movement towards grasping? Why am I afraid of that pleasure that's connected with concentration?" Then he is said to have asked the question: "I wonder if this kind of pleasure, this kind of happiness—maybe that's part of the path." And in that reflection, he is said to have realized, "Yes, this is part of the path. This kind of happiness and pleasure is part of the practice."

That completely shifted how he practiced. He began being curious about this distinction between these different kinds of feeling tone. This was an important understanding in his own practice, and I think that's why he includes it here—this understanding of the difference between these two.

The ordinary pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings are connected with sense impressions, connected with bodily sensation, with ordinary sense contact. This includes thoughts that relate to sense contact. The taste of a meal may have pleasant, un-

pleasant, or neutral sensations to it. The thought of the taste of a meal may have pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral sensations to it. That is also the same kind of worldly pleasure.

Now again, he's pointing to a distinction here—the kind of pleasure that is worth moving towards, or the kind of feeling tones that help us recognize: Am I headed in the direction of the path? Or am I getting caught in more ordinary kinds of pleasure? And yet the instructions are still very simple. They are: just notice. Is the pleasure worldly pleasure? Worldly pain? Worldly unpleasant? Is it unworldly pleasure? Unworldly pain? Just noticing that distinction.

This unworldly pleasure really is the pleasure associated with the path of practice: states of concentration, insight, the happiness of giving, the pleasure that comes with knowing you're engaged in ethical conduct. There's delight and joy that arises as you realize the heart is aligned with ethical conduct. There's the pleasure of being present. This one can be kind of interesting—it can be so similar sometimes that we might confuse it or mistake it for the pleasure of sense pleasure. As the mind gets more present and aware, we can go outside and it's like everything is sparkly sometimes. Really beautiful. A very pleasant experience. We might think that's the worldly pleasant, the pleasure of the senses.

But I think it's more connected to the pleasure of being present. Because in that state we can look down at an oil stain on the driveway and be like, "Wow, that's amazing." There's a difference—that pleasure of being present and available for what's arising.

And then there's the pleasure that comes with concentration and the pleasure that comes with insight. We can be noticing aversion, being with physical unpleasant experience, and having a kind of delight in the seeing of it. Have you noticed that? Sometimes we can see that. It's kind of interesting to have this experience of both "Wow, there's aversion happening" and yet "Wow, it's so cool to see it." There's a space around it. There's a sense of delight in the engagement, in the practice.

This is the kind of pleasure that comes with the path of practice, which the Buddha said is not the kind of pleasure we need to be afraid of. We don't need to be afraid of any pleasure as long as we're mindful of it, actually.

One thing to point to quickly, because I've been emphasizing the unworldly pleasure—and there's a lot of that which does happen for us as the mind settles, as there's connection with experience, as concentration develops, the mind can move into many states of happiness, of ease and bliss. And yet, unworldly feelings are not always only pleasant.

There's one text that describes in particular what happens around seeing the impermanent nature of experience—how that, depending on what's happening, depending on how the mind is meeting it, can unfold differently. It's interesting. When recognizing the impermanence, change, and fading away of sense experience, one sees as it actually is with proper wisdom that sense impressions, formerly and now, are all impermanent—joy arises. That's pleasantness arising with the recognition of impermanence. Sometimes we can have that, the sense of seeing the arising and passing of experience, and it's very joyful.

Other times, when recognizing the impermanence, change, and fading away of sense experience, one actually sees as it actually is with proper wisdom that sense impressions, formerly and now, are all impermanent—one generates a longing for supreme liberation. There's a kind of disenchantment with sense impressions, and this experience can be felt as unpleasant.

And when recognizing the impermanence, change, and fading away of sense experience, one sees as it actually is with proper wisdom that sense impressions, formerly and now, are all impermanent—equanimity arises. Equanimity does have a kind of neutral feeling tone.

So this is pointing to the qualities of unworldly pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience. And through all of this, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta suggests simply to recognize what kind of feeling is happening. Simple. When it's a worldly pleasant feeling, we know it's a worldly pleasant feeling. No judgment around it in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. And in fact, elsewhere in the texts it clearly says that clearly comprehending feeling of any kind, worldly or unworldly, is liberative. It leads us to being able to understand and let go of the ways our mind clings.

The simplicity of this practice of noticing the feeling tone and seeing all of the ways that the mind creates reactions, responses to the feeling tone—this is such a crucial process to see. The key in terms of helping us understand how suffering comes to be is this: what we see is that the response to feeling tone is created by our own minds. It's optional. It is a construct of our own minds that we react. It's motivated by that underlying belief.

But when we begin to see through that underlying belief—that having to get pleasant and needing to get rid of unpleasant is the way to go—we see that that's just delusion. We see that the whole of our suffering has been constructed. The mental reactivity has been constructed by our minds. The mind starts to let go of it, letting go of that movement from feeling to craving. The craving releases.

And then we are in a position to respond with wisdom, with compassion, with love, with generosity to what's happening. Not be in a reactive mode, but a responsive mode.

So let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 63

Untangling the Tangle

Andrea Fella · 53 min

In this profound dharma talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella explores the Buddha's core teaching that suffering (dukkha) is not something done to us by external conditions, but arises from our relationship to experience through greed, aversion, and delusion. Drawing from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), she examines how the Four Noble Truths invite us to understand suffering rather than simply endure it.

Fella offers a beautiful framework for understanding suffering as a "tangle" where our wholesome wishes for safety, happiness, and well-being become knotted with the truths of impermanence, unreliability, and uncontrollability. She emphasizes that these threads of love and wisdom are not inherently in conflict—they only appear so when viewed through the lens of craving and confusion. The craving for particular outcomes around our wishes creates the knot, not the wishes themselves.

The talk provides practical guidance for working with this tangle through meditation. Rather than approaching suffering with analytical aggression or spiritual bypassing, Fella suggests "honoring" our suffering with a gentle, patient presence—like rubbing a cloth softly rather than taking an ice pick to experience. She shares a moving personal story of investigating depression during retreat in Burma, discovering that what appeared to be exclusion-related pain was actually suppressed mettā waiting to be released. This teaching invites practitioners to trust that suffering, when held with mindfulness and compassion, reveals the very love and wisdom that compose it.

The Buddha said famously at one point, "What I teach is just suffering and the end of suffering." Probably more than one of us has said this already. And so pretty much all of what he taught was collected around the theme of suffering and the end of suffering.

One of the pointings that the Buddha offered us around suffering comes in his first discourse—what is said to have been his first discourse—the discourse setting the wheel of the Dhamma in motion. In that discourse he described the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. And with each truth he offered an action, something we need to undertake with respect to that truth. The truth of suffering, he said, should be understood.

This may sound like a simple thing, just to understand suffering, but what he's pointing to, the kind of understanding he came to around suffering, is so radically different than what we habitually or more commonly think of as suffering. When he points us to understand suffering, he's actually pointing to a radically different perspective.

Our usual perspective around suffering often is that it's something that happens to us. We feel kind of like leaves in the wind, just being buffeted around by conditions. Stuff out there makes us suffer, makes us angry, makes us frustrated. And in order to be happy, stuff out there has to change. That's our more habitual way of relating to suffering.

The Buddha pointed to something different. What we call suffering isn't something that's done to us, but lies in our relationship to the world. The Buddha defined this dukkha, this suffering, as the result of a relationship to what's happening in the world—when that relationship is one of greed, aversion, or delusion. Suffering is reactive emotions rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion. People or situations or conditions in the world don't actually have the power to make us angry or to make us afraid, to make us reactive. We essentially give that power to the world through this reactivity. Struggle, suffering, reactivity isn't inherent in what's happening in the world.

And that's actually really good news. Because if it were inherent in what's happening in the world, there would be no hope for us to become free. The conditions of the world are what they are—impermanent, unreliable, largely uncontrollable. And yet it is possible for us to change our minds. This opening to the reactivity, opening to the greed, aversion, and delusion, is one of the conditions that supports our minds to begin to let go of the greed, aversion, and delusion. Our minds can change. Our minds don't have to react with these habitual relationships.

Yet this changing of our minds doesn't mean that our minds somehow also change to think or believe that injustice or unethical behavior happening in the world is somehow okay. This takes a bit of turning our minds around what's being taught here. When we open to what is actually happening, what we are exploring meeting is what is already here, what's already arisen. We're aligning ourselves with the truth of what's already happening. What's already here is already here, and a reaction or a holding on or a pushing away or a confusion about what's already here simply confuses and obscures the situation.

As the mind shifts to releasing greed, aversion, and delusion, it doesn't mean that we don't act in the world. This can be hard for us to understand, especially early on in our practice, because greed and aversion have been so much the motivating forces of our actions. When greed and aversion are at work in our minds, telling us we need to act to

get that thing or get rid of that thing, fix that problem, change that—when our minds are caught in that view, that view of greed, of aversion, which is essentially a delusional view—the mind cannot fathom that there would be any other motivation or reason to act.

And so it takes a little bit of a leap of faith and trust to begin to let go of our habitual ways of acting in the world, of responding to injustice, of responding to unethical behavior, and to explore what it might mean if greed or aversion weren't here. When greed and aversion are not clouding the heart and the heart sees suffering, that heart wants to act—not from confusion or anger or hatred or craving, but from compassion for the suffering.

So we begin to be more curious about the suffering that is arising in our minds. We begin to really see how much of what we call suffering is essentially our own mind's creation. As we begin to see this, a question sometimes comes up. It certainly came up for me. As I saw my mind heading towards anger, yet knowing anger was painful, seeing it charging towards anger—I could tell the mind was clinging to something that was going to cause it suffering. Why does the mind do this? What possibly can the mind be thinking?

So essentially, I think our minds are really confused. I would say that our human organism has a kind of orientation at some level that wants us to be happy, that wants us to experience well-being. And so there's a pull in the direction of well-being.

And yet the way our system is structured—I mean, it's kind of as simple in some ways as a single-celled organism moving towards nourishment and away from noxious chemicals. That natural pull towards pleasant, away from unpleasant. A very natural movement in a living organism. And yet the way our organism is structured, there's a lot happening between that pleasant experience and our pull towards it.

I think I mentioned in the talk on vedana, on feeling tone, how much of our pull towards pleasant and away from unpleasant is motivated by views and beliefs. And so a lot of our mind, our patterns, our habits—there's this movement, we want to move towards happiness and well-being, and then there's this way that our system has learned based on how it's gotten pleasure in the past. It goes for the quickest route to happiness. And that's often getting what I want or getting rid of what I don't want.

Time and time again we have done that. Time and time again we have gotten what we want, gotten rid of what we don't want, and had a little bit of happiness that comes from that. And so we've learned that there is a little bit of happiness that comes from

that. Our mind is not really looking very deeply into what's going on. And so it's kind of like our minds think that's as good as it gets. That's the best kind of happiness that's possible. Getting what I want. Getting rid of what I don't want.

And what we're not seeing, what the mind is not seeing—it's clouded by confusion. The mind is fundamentally confused about what leads towards well-being. And so in that situation, the mind is caught by greed or caught by aversion, believing, "Get that thing, then I'll be happy."

What's going on there is that the mind is basically creating a scenario about having that thing—having that pleasant experience, having somebody look at me the way I'd like them to look at me. Our mind creates this image or projection or fantasy of a future moment in which I'll have that thing. And that feels good, that idea of having that. And so that's where the mind heads.

But what it's missing in that moment is: what's the actual present moment experience? What's actually going on right now? Because what's going on in the present moment is the wanting. The feeling of needing something that's not here. And already in that experience, if we were to actually look at the present moment experience, there's already suffering there. And that is obscured because our mind has taken up residence in this thought.

So essentially, greed is willing to forego, willing to completely ignore that it's suffering now for the possibility of some happiness in the future. This is a confusion that, when we start to investigate what's going on under the surface, we start to see—the suffering that's happening in the greed itself, in the aversion itself. And that begins to give the mind a new education, a new understanding about this movement to well-being.

Our minds are confused because they're caught by habits of mind with which we have been trained. We have been trained to do this. So we're living often in these thoughts and views rather than actually meeting what's happening here and now.

And if it were possible to only live in our thoughts and views, that might be a good strategy. But reality seems to have its way of intervening, coming in and pointing out to us that things are impermanent, unreliable, largely uncontrollable. And so the happiness that we get in that situation is fleeting. It doesn't last that long.

I'd say most, if not all, of our suffering really comes about through a struggle with this impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience. It's not a mistake that things are impermanent, uncontrollable, and unreliable. It's the way things are. It's not that we've failed, that things are unreliable. It's the way things are.

So this is a big part of our confusion—that we have misunderstandings about this basic nature of reality. At very fundamental levels, we think things are permanent, or should be.

When we want things to be permanent, we think they should be. We think they should be reliable. Certainly they should be controllable. If something isn't controllable, I've failed in some way.

At the same time, there's another thread woven into our suffering. Our suffering seems to be connected not only to a misunderstanding about the inherent nature of reality, but also to a deep inner wish to be happy—an inner wish to be safe and at ease, to have well-being. And often suffering arises when these wishes seem out of reach.

This exploration around these threads—the truth of the way life is and these deep wishes that we have—has been central to my own practice. So much of my inquiry into suffering has been seeing the interplay between these two: the deep wishes we could call core wishes for our own happiness, for the well-being and safety of ourselves and our loved ones, this metta wish, and the truths of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable.

This wish for well-being is a beautiful wish. It's a wholesome wish. It's the wish of metta. And a lot of our suffering happens when that wish gets tangled up with the truth. Our suffering is this tangle—this knotted confusion between impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable and our deep wish to be safe and happy and peaceful.

We find ourselves in this tangle, caught in strategies that try to deal with the seemingly irreconcilable nature of these wishes and these truths. We have a deep wish for safety, well-being, happiness, and we start to see the vulnerability, uncertainty, impermanence in the world. Fear is born. Anxiety is born. Confusion is born. Anger and rage can be born when these two get tangled up.

This meeting of truths and wishes is where craving arises. Craving is essentially a misunderstanding that has interplay with both sides. We meet the truth of impermanent, uncontrollable, and craving says something like, "No, that's just wrong. It should not be that way." In the meeting of those truths with craving, we may either blame ourselves for the impermanent, uncontrollable, unreliable nature of our experience—somehow feeling like we're wrong or we've failed—or we may blame the world, put it out there as if the world is somehow targeting us with these events. Or we blame somebody else for that impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience. There's a distortion there, not really taking in the truth. This is truth.

Deeply tied up with craving is often this wish, the wish for our own well-being, our happiness, the wish for the well-being and happiness of our families and friends. These two collide and get tangled because it feels like if I want to be happy and healthy and safe, then there's something wrong if I can't control things. The uncontrollability and the wish for safety become so knotted up, so tangled, because we cannot see—our minds just cannot understand—how these two might coexist: the wish for our safety and the truth of uncontrollability. The mind has trouble holding that both of those are valid.

As we begin to touch in through our meditation practice to this truth of impermanent, unreliable vulnerability, we might begin to experience the feeling of vulnerability that comes with this wish for safety and tell ourselves, "Well, things are impermanent. Things are uncontrollable. Vulnerability, okay, that's just the way it is." But it may be that this movement is almost a denial of that wish for safety.

Sometimes we can fall into what Bhante was talking about this morning—spiritual bypassing—where we use the Dharma as a way to ignore or deny what we may be experiencing, something like anger or aversion. "No, I'm a good Buddhist. I don't experience those things." We find ourselves in that spiritual bypassing mode.

There's also something that I'm going to call spiritual bludgeoning—when we sometimes beat ourselves up with the Dharma. It sounds like, "Yep, things are impermanent. That wish for safety? That's just not a valid wish." We may try to beat our wishes for well-being and happiness and safety with this kind of understanding: "Well, things are impermanent, and so this vulnerability—okay, that's just the way it is. This wish for safety is not a valid wish." We may think that.

And yet, that wish for safety is a wholesome movement of the heart. What happens as it meets that truth of uncontrollability is that the clinging, the craving around that wish for safety is demanding safety in a certain way—demanding a particular result, as Bhante talked about this morning.

So the exploration here is beginning to be curious about this knot between these two, between these truths and these wishes. The craving around a particular way to be safe is what creates this tangle when our experience is impermanent and uncertain.

Wisdom asks us to let go of the expectations around the wishes. Wisdom asks us to let go of the craving for particular outcomes around these wishes, around this movement of well-being and love. It asks us to let go of particular expectations. It doesn't ask us to let go of the wishes. Wisdom actually wants us to embrace those wishes. Wisdom

is wanting us to simultaneously recognize these two threads. The threads of truth and the threads of love can coexist—not tangled, but interwoven. The weave of our lives can be this weave of love and wisdom, not in conflict.

One of the things I've learned is that whenever there's suffering, whenever I'm experiencing suffering, there's a tangle going on. Think of the way threads get tangled—the knot is composed of these knotted threads of love and wisdom. The tangle exists because of the confusion, because of the craving. And so anytime there is suffering, it's an opportunity. The suffering is pointing right out to us where we are resisting the truth and where we are confused about love. It's an opportunity for us to see right into love and wisdom when we meet suffering.

Certainly in my years of practice, when I saw suffering, I often did a couple different things. One was this sense of it feeling like a tumor, some really bad thing—this anger or whatever it was—and I felt like I needed to take a scalpel and cut it out of my system, to excise it, throw it away. But if we look at the tangle, if we take scissors and cut the tangle out, we are left with a hole in our fabric.

Actually, my experience is that when we're trying to get rid of something in that way, thinking that this is bad, wholly bad, approaching our dukkha as something that is bad and has to be gotten rid of—what that suffering is composed of is not going to just let itself be cut out. Because again, these threads of love and wisdom are there waiting to be revealed in the tangle.

So how can we do this? How can we let the tangle untangle?

Another strategy that I often employed was when I saw something challenging, I would think, "Okay, there it is. I am going to figure it out." Put it under the microscope, find all the pieces, pull it apart, figure out what's in there. A form of greed, essentially—greed combined with aversion, both of them together. I learned a lot doing that, but I also reinforced a lot of greed and aversion in doing that.

What I have learned is really helpful in this seeing of the tangle is to honor it. I've started using this word *honoring*. Honor the tangle. Respect that suffering. It's there to show us love and wisdom. Can we hold it in that way? Willingness to honor this tangle will—it's a slow process, I'd say, a slow unwinding sometimes. And what is often helpful there is a gentle meeting, just of the most obvious piece of whatever's here in that tangle.

And so we might, in the way that I had described, have put it under the microscope, kind of like, "Yep, I've seen anger before, there's usually fear in there, I'll find the fear." And yes, I would find fear when I was looking for it. Or maybe there's something that

we think is going on there, and so we may try to dive inside of the pattern to find out what's happening. A lot of the time, if we're looking for something, we will find it. We'll construct it even.

So in my own experience, it can be really helpful to just settle back and explore meeting that pattern of the tangle. Think of it as a kind of warm bath of mindfulness and wisdom that lubricates the tangle, lets it loosen gently. And as it loosens, little pieces of it are seen. Just be with what's most obvious about these tangles. Let the tangle reveal itself to you.

This takes patience and trust, deep trust. And also it takes recognizing when that's possible. You've been practicing here for nearly three weeks, and this is possible at least some of the time. In your meetings you've been reporting this possibility of just holding suffering—that the mindfulness is strong enough for all of you at times to hold suffering and learn from it in this way.

For me, realizing that suffering is this beautiful, beautiful pointing to love and wisdom has given me so much patience around it—that what can be revealed there is beauty and truth, love and truth, as we can hold it with mindfulness. It takes knowing when we can do that, because there are times when we try to meet a particularly tangled knot and what happens, instead of the mindfulness being a lubricant letting the tangle loosen and weaken and point out the love and wisdom that's kind of in there, is that it just gets more and more knotted up. If that's happening, if it feels like it's getting tighter and tighter, if it feels like we're going down the rabbit hole of the pattern, that is not the time to try to sit with it. Then it's time to redirect the attention, work with something else, set it aside. There are lots of different ways we've talked about doing that. And yet there's a lot of capacity that you've developed over these weeks with which to meet dukkha.

My microscope kind of way of meeting dukkha was like if I wanted to figure something out about this cup, I'd be taking an ice pick to it, trying to pry it apart and figure out what's inside of it and what it's made of, what's underneath that glaze. I could smash it even. That's a pretty violent way to go about meeting suffering.

The kind of investigation or meeting—being with, actually, it's more being with—one of my teachers at one point, I think it was Sayadaw U Pandita, brought a cloth up and said, "This is how we meet experience." Rubbing it with a soft cloth, staying in contact with it, that kind of gentleness. There's a different set of things that are learned in this way. That's a being with experience. One of you in the interviews talked about accompanying ourselves. That's the quality.

If you notice that there are ideas or views about what might be underneath, hold those views lightly. So many times when I have been investigating some kind of suffering, I thought I knew something. I thought I had some idea about what it was about—some connection to my childhood trauma on the playground, or some relationship issue. I thought I knew. My analytical mind would come up with very reasonable ideas about what this suffering was about. But many, many times I saw that when I actually just set those aside, when I actually allowed it, held it in this way I'm talking about—this gentle holding, letting it reveal itself to me—so many times I was completely surprised by what was revealed.

One of the most surprising experiences I had along these lines was when I was practicing in Burma with Sayadaw U Tejaniya at Shwe Oo Min Monastery. I was experiencing quite a bit of low-grade depression over several weeks. I could see some of how it arose and actually tied it to this notion of being excluded on the playground. There was a particular time in the day when talking was allowed at this monastery, and people would get together and walk and talk—there would be these walk and talks happening up and down the middle road of the monastery. I often saw this depression coming up there, and it got strengthened as I saw two people together talking. This idea arose: "Oh, this is connected to being excluded on the playground."

Fortunately, I just put that aside and said, "Okay, well, what's here? What's happening?" I investigated this in many different ways over the course of a couple of weeks, just seeing when it was coming into being, what happened. I actually at one point noticed it came into being out of calm. My mind was really calm, and suddenly it was sinking into depression.

Well, that's interesting, huh? I wonder what that's about. So again, just noticing.

At times when the depression was kind of strong and I needed to not be so focused on it, I would expand my awareness: "Okay, well yeah, that depression's there, and there's thousands of other things happening in the present moment." So okay, there's seeing happening, hearing's happening, walking's happening, oh there's the depression, okay, there's seeing, there's walking, there's the depression. Just letting myself take a bigger container. There's just so many different ways of working with this.

And then at one point, as I was walking back to my room, I felt the depression really get strong. But at this point the mind was pretty at ease with working with it. As I went to my room and did my lying meditation—because I was doing primarily lying meditation—I felt the depression just expand. It felt like it was growing really big. I was like,

"Wow, I haven't felt it get that big before." But this is what was happening. It was just expanding, expanding. Okay, can I be with it while it expands? I could. I could be with it. It's a little scary, but I could be with it.

And then at some point, while I was sitting with that expanding depression, it felt like the entire thing flipped inside out and it became expansive mettā.

The next thing my mind did was have a kind of smashing thought: "Oh, that's sappy, that's stupid." And I was like, wow. Seeing that as the mind entered into this vast, beautiful mettā experience, there was this relationship to it—"that's sappy, that's stupid." Seeing that the mind wanted to repress the mettā. That was the depression—this kind of subtle holding down of this mettā. That was not what I had expected.

Many, many times in investigating some kind of suffering, I have seen love in there, with some kind of weird or contorted relationship to it. And connected also to these truths of impermanent, unreliable—that relationship around that mettā was something like, "Well, that mettā, that's not reliable." Something like that.

And so the tangle—honoring the tangle, allowing it to reveal the love and the wisdom. It's a very beautiful process that we're engaged in. This transformation happens.

I think Bhante used the analogy around ice and water. In a way this is similar, because the ice is like when love and wisdom are all frozen up together. But that ice, every single molecule of that ice is water. It's H_2O. And yet it's frozen, it's stuck. The transformation, the melting, just changes state to a fluid, malleable state. Very similar to this.

The tangle—the tangle is the threads of love and wisdom. And our practice helps us to hold and meet that, so that we see into these truths. Our heart begins to stretch through this exploration to understand actually that our hearts can hold both: these wishes, these pure wishes of well-being, of love, of connection, of care, of compassion—and these truths. They are not in conflict. They're only in conflict when viewed from the perspective of greed and aversion and delusion.

And so honoring what's arising. Because it is pointing the way for us. Our suffering points the way for us to more deeply understand. Honoring our pain, honoring our confusion.

It reminds me of a phrase from a poem I mentioned at the beginning of the retreat, a poem by Izumi Shikibu: "Watching the moon at dawn, solitary mid-sky, I knew myself completely, no part left out."

No part left out. The pain, the confusion, the anger, the frustration, the craving—all asking to be seen, and in a way waiting to reveal love and wisdom.

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

This concludes the talk.

CHAPTER 64

Not-Self and Selfing

Andrea Fella · 1h02

> *In this profound exploration of the Buddhist teaching on anattā (not-self), Andrea Fella guides practitioners through understanding how we habitually construct a sense of self and why the Buddha considered questions like "who feels?" to be invalid. Drawing from key discourses including the second discourse of the Buddha on the five aggregates (khandhas), she illuminates how our ordinary way of attending—asking "Was I?" "Am I?" "What am I?"—leads to a thicket of views and suffering.*
>
> *Fella uses the beautiful analogy of a rainbow to illustrate the conditioned nature of self: just as a rainbow arises from the confluence of moisture, sunlight, and an observer—and cannot be approached as a solid thing—so too our sense of self is a confluence of conditions rather than a fixed entity. She explores the Buddha's teaching that form, feeling, perception, mental formations (saṅkhāra), and consciousness are all "not-self" precisely because they cannot be controlled and are impermanent and unreliable.*
>
> *The talk offers practical frameworks for investigation, including the Buddha's threefold reflection: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself." Fella unpacks these as pointing to progressively subtler levels of selfing—the possessive self, the agent self, and the recipient self. She shares personal examples of watching identities shift dramatically in moments, revealing their constructed and impermanent nature. Rather than trying to eliminate the sense of self, practitioners are encouraged to study it with curiosity and meet it with allowing and love, letting wisdom naturally untangle these habitual patterns.*

The Buddha in his conversations with his followers often talked about how our minds get caught in different ways at different times. I'd like to start this evening by sharing one of those teachings.

He begins this teaching by describing one of the ways in which an ordinary person relates to experience. You might recall that when we talked about feeling tone, I mentioned a text in which the Buddha also described how an ordinary person—I think "ordinary worldling" was the translation that was used there—how they relate to feeling tone. Here he's talking about how an ordinary person attends to things.

He says an ordinary person—this is someone who's not met the teachings, who doesn't practice—does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, they attend to those things unfit for attention and do not attend to those things fit for attention.

This is how they attend unwisely: "Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?" Or else they are inwardly perplexed about the present thus: "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?"

These thoughts, this way of attending—I think you get the drift—attending through the sense or the perspective of I, of I-me.

He goes on to say that when they attend unwisely in this way, one of six views arises. The view "self exists for me" arises as true and established. Or the view "no self exists for me" arises as true and established—that one's interesting. There, the Buddha points to this view of no self as being one of these six views that arises. Or the view "I perceive self with self" arises. Or the view "I perceive not-self with self" arises. Or the view "I perceive self with not-self" arises. Or else they have some such view as this: "It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the results of good and bad actions. But this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change and will endure as long as eternity."

This, he said, is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views. The untaught ordinary person is not freed from suffering, being caught in this thicket of views.

This kind of habitual way we have of meeting experience through the perspective of self, the Buddha says, inclines us towards these different views of self. Caught by this perspective of self, he says there's a direct connection with suffering.

I'll read another teaching, because this sense of questioning—he's saying here that pretty much any view at all around the self, any way you can even think about having a view of the self: I perceive self with not-self, I perceive self with self, I perceive not-self with self—all of these are mistaken understandings, he says.

And so the question arises, and has arisen for thousands of years, something along the lines of: well, okay, if there's no self, then who feels? Or who decides? This kind of question has come up in some of our meetings. So I thought I'd read a story of an exchange between the Buddha and someone with questions along these lines, so we can hear how the Buddha responds to this kind of question.

The questioner asks the Buddha, "Venerable Sir, who feels?"

"Not a valid question," the Blessed One replied. "I do not say one feels. If I should say one feels, in that case this would be a valid question. But I do not speak thus. If one should ask me, 'Venerable Sir, with what as condition does feeling come to be?' This would be a valid question."

To this the valid answer is, "With contact as condition, feeling comes to be. With feeling as condition, craving."

And this person, not quite getting it, asks next, "Venerable Sir, who craves?"

"Not a valid question," the Blessed One replies.

I'll skip some of it, but basically: with feeling as condition, craving comes to be; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, becoming.

And so the Buddha is really pointing to this question around "Who is feeling? Who is experiencing?" It's not really relevant here. It's not the way, the understanding of the way things are happening in our experience.

To me, this way of responding to the question is really pointing to the conditioned nature of our experience—that we are just this conditioning tumbling on. That's all that is happening. Conditions arising, passing away. Conditions arising, giving rise to other conditions, giving rise to other conditions. This is what this being... I won't say this is what this being *is*, but this is how this being *happens*. Maybe I could say that. This is how this being happens. We are more a happening.

One philosopher, Buckminster Fuller—I thought of this today and went and looked on the internet. The internet is great this way; you can find pretty much anything. I remembered this from when I was a teenager. I read a book by Buckminster Fuller called *I Seem to Be a Verb* and wanted to get the whole quote. So here's what he says:

"I live on earth at present and I don't know what I am. I know that I'm not a category. I'm not a thing. I'm not a noun. I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process, an integral function of the universe."

That's what we are. We are functioning. We are functionings—human functionings, human happenings. We could say, instead of a being, human happenings.

So I'd like to briefly give some analogies, some senses of how to understand this teaching of not-self in a more analogical way. Because there's nothing really out there that's a thing. We know through just our understanding, to some extent, of the way physics works, that there's no stasis anywhere—that there's just this continual flux of particles. And yet we congeal into the sense of something. We congeal, we put on top of experience, that things are things, including ourself.

And so one analogy, thinking about this happening as a conditioned set of arisings—an arising that comes with a set of conditions—a good analogy for this is a rainbow. A rainbow seems to kind of, sort of be a thing, although it's very ephemeral. When I was a kid, I was shocked that you could actually take a picture of a rainbow. It's got some kind of happening going on, for sure. But it's this confluence of conditions that makes that happening, that has that happening be realized, that makes that happening arise. There's moisture in the air. There's sun that has to be hitting those drops of moisture. And then there needs to be an observer.

I think anytime there is sun and water in the air, at some place there will be a rainbow—whether it's landing anywhere. There would be the possibility of a rainbow if there was somebody standing in the right place to see it. But it really does need the observer.

I actually decided to look this up on the internet to see how rainbows work. And one of the things I thought was really cool was this: it said that a rainbow doesn't actually exist in the way that we think it exists, because you cannot approach it as a thing. You cannot walk up to a rainbow. If you walk up to a rainbow, it may appear that the rainbow is staying the same distance from you. Every step you take towards the rainbow, basically what's happening is you're seeing a new rainbow. Because the distance from those water droplets is essential in terms of the refraction and where we are. The distance is essential. So we take a step, and we're seeing the water droplets refracted just a step further.

It doesn't exist in the way we think it exists as something out there. It's this confluence of conditions.

At one point I was doing a self-retreat. A friend of mine let me use their cabin on the Oregon coast this past January, and I was there during a really stormy time, so some of the waves were enormous. I was up on a cliff seventy-five feet above the ocean, but some of the waves were breaking and spraying water up above the seventy-five foot

mark of the cliff. As I stood there one afternoon, each time the wave broke and sent up this shower of water, I saw a rainbow appear in the air in front of me. Sometimes I could see the rainbow appear and vanish and appear and vanish and appear and vanish as wafts of mist went through that area. It was very interesting to see. It looked like the rainbow was hovering there just waiting to be revealed. But it's the conditions that come together.

And so the sense of self is kind of like that. It is conditions that are interpreted as I or me or mine.

In another discourse of the Buddha—one that Sally mentioned the other night, the second discourse of the Buddha—the Buddha really began to unpack this teaching of not-self with respect to the five aggregates. I want to give you a little bit of a flavor of this text.

With respect to each of the five aggregates, the first thing that the Buddha points to is this aspect of how we think of a sense of self as being something that has control—control over our experience, control over what we feel or think or do. This is a very common way to have a sense of "I am." I'm the one who chooses, I'm the one who feels, I'm the one who thinks. The sense that I should be able to make things happen the way I want them to. This notion is a very common way to impute a sense of self—the sense of agency, the sense of control.

The Buddha points to this as what we actually see when we really go through our lives. Over and over again, we have staring us in the face this kind of truth of not-self. Only we don't see it because we have views and beliefs that we're holding to. We're looking at our experience through those views and beliefs and thinking, for instance, something like, "Well, I should have control over my thoughts," or "I should have control over my emotions. Why can't I just stop myself from doing this thing over and over again?" We think we're failing, we think we're a failure, we think somebody is doing something to us—as opposed to recognizing that this is simply an aspect of not-self staring us in the face, that we don't have this kind of control.

So the Buddha said—I'll just read a couple of these to give you the flavor. Form is one of the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness. Form refers primarily to the body but also to all physical form.

"Form is not self. If form were self, the body would not lend itself to affliction, and it would be possible to say of the body, 'Let my body be thus. Let my body not be thus.' But because form is not self, it is not possible to say, 'Let my body be thus. Let my body not be thus.'"

Mental formations are not self. Mental formations include all of our emotions, our mind states, things like mindfulness, anger, frustration. I'm going to read through this with a couple of examples.

"Anger is not self. If anger were self, anger would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to say of anger, 'Let my anger be thus. Let my anger not be thus.' But because anger is not self, anger leads to affliction, and it is not possible to say of it, 'Let my anger be thus. Let my anger not be thus.'"

"Mindfulness is not self. If mindfulness were self, it would be possible to determine of mindfulness, 'May my mindfulness be thus. May my mindfulness not be thus.' But mindfulness is not self. Therefore it is not possible to say of mindfulness, 'May my mindfulness be thus. May my mindfulness not be thus.'"

That's a little bit of a relief.

It's also a way we suffer, isn't it? A lot of us suffer over this, thinking we should be in control of the mind. So this notion of control is one of the main ways that we tend to impute a sense of self. And when we see that we do not have control, rather than taking this to be a personal failing, we might remind ourselves: not self. No control, not self. This is not self. Mindfulness is not self. Self-judgment is not self. Frustration is not self.

So that's one piece of this teaching, this notion. And the Buddha pulls out this aspect of control particularly for us to examine. Then for each of the aggregates, he reminded his followers—he actually engaged them in a dialogue. He said, "So form, body—is form permanent or impermanent?" They said, "Well, it's impermanent." And he says, "Well, okay, so what is impermanent—reliable or unreliable?" "Well, it's unreliable." "Is what is impermanent and unreliable fitting to be called self?" And he went through this with each of the aggregates.

Because the aggregates are impermanent and unreliable, they tend to lead to dukkha. They lead to dukkha when they are clung to. In the time of the Buddha, one of the understandings or definitions of what self is—the self we are aspiring towards—was a self that is permanent and blissful. So in this situation, he was most likely speaking to people who held this perspective, that the self worth aspiring towards is permanent and blissful. And what the Buddha says is, you cannot find anything in your experience that is reliable and blissful all the time. So is that worthy of being called self? And those followers of the Buddha responded, "Well, I guess not. I guess it's not worthy of being called self."

But for us, maybe that's not the sense of self that we connect with—that idea of some permanent, stable, blissful entity that we're shooting for, merging with some kind of oneness. Maybe that's not our view or worldview. But what I think this teaching is partly asking us to do, what I read in this instruction, is the Buddha saying, "Well, what is your definition of a sense of self? What do you take to be self?" And then start looking at it. Is it what you think it is?

A sense of self we usually do impute some kind of solidity to, some kind of stability to, some kind of ongoingness to. Some of that comes from a sense of memory and continuity, from remembering what we've done. So there's some sense of stability, some sort of something that's traveling through time. But what is that? What is that experience?

To me, one of the things this teaching points to is: whatever you think of as self, start looking at it. Because that's what the Buddha had them do in this sutta. What is it that you call self? Something permanent and blissful? Okay, let's look at our experience. Is there anything you can experience that's permanent, that's going to be here forever? Nothing found in our process of humanness is permanent.

So this exploration—how does the practice help us to shift from this idea of not-self, or anatta, the Pali term that's often translated as not-self? And I like that translation, "not-self" as opposed to "no-self," because "no self" tends to have us reify this idea that there is no self—which was one of those views the Buddha said leads to suffering. This notion of "there is no self" established as the way it is—he says that's a view that leads to suffering.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, I think, is the one who really brought in this use of "not-self," which to me speaks to: what do we call self? What do we take to be self? And the "not" in front of it says, well, it's not what we think it is.

It's not that. What do you think self is? Well, it's not that. And how about this? Nope, not that either.

So the exploration here isn't to try to pick up this idea or teaching of not-self or no-self and walk around saying, "I'm a no-self," or even "I'm a not-self"—to kind of overlay that teaching or that idea onto our experience and try to not have a sense of self. Because good luck with that.

Our practice really is to see: What is it that we are calling self? What are we taking to be I or me or mine? In this moment, are you the one that's listening? Are you the one that's a meditator? What are you taking to be I or me or mine right now? There can often be some subtle thing there.

One famous quote by the Zen master Dogen: "To study the way is to study the self." That's our work—study these senses of self, get to know what the experience is. "To study the self is to forget the self." My understanding of this teaching is that our work is to study what we think of as a sense of self. As we explore that, there's a very natural understanding that arises: "Hmm, I thought that was self, but it kind of showed itself to be not that." So a very natural unfolding of this study is that we begin to understand in a different way than a kind of intellectual thinking. We begin to understand this teaching of not-self in an experiential way. "To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."

To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.

And so to study the self—this is the exploration of what do I call I or me or mine.

There are different ways we may experience a sense of self. Get familiar with how you experience a sense of self. Sometimes it might be that we see a sense of self kind of congealing, a strong sense of identity coming into being, and we recognize something about a sense of self. Or we might notice—and I think this was more of an earlier understanding for me—seeing a sense of self shifting. Having a kind of identity around some aspect of who I was, and then something else happened, and in a split second there was another identity, like a flip off of one and a flip on of another.

On one three-month course—I think it was my first three-month course—I was reactive to the questions that were asked in the hall, the live questions in the hall. And by one person in particular. I got very argumentative in my mind with this person about their questions. And I spent some time out in front of the meditation hall, outside on the driveway, walking up and down and feeling into that sense of "I am right." I know how these questions should be asked, or whatever I was thinking. I was this identity, this very familiar—really, really familiar—analytical person. I was forty at the time, twenty years ago. Analytical Andrea arose. And it was suffering. I could feel the suffering of it. So I was walking up and down and feeling that suffering, trying to understand, doing a little bit of the microscope thing, trying to figure out this sense of self. But I was just watching it and feeling the suffering of it, basically.

And then this truck drove up. It was one of those lunchtime things. The truck drove up and stopped in front of the building, and the brakes squealed, and the door slammed. And my mind immediately flipped from this forty-year-old analytical, argumentative person to a two-year-old that was like, "Ooh!" And I was just reveling—I was standing there feeling the bangs and the big bursts of sound, and rapture was just going through me.

In a second.

That was interesting, because that sense of self had seemed so solid, so there. And it changed in a split second. That helped me to see something about the impermanent nature of self and that sense of "that's me." This is actually one of the really great tools around exploring not-self—when we start to see these identities, just noticing what kinds of senses of self there are.

Another time I was sitting in the dining room, basically miserable, feeling the miserable self.

And then I picked up my fork and I noted "lifting, lifting," and suddenly I became a practicing yogi, and the miserable self disappeared. It was like—whoa, what happened?

So we can see these shifts of identities. And in seeing these shifts, we start to recognize and understand, especially for the ones that are kind of entrenched. The ones that are entrenched, we impute a permanence to. We think they're always there. And we can start to recognize through this kind of exploration—like when I turned into that two-year-old, the forty-year-old analytical one was not there. It just did not exist. We begin to poke holes in this belief of the solidity, or the ongoing traveling through time, of these identities.

The Buddha offered a number of ways to explore this. He actually identified twenty ways that we create identities. I'm not going to go through all twenty ways we create identities—you can breathe a sigh of relief. But I will just mention the frame and a couple of the things he said about it.

We get the twenty by taking the five aggregates times four methods of identifying with each one. Five times four is twenty.

These four methods of identifying: The Buddha says we tend to create an identity or a view of self as "I am something." I am my body, I am my feelings, I am my emotions. This is a very common way that we identify. "I'm angry, I'm miserable." We identify with roles—I'm the parent, the child, the teacher, the student. So we have this "I am something" going on sometimes. And we can reflect or hear the kinds of thoughts going on in our mind and begin to touch into the flavor of identity that's happening.

Another one is the possessive quality: something is mine. My emotions are mine. You might have more of a feeling of the emotions being mine rather than "I am my emotions"—maybe a slightly different flavor of identifying around the emotions. The body belongs to me. The body is mine. Some entity exists that owns the body. That's another flavor of identification.

And then two other interesting ones: "I am inside of something." I'm inside the body. I'm inside of consciousness. Sometimes in a meditative state it can feel like that—I'm inside of consciousness. A sense of sitting here behind the eyes and looking out. The "I" is up here somewhere, looking out. That feeling of being inside. Or something is inside of me—another flavor of identification. Consciousness is in me, maybe. Emotions are in me.

So the Buddha points to these different ways of identifying. He was a real analyzer—he really pulled things apart and saw how they worked and were put together. I think it can be useful at times to recognize that we are identifying in different ways at different times.

Now, for myself personally, this twenty-part framework is not one that I use in my own practice very much. Occasionally I'll use it in a reflective way, recognizing, "Oh yes, taking myself to be inside of my body." Something like that. But there's another framework that the Buddha offered that I find really useful in my practice. That one I'm going to spend more time with, because I can talk about how it's informed my understanding and my practice.

There's a very common encouragement by the Buddha: when we notice something arising with the aggregates, with dukkha, with clinging—in so many different places—there's this encouragement that one should see with proper wisdom. Whatever is arising—the body, feeling, perception, clinging, craving—one should see with proper wisdom: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself."

So he has this three-part exploration. And what I began to explore is not so much...

I mean, sometimes I use that. Sometimes I just remind myself. It's kind of like using that as a reflection. Sometimes I remind myself when I'm caught by something—caught by some mind state—this is not me, this is conditioned. *Conditioned.*

So that's another way of understanding or framing this statement: this is not who I am. And the understanding of the sense of self being a conditioned unfolding, a conditioned arising—sometimes we can just remind ourselves, yes, this is conditioned. I also like using, "This is nature." One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, offered this: "This is nature." What's happening right now is like a plant growing or a rainbow arising. It's just nature. And so that reflection can sometimes help bring a little more balance in the mind so that the mindfulness can have some more ease with it. So that's one way of using that reflection, which has been very helpful for me.

Another way of exploring it is to look at the three parts and see what sense of self is being turned over. The first one—"this is not mine"—is turning over the possessive self: *this is mine.* There are times when the primary sense of identification is around ownership, possession. My own papers at one point had so much suffering in one retreat where I had taken ownership of a word. I had thought in some way that I had coined a phrase, and I heard other people using that phrase. And they weren't giving me credit. So much suffering.

So that's one way of having that sense of self—I own this, this is mine. That's probably the most obvious form of selfing. And I think it's interesting: as I reflected on these three, to me it's like each one points to a subtler sense of self. This possessive sense of self, we recognize this, we know this one. And so beginning to get familiar with it—in this way of asking, okay, what is this sense of self? What is this feeling of possession? What is that like? When I started exploring these senses of self, I found a lot of contraction in the body, a lot of familiar mind states. And what I began to realize is that what I called a sense of self was just a lot of familiar contractions and mind states.

The second one—after this possessor—is "this I am not." That's turning over the sense of "this is what I am." I am solid. I am this kind of being that travels through time. I am the one who chooses, who decides, who acts. This is self as agent in some ways—this sense "I am."

That exploration around that sense of self is something that we've pointed to in several talks. Looking at this aspect of how action happens, in the instructions on intention and in Sally's talk on intention and in Greg's talk on karma, we talked about this—this aspect of how choice arises, intention arises, dependent on conditions. We can start to see this.

I think I gave the example in the instructions around intention that something might happen: you have your breakfast and you've had your tea or coffee or water, whatever you've had to drink. And then sitting in the hall after breakfast, the bladder gets full. The pressure builds. There's discomfort. There's the intention to relieve that pressure, which leads to the intention to get up, stand, use the restroom. Sometimes we can see this with such clarity that it's a little bit spooky. Because it really shows us at times how these intentions are conditioned. And what I thought was me deciding to get up—I decided to get up and go to the restroom—was a whole series of conditions unfolding.

This can be a little odd to see sometimes, but we can be curious about this. When we think, "I am the one who's acting or choosing," begin to investigate that. What is that?

"Who is choosing?" That, as the Buddha would say, is not a valid question. With something as condition, intention arises. In this case, with feeling as condition, discomfort arose. With discomfort as condition, the intention to relieve discomfort arose.

So this is the second sense of self—the one who's in control, who decides, who chooses. I had an interesting experience one day seeing the subtlety of this feeling of being in control and the sense of self embedded within it.

I was taking a drive with my dear friend Annie one time while teaching this retreat. We went out for a nice drive on a beautiful day, and she was driving me along all these back roads I'd never been on. I was just the passenger, looking out the window, really happy. As I felt that happiness—and sometimes on these retreats even as teachers we gain some continuity of mindfulness—I had that happen in that moment. There was a real continuity of seeing that sense of happiness arising, and what I saw in being present with it was that the happiness was predicated on this sense of "Ah, I've got it figured out." It wasn't as simple as just appreciating that in the scene is only the scene, in the heard is only the heard. There was a subtle sense of "Ah, I'm in control." That felt good.

I just had to laugh at myself. How subtle is that? I didn't beat myself up for having that experience. It's just—that is so subtle. That sense of control, and the happiness had seemed so simple.

This is a kind of exploration we can do.

And then the third one: "This is not myself." This one took me a little more reflecting on what it might mean. I don't know if this is exactly what it's pointing to, but it was useful as I explored it in this way.

So there's the sense of "mine," there's a sense of "I am," and then there's a sense of "me." Initially I didn't quite feel into what the difference between "I am" and "me" might be. But as I kept exploring my experience, noticing the senses of self and what was going on around them, there was one point where I could clearly see the sense of self as the one who does things—seeing these intentions arise and the actions follow, thinking "Who's in charge here anyway?" It's really quite odd.

I also noticed something about the knowings—you know, the choosing or knowing what I'm aware of. At one point it became so clear to me that I was not in charge of this knowing process. It was just happening. I didn't even really get to pick what was coming into that awareness. This was just happening, just unfolding. And yet there was a clear sense in that moment: I wasn't in control, but it sure felt like it was happening to me.

That pointed me to a subtler sense of self. We could say the first one is the self as agent or as subject—self as the subject of the sentence. "I am the one who does this"—the agent of the action. And the "me" is self as the recipient, the object. "I'm the hapless one that things happen to." That's also a sense of self.

I found it really useful to notice these three different flavors of senses of self. Sometimes a sense of self feels really clear; there are times when it's not so obvious. And when it's not obvious, that's not the time to go looking for it.

Sometimes we might be experiencing suffering around an emotion, and we might see there's a feeling of anger or frustration. We might think, "Well, where's the sense of self here?" There's clearly perhaps the sense of "I am angry" or "I am frustrated," but that feeling of the "I am" is overwhelmed by the anger itself—by the feeling, the experience of that anger. Sometimes what we're able to notice is not so much the subtlety of the "I" that feels angry, but just the anger itself. We don't have to try to find the "I" in the middle, or the "I" that's connected to dukkha.

Just looking at dukkha is good enough.

In fact, there's a teaching where the Buddha described how dukkha comes to be—a teaching of dependent origination, these links of just the process by which suffering arises. And we've talked about pieces of it. Contact leads to feeling, which leads to craving. When ignorance is present in the mind, feeling leads to craving, craving leads to clinging, clinging leads to becoming. Becoming leads to birth, and birth leads to suffering.

And so the work of the First Noble Truth—to understand suffering—really points to understanding this process of dependent origination, how suffering comes to be. That same process also describes how the sense of self comes to be. Becoming is this arising of the sense of self. Birth is taking identification—one way to understand birth is taking birth into an identity. This same process describes both how the sense of self comes to be and how suffering comes to be.

So whatever is obvious to you in the moment, if it's suffering that's obvious, you are exploring this process. You don't have to go searching after hearing this talk. It's not necessary to think, "Okay, where's the sense of self in there?" And yet sometimes that is what's staring us in the face.

Kind of like when I was doing the walking meditation and feeling that sense of "I'm right." Self-righteousness is a good place to feel the sense of self—that's a great one. So if you feel self-righteous, take that as an opportunity to explore. What is this feeling? What is it? And as I saw in that example, how it just shifted on a dime and became something else.

The sense I had in that first experience of really feeling into that sense of self was how solid it felt, how real it felt, how stable it felt. And then when it vanished in a second, it was like, "Wow, that was not stable." No. Thank goodness that was not stable.

Another way we can see selfing—I talked about noticing the thoughts in our mind. So many of our thoughts relate to me. I'd say probably the vast majority of our thoughts have me at the center. We can tell this because our thoughts come with "I," "me," "mine" in them. And yet sometimes our thoughts come with "they," "them," "that person." "They shouldn't be doing that." This is an othering. We are creating a self out of them, making them something separate. And in that process by which we other, there is a sense of self here.

Sometimes it may be more clear to us that we are othering, so we can be curious about that as a form of selfing. What does it feel like when there's this sense of imputing otherness? So much suffering comes from this type of selfing.

When we create other, we create an identity here. Sometimes these self and others have to do with specific individuals, specific somebody that we have opinions or views about. And sometimes these otherings come from more cultural perspectives, tribal identities that we might have, group identities that we don't necessarily recognize. The othering that happens around race and sexual orientation and religious affiliation—this is a huge place of suffering, and it comes about through this mental formation of selfing and othering.

We can begin to be curious about that kind of selfing, that othering. We may not be able to feel into the self that's here, but maybe we can feel into the sense of separation. When we create a sense of self, when there is a sense of self arising and being believed, there is a separation. It may be us from some other part of ourselves. It may be us from some other person. It may be us and some thing that we own—we are creating a separation there, thinking that we can own something.

The sense of self comes with a separation.

And we can feel into that sometimes, we can feel into that experience of separation.

Seeing the selfing, seeing the senses of self arise, we see how intimately connected with dukkha it can be. These senses of self—we often have identities around strategies that we've used to navigate difficulty. Strategies for safety in our lives. Strategies for happiness. This is often where these senses of self congeal.

And so these senses of self have mistakenly been trying to help us get through life, get through the impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of the way things are. Very much like when I talked about the tangle—the tangle of suffering—the sense of self is also a tangle. It's a different version of that tangle. Or maybe it's the same version, just seen from a different perspective.

And it's really important to meet that with allowing and love, to let the wisdom begin to untangle the threads of that sense of self. Rather than trying to not-self the self, meet it with mindfulness.

It also has these pointers back to love and to wisdom—this wish to be happy, healthy, safe, and trying to navigate these impermanent, unreliable situations, and the tangle that happens there. So sometimes that tangle is felt as an identity. Sometimes it's felt as suffering. Sometimes we feel it as both.

And honoring these with our respect. The word *respect* means to look at again—that's the derivation of that word, to look closely at. So respecting these tangles, holding them with respect and honoring them. Not to dismiss our identities, but to hold them with care. Let them reveal and release with wisdom.

Let's just sit for a few moments.

CHAPTER 65

Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)

Andrea Fella · 1h03

> *In this comprehensive teaching, Andrea Fella unpacks the Buddha's profound doctrine of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), the twelve-link chain describing how suffering comes to be. She begins by acknowledging the teaching's depth, referencing the exchange between Ānanda and the Buddha where the Buddha cautioned that this teaching only appears clear while remaining profoundly subtle. Rather than starting with the traditional first link of ignorance (avijjā), Andrea works from the more experientially accessible middle links—the six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, and birth—before circling back to explain how ignorance and mental formations (saṅkhāra) shape consciousness itself.*
>
> *Andrea illuminates how this cycle operates not just across lifetimes but moment-to-moment in our direct experience. She offers a vivid example of how the idea of being a "good yogi" can trigger the entire chain: pleasant feeling leads to craving, clinging intensifies into fixed beliefs about what we need for happiness, becoming rallies our intentions in service of that identity, and birth into that identity inevitably brings suffering when it cannot be maintained. She also explores how cultural conditioning shapes our mental formations, creating shared ignorance about the nature of happiness.*
>
> *The liberating heart of this teaching emerges through Andrea's personal story of practicing with self-hatred during a three-month retreat. Drawing on Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta (MN 9), she emphasizes that freedom is possible wherever mindfulness meets experience—not only at the feeling-craving junction traditionally emphasized, but at any link in the chain. When wisdom sees clearly that arising is just arising, the entire pattern can fall apart. This is the good news: we are not stuck in this cycle, and understanding dependent origination itself becomes a condition for liberation.*

A few days ago in the morning I responded to a question about dependent origination, and following that there were quite a few requests for a talk. So that's what we're doing tonight.

I'd like to start with just offering what the Buddha's words were on this teaching. With ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. With mental formation as condition, consciousness comes to be. With consciousness as condition, materiality and mentality come to be—nāma-rūpa comes to be. With nāma-rūpa as condition, the six sense bases. With the sense bases as condition, contact. With contact as condition, feel-

ing. With feeling as condition, craving. With craving as condition, clinging. With clinging as condition, becoming. With becoming as condition, birth. With birth as condition, aging and death and the entire mass of suffering comes to be.

As I said the other morning, the Buddha described this as a teaching on how suffering comes to be. And this teaching is not just as simple as understanding causality as we understand it in the world, because what it really points to is the conditionality in our own minds that leads to the arising of suffering. It is pointing to an internal process, the conditions internally that lead to suffering.

It's a complex teaching in many ways. I think one of us referred the other day to an interchange between Ānanda and the Buddha. Ānanda came to the Buddha and said, "It is wonderful, it is marvelous how profound this dependent origination is and how profound it appears. And yet it appears to me as clear as clear." And the Buddha's response is, "Do not say that, Ānanda, do not say that. This dependent origination is profound and appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine, that this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe, unable to pass beyond suffering."

He was pointing out to Ānanda that what he thought was clear as clear about dependent origination—that he wasn't quite really penetrating the depth of the teaching. Conditionality can seem clear, cause and effect can seem clear, and yet what the Buddha is pointing to is subtle.

I think of this teaching as an elaboration on the second noble truth. The second noble truth states that with the arising of craving is the arising of suffering. Dependent origination goes into more detail on how that happens.

I found it useful in my own practice, not simply as a theoretical teaching. My understanding is that it is a description of how suffering comes to be. It's not a practice. Many of the teachings that the Buddha offered were practices about how to look at our experience, but this is more a description—and yet a very penetrating description that helps us to see clearly. While not a practice in itself, it is a teaching that helps us to practice.

There are a couple of key pieces that for me have been really useful to reflect on about this teaching, just in a broad brush way. One of those pieces is that this description is about how suffering arises for human beings—the conditioned nature of suffering for human beings. This itself is useful for us to recognize: that suffering is conditioned, and it is human. Being born in this human realm, we are caught in this process, and until we see through it we will continue to struggle.

The other key piece of this teaching is that the arising of suffering arises in dependence on processes within our own hearts and minds. This is good news because it means that there is the possibility for releasing, shifting, changing this. Given that suffering is conditioned, if the conditions are changed—and just hearing this teaching is a condition that leads to something potentially different happening—then when the conditions change, there can be a different unfolding. Experience does not have to follow in this very habitual way of leading to suffering.

Another thing that has been useful for me, a way to think about dependent origination, is that it essentially points to ways that our mind habitually works. But it is not a description of the way our minds necessarily work. It is possible to change our minds.

Key conditions. One of the key conditions is hearing the Dharma. And for some of us, hearing the Dharma lands in a way such that we are inspired to engage. It doesn't land that way for everybody. It has landed that way for all of you. So here you are, cultivating mindfulness and wisdom—conditions which alter the habitual processes that usually lead us to suffering.

Another thing I think about is this description of dependent origination as a description of how suffering comes to be. It's kind of a description of the tangle that we get caught in. It describes this tangle. And so understanding something about how our minds get tangled helps the untangling.

So this teaching on dependent origination, as I stated it earlier—I'll just name the links one more time. Ignorance conditions mental formations, conditions consciousness, conditions mentality-materiality, conditions the sense bases, conditions contact, conditions feeling, conditions craving, conditions clinging, conditions becoming, conditions birth, conditions old age and death, conditions the entire mass of suffering.

And there's an understanding, although it's not so explicit in the teachings on dependent origination, but elsewhere in the teachings the Buddha points to how suffering conditions ignorance much of the time. And so this chain of dependent origination becomes a wheel or a cycle, with the suffering that arises often—but not necessarily—conditioning more ignorance, which leads us back through this chain again.

This teaching on dependent origination has multiple ways we can look at it. Both of these different ways are supported by what's in the texts, what's in the suttas. One of the ways we can look at dependent origination is as a description of how suffering comes to be over a lifetime, or even over multiple lifetimes. The conditions from our past—ignorance from our past, mental formations from our past—are feeding into how

we are now and in the future, creating suffering. Things from our distant past can be coming into our present, creating suffering now or perhaps creating suffering in the future. And so there's a kind of large time frame on which this teaching operates.

It is even understood as operating over multiple lifetimes. Conditions from previous lives may be arising, conditioning things in this life that we suffer in connection with. What we do in this life may condition suffering in a future life. And so the teaching is understood on this vast timeframe, describing how we are propelled through the cycle of suffering throughout our life here and also through multiple lives.

It is also understood in the texts as a description of how suffering arises right in this moment—the conditions in this moment that lead to suffering. The teaching also points to how we can release that suffering in this moment.

This perspective of dependent origination describing the arising of suffering moment to moment in our experience—this is the one that I have more direct experience with. I don't have direct experience with lifetime-to-lifetime understanding around this teaching. I have some sense of how things that happened long ago in this life, from my childhood, have played into how I suffer here and now. But at the same time, what I see is that play between past and present happens now, through the arising of a thought of the past right now. And so this moment-to-moment arising of conditionality is really where I'd like to focus this talk tonight.

I'm going to go through all twelve of these links, and I'm going to start not at the traditional beginning with ignorance, because in my own experience and understanding, these first four links were some of the most challenging to understand. What I'd like to start with tonight is where it's easier to understand—which is a lot of what we've actually talked about already. So I'll go through some of these links fairly quickly.

If we start with the fact that we are living, we are alive—we have a body and we're alive, we have consciousness and this physical being, mind and body—because of that, we have these sense bases. And with these sense bases as conditioned, because we're conscious, we experience contact with these sense bases. This is the six sense bases conditioning contact. We experience contact with the eye; there's contact through form and there's sight. With the ear, there's contact and hearing. With the nose, contact and smelling. These six sense bases—eye, ear, nose, tongue, the touch sense, and the sense base of the mind—with all of our sense bases there's this contact. We're alive and we experience contact.

With contact as condition, there is feeling—the feeling tone. We've talked a lot about feeling tone. Every sense contact, every sense impression on the five physical senses and in our mind includes this feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

With this feeling tone as condition—and we've explored this extensively—our habitual response to feeling is that when there's pleasant feeling, we like it, we want more of it. When there's unpleasant feeling, we don't like it, we want to push it away. We've also discussed how feeling tends to lead to craving, how it habitually leads to craving.

I want to point back to one of the early links that we didn't explore in depth. Feeling will lead to craving when there is ignorance in the mind—that very first link. When there is not understanding how suffering comes to be. This is what we sometimes call dependent co-arising. With ignorance at the head of our process, when ignorance is arising, feeling leads to craving. When ignorance is arising, feeling and craving come together; there's this co-arising where ignorance, feeling, and craving arise together.

But this is very habitual, very familiar. We're like automatons wanting to maximize pleasant and minimize unpleasant, usually missing the neutral altogether. So feeling leads to craving. You've all seen this—it's not mysterious. We've got our sense bases, there's contact, there's feeling, and often it leads to craving.

With craving as condition, clinging arises. In my sense, clinging is really an intensification of craving. The craving is like the leaning toward, the movement toward something, and the clinging is the latching onto it. Bhikkhu Bodhi offered a wonderful analogy: craving is like a thief reaching out to get something, and clinging is when they've picked it up to take it. That's the flavor of clinging.

Once something is clung to—and for me, at least experientially, this is something useful to become familiar with—we can sense the quality of these links, of each of these things. We know feeling, that quality of pleasant and unpleasant. Craving, to me, has a quality of leaning toward. Clinging has a quality of squeezing or constriction. The body almost feels like it squeezes around an idea, or it literally squeezes to pick something up. There's a feeling in there—clinging has that quality of holding, of contraction.

Once we have clung to something, the next link in the chain is becoming. This one we've touched on briefly. Becoming is in the realm of identification, the heading toward an identity. Once an experience is clung to, our whole system seems to rally in the service of that clinging—to have intentions and actions that follow through on it, to produce or to control. These intentions and actions that serve clinging, this is becoming.

Now, in my experience, becoming actually feels good. It's like this place in our minds where we feel like we've figured it out: "I know how to keep this thing. I know how to navigate my life. I know how to do this." There's a feeling of being in control, of having figured it out. This is becoming. Becoming feels good.

So it's this heading in a direction. We haven't quite landed yet, in a way, with becoming and birth. Birth, in this understanding of the moment-to-moment teaching of dependent origination...

Birth refers to birth into an identity—really landing in "this is who I am. I am this person." It's a solidification of that becoming. In a similar way to how craving and clinging exist on a gradation, I see becoming and birth, or becoming and identity, as being on a gradation from one to the other. We're reaching towards something, we think we've got it figured out, and then we land in the birth.

Sometimes the birth can feel like we've really got it under control, but with birth comes the recognition that now I have to make sure I stay here. This is that vipariṇāma dukkha, the suffering of change. And sometimes we can take birth into something unpleasant. We definitely can take birth into unpleasant identities. I got really good at that with self-hatred, seeing that process. Sometimes it's amazing to think that we actually have intentions that rally in the service of self-hatred, but we do. We can see this. We can see that there's a wanting to have that, because we think it serves us in some way.

With this birth, there will either be suffering in the nature of the birth itself—in my experience of taking birth into self-hatred, it was just unpleasant in and of itself—or even if we take birth into something we think is a good identity, in that moment of taking birth there's a recognition of "whoa, this is not very stable." Some piece of us understands it's not very stable and that it is destined to fall apart. This is old age and death. Once we take birth, we inevitably will suffer, either through the nature of the identity itself being painful, or through the understanding that this identity, even if it's a great one, is not going to last.

Let me offer an example to make this clearer. One thing that's been coming up for a lot of you is this notion of being a good practitioner. So an idea of maybe being a good yogi arises in the mind. This is contact—contact with the sense base of the mind, the idea of being a good yogi. The feeling of that, like an idea or a fantasy in the mind, the feeling of being a good yogi—that feels pretty good, so it's a pleasant experience.

Based on that pleasant experience there's a wish, a desire, a movement towards wanting to make that a reality, wanting to follow through, to have that fantasy or idea become a reality. That's the craving. And then with that comes the clinging, the intensi-

fication of that, which would be the fixed idea or belief that in order to be happy, in order to be okay, I need to be this good yogi. There's a belief that it's necessary—I will not be happy unless I get this, unless I can be this good practitioner, whatever this idea is we have in our mind about what a good practitioner is.

And then the becoming—from that clinging, that sense of necessity, comes these intentions and actions to make it happen. Intentions rally in the service of that idea, that thing we think is a necessity. We start engaging in behaviors, maybe sitting long hours or walking really slowly or whatever we think being a good yogi is.

Let's say for simplicity's sake that these activities have you seeing some things and create the sense of "oh, I am a good yogi." Birth. We take birth in that. "I am a good yogi." We have this distinct feeling of having accomplished or created what we wanted in order to be happy. This creates the sense of self, this birth into identity, and augments the distinction between self and others. In this sense of being a good yogi, we may also be checking everybody else out as to whether they're good yogis or not, and whether we're the best yogi.

And yet, even if this lasts for some time, having taken birth into this sense of being a good yogi, at some point something's going to happen. Many of you have reported this kind of thing where something happens. Suddenly we don't seem to be able to stay with our breath as long as we want to. Something has shifted, and there's a crash. Based on what our idea of being a good yogi is—and I think this is where a lot of the suffering comes from, the idea of what a good yogi is—we're not measuring up to that anymore. We're not measuring up to our own sense of what that is, and then we suffer.

I went through this over and over again. Taking a step and feeling "oh, I can be right with that step," and step, and right with that step, and then suddenly the mind wanders and within seconds it's good yogi, bad yogi, good yogi, bad yogi.

So much pain, so much suffering around this.

The cycle of this chain reinforces itself in certain ways, and one of those ways has to do with the feeling tone associated with some of these links. Wanting, for instance—when we actually touch into the experience of wanting, that feeling of leaning that I talked about—when we notice that feeling too, we recognize that craving is a mental formation. It has a feeling tone, and it generally feels unpleasant when we actually touch into it.

We often miss that unpleasantness because we are thinking about what we're going to get. We're not really clearly seeing the unpleasantness of the wanting in the direct moment's experience. This wanting is unpleasant. Then when we get what we want,

when we cling and move into becoming, that's pleasant. There's something pleasant there—the pleasantness of having the thing that we want, the pleasantness of the feeling of control in that becoming. There's also the pleasantness of the unpleasant wanting going away. And that's actually a really powerful driver.

That wanting, that quality of leaning in, that unpleasantness of wanting, the feeling of offness around the wanting—that goes away for a moment when we get something that we want. And yet, getting the thing that we want isn't very reliable. It kind of falls apart relatively quickly. In that falling apart, our minds go something like, "Well, the last time I felt pretty good was when I got something I wanted. So what can I want in order to get it so that I can feel good again?"

This perpetuates the cycle—basically wanting to want in order to get rid of the wanting. That's actually what's going on. We want to want in order that the wanting go away.

So that's the kind of easy part of the chain in a way, the part that maybe we have a little bit of experience with in our practice so far. But we actually have experience with this other part too, at the beginning of the links. Let me come to the beginning here and review these first parts of the chain.

With suffering, once suffering has arisen, as I said earlier, that suffering tends to condition ignorance. The definition of ignorance in the texts is not knowing about suffering, not knowing about the arising of suffering, not knowing about the cessation of suffering, not knowing about the way leading to the cessation of suffering. This is called ignorance. Ignorance here is not ignorance about how to drive a car or how to cook a zucchini, but ignorance about this process of suffering.

The Buddha said that when suffering happens, it leads to either bewilderment, confusion, more ignorance—or in certain situations, it leads to search. This is said to be what happened for him when he met suffering. It's said that he had the thought, "Does anyone know a way out of this suffering?" And so this is the beginning of search, this searching for a way out of suffering.

If we hear some teachings and gain some faith in the teachings, this puts us onto the process that leads us, in the same kind of conditioned nature, toward freedom. Suffering can also lead to faith when it comes into contact with some curiosity and search and hearing a teaching. This is pointing in the direction of transcendent dependent origination, toward freedom.

But very often, suffering leads right back to ignorance. Because we don't understand suffering. We think we need to adjust the world to deal with suffering. We have to get rid of what's unpleasant. We have to get what's pleasant. This is just the fundamental misunderstanding, and this is the driver of this chain.

Ignorance—suffering not being understood—this is why mindfulness is so powerful in our practice. When mindfulness is present, it has the capacity to see into suffering in a new way. Ignorance generally thinks that having what we want will lead to happiness, following that kind of belief. And we've seen this doesn't go very far toward a deeper kind of happiness. It can lead to a certain kind of happiness—that happiness of sense pleasure, the happiness of getting what we want. It is a kind of happiness.

The Buddha pointed to it as a kind of happiness. But he also said it is pretty much the least kind of happiness that's possible for us as human beings. Caught in this ignorance, we think that kind of happiness is as good as it gets. And so we stay stuck on that wheel.

Ignorance conditions what we do with our minds—this ignorance about not understanding suffering. Based on not understanding suffering, we make choices. We decide how we're going to engage. We tend to go for what we want, get rid of what we don't want. We think this kind of happiness is as good as it gets. That's how we organize our lives. And this organization is mental formations.

Not understanding suffering, we choose things, we decide things, we act based on conditioned habits and patterns. Due to ignorance, we usually take the most obvious move to get rid of unpleasant sensations and to have pleasant sensations. We go for the quick fix, the quick hit. And while we think we're making ourselves happy, this is actually digging us deeper into the cycle, because we're reinforcing this pattern: I got something pleasant, that felt good. Oh, it goes away. Well, find something else to want. It just reinforces that. This ignorance reinforces that. And so with ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be.

I want to talk a little bit about this link not just internally, not just in our own minds. Because the ignorance that we have in our minds around how happiness comes to be, what we can do to make ourselves feel good—this is not simply what's happening in our own hearts and minds. We learn from our families, our cultures. We're taught this same pattern. And so there's a way in which it's not only ignorance in our own hearts and minds, but a kind of collective ignorance that leads to collective mental formations around how we engage in the world.

We can think of culture as being shared mental formations—shared views, shared ideas, shared beliefs. And we teach these to each other. So our ignorance is not just our own. It's coming to us through conditioning, through our families, through our fellow playmates on the playground, through what we see on media. We learn what to believe, what to think.

This kind of ignorance and mental formation that comes through our culture is hard for us to see because it's shared with people around us. We share beliefs and values and we think that's what it is to be human. That's what a good human being is—what I've learned to be. But it's just these views and opinions and beliefs that we've been shaped with.

These mental formations—we have so many that we have absorbed through our culture. Some of these really create suffering not only for ourselves but in our culture as a whole. Views and beliefs around race, around sexual orientation, around climate change. These are mental formations, shared mental formations. And yet we sometimes think of mental formations as just something happening in my own mind. But these things that happen in our own mind affect how we engage in the world, how we meet each other, care for each other, hate each other, hurt each other. This is an important piece to begin to be curious about—these mental formations that are shaped collectively.

With mental formation as condition—whether mental formations coming from our own habits and patterns, based in ignorance, some of them our own particular flavors, like my own flavor of self-hatred that was my own, and some of them more cultural or collective mental formations—with these mental formations as condition, the next link arises: consciousness comes to be.

My understanding of this is that with these views, these ideas, these beliefs, with the arising of a particular state of mind that's a mental formation—such as anger, for instance—that shapes what consciousness becomes aware of. We seem to think of ourselves as being like cameras and microphones just picking up everything that's out there. But that's not quite the way our minds work. Based on our views, based on whatever our mind state is, based on even something as simple as an agenda, our consciousness is shaped to select some things out of the vast incoming data and not select other things.

One term is selective attention. When we have a focus on something, have an agenda to do something, our minds tend to focus down on that and we will not see things that are not relevant to that agenda. Really not see them.

I was watching a show on perception—I think it was on PBS, a television show about how the brain works and perception. They did a lot of experiments helping you to see these things in your own mind. There was one where they said, "Okay, watch this magic trick. They're going to do a magic trick and you need to figure out how the keys get out of the cup." He put some keys in the cup and then later the keys were gone or something. It was a pretty simple kind of magic trick.

I watched really closely. I was focused on that magic trick, trying to see what he did. Maybe I saw it—I'm not sure really that I saw what it was. But I was really focused in on that magic trick. That was the agenda: see how that magic trick works. Then they said, "Okay, did you figure that out?" And they showed us how it worked. Then they said, "And did you see the guy in the giant bunny suit that walked by?"

I had not seen the guy in the giant bunny suit. It was really obvious. Selective attention had consciousness seeing some things and not seeing other things. This is important to recognize—that we are not seeing everything that's out there.

Then there's another term, confirmation bias, which has been in the news a lot lately. Given particular views, opinions, beliefs, given particular perspectives, we tend to—this is well studied psychologically—we tend to pick things out of the environment that confirm those beliefs and not see things that disconfirm them. These are ways that our minds function. Knowing that our minds do this can help us to not assume we know more than we do.

So with mental formation as condition—with beliefs, views, emotions—we see certain things, we don't see other things. Consciousness. And with consciousness as condition, what is arising in our consciousness with these views and beliefs and ideas or emotions tends to shape the rest of our system, our mental and physical processes.

Just imagine the arising of anger, for instance, a mental formation shaping our consciousness. We're picking certain things out of the environment with that anger, not other things. The quality of mind, the consciousness, is filtered by this quality of anger. This tends to shape not only what we perceive, what we pull out of the environment, what we know—it shapes what we feel. When we're experiencing anger, we tend to orient towards things that confirm that anger or reify that anger.

At one point I was practicing walking meditation, and I was experiencing aversion. I often experienced aversion doing walking meditation with other people in the room. I was just noticing the aversion, just doing my back and forth walking, and at one point I turned around and somebody had put their shoes at the end of my walking path. My mind just exploded with aversion to these shoes. This was very unpleasant. The anger

was shaping how the mind perceived the experience. If I'd been experiencing love and connection—I can imagine there were a few times I experienced that—if I had turned around and seen the shoes in that situation, very different experience shaped.

When mental formations are arising in the mind, it shapes our bodies, it shapes what we perceive, what we think, what we feel. And so here we are with a body and a mind. And there's contact. We're back where we started—contact. Only now we see that it's not just a simple "oh, there's a sight coming into the eye." It's already been filtered and chosen and pulled out based on views and ideas and opinions.

This is another way the cycle tends to perpetuate itself. Because those views and ideas that shape our mind tend to have us orient towards receiving information that further shapes those same things. The cycle tends to reinforce itself.

And yet it is not hopeless. Because this chain—it's a chain that describes conditions—it's not lockstep, it's not cause-effect, cause-effect, cause-effect. It's conditions.

And if the conditions change, the whole cycle can shift. The main conditions that help change this cycle, that help it move in a different direction, are understanding—understanding suffering, that root point of the chain, the ignorance. Shifting the conditions so that we understand suffering. Mindfulness and wisdom are really the tools that support a change of this pattern.

The teachings emphasize in various ways—there are many teachings in the suttas that point to mindfulness of feeling as a very powerful tool that helps to shift the conditions of this unfolding. Feeling leads to craving, leads to clinging, leads to becoming, leads to birth, suffering. When we bring mindfulness to the feeling tone of experience, we have the opportunity to see that as an arising, to see the feeling. Seeing the feeling itself, just the seeing of the feeling with mindfulness, helps the mind to not necessarily do its automatic shift to craving. Sometimes just the awareness of feeling can short circuit that movement towards craving, towards greed and aversion around pleasant and unpleasant. Clearly experiencing the feeling tone with mindfulness is bringing wisdom to feeling tone. It's bringing wisdom in there. And so that's often a place where there's an emphasis around breaking this chain of dependent origination at this feeling-craving link. There definitely are a lot of instructions around feeling tone—looking at feeling tone, understanding feeling tone—in the suttas that really help us orient towards this as a very crucial practice.

And yet there are also teachings—one particular teaching that I really have resonated with. It's in the Majjhima Nikāya, Majjhima 9, called Right View. In that text, it looks at every single link of dependent origination. It doesn't exactly talk about depend-

ent origination as such, but it talks about every single link. And it points to how you can practice with that link so that there can be freedom. Any link, any place where we notice, any place where mindfulness can join—whether it's with craving or clinging or becoming or ignorance—the teaching says, around clinging for example, that one can understand clinging, one can understand the arising of clinging, one can understand the ending of clinging, and the way leading to the ending of clinging. And in that seeing, in that clear seeing, freedom will be right there.

When I first learned about dependent origination, I thought I had to stop the experience at feeling, and that that was the only way to come to an end of suffering. But this teaching just spoke right to my heart. It's like, wherever you wake up, if you're noticing anger, notice that. Freedom is possible right there through the seeing of how it arises, how it ends. Understanding it. This really is uprooting the ignorance that's coming along with whatever's happening—that co-arising of ignorance.

When we're caught in this chain, this cycle, ignorance is arising. To me, this is the co-arising. It's like when ignorance is arising, the entire twelve links are picked up all at once. When ignorance arises, we are already suffering. And so the real medicine is seeing through that ignorance. And wherever we are, mindfulness and wisdom can penetrate that.

I had this really shocking experience. I mentioned my self-hatred retreat at one point, where I was seeing self-hatred. It was a three-month retreat where self-hatred was really predominant, and so I was looking at it a lot. I watched it from many different ways, many different perspectives. I had the belief that, well, I guess this is my self-hatred retreat and enlightenment will have to wait. That's kind of what I was thinking. And yet I was pretty dedicated about looking at the self-hatred.

One evening, in being right there—there had been a lot of freeing around the self-hatred that had allowed me to be able to meet it—I was watching it arise, watching it arise, just seeing these little weavings of self-hatred coming together and just noting it immediately. Oh, there it is. That's it arising. It's unpleasant. Contact unpleasant. I was actually using that note: contact unpleasant. As soon as I noticed this little flavor of self-hatred, contact unpleasant. And as the mind sat with that, at one point it saw so clearly—the mind saw that this was just an arising. It was just an arising. It was just a thought. And in an instant, with that wisdom—it's just a thought—that whole pattern just fell apart. Not completely. But that moment was really powerful.

It was like a tree was uprooted. But I still see just little wisps of that pattern every now and then, just little wisps of it. But the belief is not there anymore.

And so that understanding—what was uprooted really was the belief that it was me.

That mindfulness and wisdom, meeting whatever's arising—that was a moment that really changed my life. That moment. Right in the midst of self-hatred, deep understanding. Deep understanding.

And so truly, wherever you are, whatever you are meeting, that is where freedom is possible. And that, to me, is the good news of this teaching.

We are not stuck with this cycle. Freedom is possible.

Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 66

Mettā Practice: All Beings

Andrea Fella · 47 min

In this guided meditation talk, Andrea Fella explores the culmination of mettā practice—extending loving-kindness to all beings. She begins by reflecting on the value of the traditional Theravāda commentary method, which works through categories of beings (self, benefactor, dear friend, neutral person, difficult person) before opening to all beings. This systematic approach, she explains, reveals where we encounter resistance or "rub" in our hearts—discovering that while we may easily wish all beings well in the abstract, specific individuals may challenge our open-heartedness.

Fella then introduces the sutta-based approach to mettā, drawing particularly from Bhikkhu Anālayo's teachings on the directional radiation practice found in the Pāli canon. Rather than focusing on specific beings, this method involves pervading the six directions—front, sides, back, above, and below—with the quality of loving-kindness. She emphasizes that this practice isn't about pushing mettā outward but rather gently allowing it to expand, like drawing back a curtain to let light spread naturally into space.

The guided meditation integrates both approaches: first gathering the five categories of beings into a group and practicing with "may we be happy," which evokes the non-exclusive, mutual nature of mettā. Then practitioners are guided to connect with whatever taste of open-heartedness is present and allow that feeling to radiate through the body and into space in all directions. This practice points to mettā's immeasurable quality—abundant, exalted, without hostility or ill will—embracing all beings seen and unseen.

And today we'll explore the metta practice in relationship to all beings.

The practices we've been exploring have followed the standard Theravada method of metta practice, which comes from the commentaries more than from the suttas, using categories of beings. From my perspective, one of the real benefits of this method is that we get to see where the rub is with individual beings before we explore opening to all beings.

The teachings in the suttas basically just express this: one should abide pervading the directions with loving kindness. And it can be easy to deceive ourselves, to delude ourselves, thinking, "Oh yes, I do wish all beings to be happy." But if a particular being were to come to mind—maybe not that person.

And so the use of self, benefactor, and dear friend begins to help us see where metta is generally somewhat easier. With benefactor, it's often easier. Often it's easier with self, though for some of us it's not as easy. But then we get to the dear friend, and with someone we often think it should be easy, we frequently remember incidents. "Oh, but they did that thing." And it gets in the way of our open heart. We see that with specific individuals, it may not be so easy to simply say, "May all beings be happy."

And so we explore the specifics in this way, with the teachings from the commentary helping us recognize where we may have a little bit of challenge with the feeling of metta in offering metta to particular beings.

With the neutral person, sometimes there's more a sense of not caring so much or not feeling a connection. For others it may actually feel easier to offer metta to a neutral person because there isn't the specific history. In some ways, the neutral person is really a stand-in for all beings, because the vast majority of beings on the planet are neutral to us. We don't know the vast majority of beings, and so that neutral person begins to point to any rub we might have about connecting with this deep wish for well-being for all beings.

With the neutral person, we also realize that we have to connect more. The connection with somebody we don't know needs to come from the place of just our common humanity, our shared humanity. Sitting in the Vipassana practice, looking at our own minds and hearts, we see what goes on in our own minds and hearts—how hard it is to be a human being, what our joys and sorrows are like at a human level. That's the level at which we can connect with all beings: just our common humanity.

And then of course the difficult person really begins to reveal the rub, where it's truly hard to wish this person well. We begin to recognize that we can not close a being out of our hearts, even if the actions of that being have been unskillful. Wishing a difficult person well isn't about saying or converting any sense of something that person did that was unskillful. We don't have to dismiss that or push it under the rug. What we explore is not closing our hearts to beings even though there have been unskillful actions. We can see this in our own hearts and minds too—that we have behaved unskillfully at times. Again, the humanness of that. And so there's some sense of keeping the heart open, even for challenging beings.

In exploring metta to all beings, we are taking in all of these categories of beings. There are different ways to explore metta to all beings. We can simply use the phrases: "May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be safe. May all beings live with ease." And just continue with this holding of all beings in mind.

Yet it can be challenging to envision all beings. One way I've practiced with this form is to just allow my mind to wander through the planet, let those phrases come, and let my mind envision beings—human beings, non-human beings, insects and spiders and snakes, this person or that person. We can let the metta be infused with a little bit of specificity as we let our mind roam through the world of beings.

Another way to express the wishes for all beings is through certain phrases that help us connect to all beings in different ways. "May all beings be happy. May all breathing beings be happy." For me, that actually evokes something different. "May all breathing beings be happy. May all living beings be happy. May all personalities be happy." These are just different ways to frame or language all beings in our minds. Sometimes that evokes something for us that can support the quality of metta.

The way that metta is taught in the suttas, using directions, is what I'd really like to explore today. This will be the main approach I'll offer in the guided meditation—this use of directions for the metta practice.

The texts say, and I think you've chanted this, at least those of you who've been here in the evenings: I'll read this part with respect to loving-kindness.

"I will abide pervading one quarter." One quarter here means a quarter section of space—the quarter of space in front of us. If we're dividing the space, this 360-degree space around us, into four pie-shaped pieces: front quarter, to the first side, to the back, to the second side, and then above and below.

This is what the instructions are pointing to: "I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with kindness. Likewise the second, the second quarter, the second direction. Likewise the third, likewise the fourth. So above and below, around and everywhere, and to all as to myself. I will abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will."

The teacher I first really connected with for the radiating metta practice was Bhikkhu Anālayo. He uses the sutta teachings in his practice for metta, and that's a piece of what I'd like to offer in the guided meditation—how he explores this.

The way it starts is basically to connect to something that gives you a taste of the flavor of metta. In one of the questions this morning, somebody asked about doing the metta practice when there were times the feeling was just there. It felt really good, and so there was this question about whether that was kind of cheating, or not what they were supposed to be doing if they were supposed to be sending it to others.

Well, in this form of practice, that's where we start—connecting with this feeling as best we can, and then exploring the possibility of just letting that feeling spread out in space, in this direction to the front, as far as it wants to go. In this style of practice, we aren't even necessarily needing to think about the beings. This is about feeling the quality and allowing the quality to expand as far as it wants to into space.

My image of this is that whatever beings are in that space, they receive that metta. And so it's pervading the space, which is what the teachings here in the suttas encourage about this practice: "I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with kindness." It's not particularly pointing to any particular beings, and yet as we pervade the space, there's a sense of the metta kind of washing over whoever's in that space—whatever beings in the air, walking around on the ground, small beings, medium-sized beings, large beings, seen and unseen. Just allowing that feeling to spread.

When Bhikkhu Anālayo taught this, the thing that really struck me is that he encouraged not trying to push the metta out. He said it's as if you have a curtain with a light behind it. You gently open the curtain partway, and that light would just expand, spread into the space. If the light is like a candle, it may spread so far. If it's a spotlight, it may spread further. We don't have to try to have an agenda to push the metta. It's more just allowing it to go as far as it wants to in this form of practice.

We'll explore this in the guided meditation, but to begin with, there are really two parts. One is a technique of allowing the individuals we have been working with to come together. We'll call them up one by one—yourself, your benefactor, your dear friend, your neutral person, your difficult person—and it will be as if we're creating a little group of folks standing with us. Then we'll explore the possibility of offering metta for this group. This group essentially is a stand-in for the whole variety of different kinds of beings that are out there for us. It's just a way into beginning to generate some of this quality of metta. Then we'll shift to the directional practice.

Allow yourself to find a comfortable, relaxed posture. It is often helpful to let the attention rest in the area of the heart, maybe having the feeling of breathing through the heart center. Just opening to whatever is there. An act of kindness to yourself—to not have to have it be any different than it already is. That itself is metta for yourself, this allowing your heart to be as it is.

Allow yourself to call yourself to mind, however that is easiest for you—either just this experience of sitting here, or maybe an image of yourself. Put your hand on your heart if it's supportive to connect to this area.

We'll start with the phrases, just for yourself for a few moments:

May I be happy.
May I be healthy.
May I be safe.
May I live with ease.

Let yourself see how that lands in this area of your heart, to make those wishes.

For another minute or so, just in whatever phrases are most resonant for you, wishing yourself well.

Now, allowing your benefactor to join you—either standing face to face or side by side, whatever feels most comfortable for you. Letting your benefactor in your imagination stand or sit or lie with you, and allowing them to join with you in offering metta to both of you together.

May we be happy. May we be healthy. May we be safe. May we live with ease.

This begins to evoke part of the quality of metta not being exclusive—that in wishing metta to more than ourselves, we are also wishing it for ourselves.

May we be happy.

Taking another few minutes to connect with your benefactor in this way, the two of you offering metta to each other.

And then allowing your dear friend to join you. The three of you standing together.

May we be happy. May we be healthy. May we be safe. May we live with ease.

It can be fine too to play within your imagination with where you are located on the planet.

And allowing your neutral person to join the circle, join the group, however you find yourselves situated. And if you can't have a sense of the neutral person joining in, or don't have that sense arise, that's fine. Just continuing with this reflection. The four of you standing together.

May we be happy. May we be healthy. May we be safe. May we live with ease.

To me this also evokes that this metta, the metta quality, is not giving over our happiness for the happiness of others. It is a mutual wish for all of us to be happy.

And then letting the person with whom you have some difficulty also join the group. And exploring the possibility of continuing the wish.

May we all be happy. May we all be healthy. May we all be safe. May we all live with ease.

Continuing for a few minutes to explore this offering of well-wishing to each other, in whatever words or phrases are most resonant for you.

If you have in this exploration a taste of even a small kind of sense of openheartedness or well-wishing, that can be the starting point for the next part. And if this part has been challenging for you, then I invite you to bring to mind a being that makes you smile. And that smile, that quality—that's where we can begin here.

So with that quality, however subtle or however it may feel for you, first an exploration of recognizing that the feeling is inside. Perhaps a feeling of it being inside, and allowing that feeling to just spread from wherever it is through the tissues, through the heart, maybe through the chest and bones of the body in the front of your body.

And as it is possible, maybe envisioning this curtain that Analayo talked about—drawing back a curtain and allowing that feeling to just spread as far through this body and into space, maybe like bubbling off of the body into space, as far as it wants to go. Sometimes in doing this I have a sense that it just goes maybe a few inches out, sometimes further, sometimes more expansively, and this fluctuates. So just connecting to this feeling.

And you can refresh the feeling if you wish, contemplating your group of five wishing each other well, or this being that makes you smile. And then letting the feeling expand into space in front of you as far as it wants to go.

And then allowing the curtain to open a little further to the second quarter. Letting the feeling pervade through that part of the body in that direction. Bubbling, rippling, perhaps a feeling of waves or just energy moving outwards in space to the side, as far as it wants to go. And any beings in that space, seen or unseen, small, medium, or large—they get to participate in that quality.

And allowing the curtain to open still further around the third quarter, to behind you. Exploring letting the metta also, the feeling also, pervade through the tissues and bones and spaces of the body in the backward direction, bubbling off, rippling off the body to the rear, as well as to the front and side, just as far as it wants to go.

Sometimes in my exploration of this, there's a sense of certain directions being easier than others, and that's fine. Just noticing how it is for each direction. In a way this is kind of analogous to expanding our awareness—we're allowing our metta to expand as far as it wants to go.

And I find relaxation really helpful here. We're not pushing.

Then allowing the curtain to open to the fourth direction, allowing the feeling to penetrate through the body. I think of it as starting in the heart, penetrating through the spaces and tissues and bones of that side of the body—perhaps tingling or bubbling or rippling through, then bubbling off the surface and expanding into space as far as it wants to go. To the front, to the first side, to the rear, to the second side. This is allowing the feeling and letting it expand as it wishes.

Then, as though there were a curtain underneath you, letting that quality pervade the body in the direction down towards the floor, towards the earth. Allow the metta to go through the earth as far as it wants to go. We don't have to think about the earth as being a block—it's very porous, the earth. The metta can go right through it.

And then the final direction: above. Gently drawing back the curtain above us, allowing the feeling to move through the body upwards, through the shoulders and neck and head, off the top of the head into space. In all directions, however far the quality wishes to expand. To the front, to the side, to the back, to the other side, below and above—in all directions.

If it feels like it dims or weakens, just refresh the connection with the quality. Whatever way is supportive for you—it may be through the use of a couple of phrases, or thinking of a particular being that makes you smile, or thinking about your benefactor offering you metta. Then let that feeling spread as far as it wants to, into space, in all directions.

CHAPTER 67

Not Knowing

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this profound dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella examines one of our deepest human tendencies: the persistent desire to know what will happen next. She reveals how this wanting to know actually obscures a fundamental truth—that we genuinely have no idea what the next moment will bring. As mindfulness deepens, practitioners begin to touch this truth directly, seeing moment-to-moment experience arising without any ability to predict or control what comes next.

Fella explores how views, beliefs, and concepts—particularly those connected to a sense of self—create the illusion of knowing. Drawing on the classic Buddhist teaching of the blind people and the elephant, she illustrates how we construct partial views based on limited experience and then mistake them for complete truth. She references the Aṭṭhakavagga from the Sutta Nipāta, noting that "those attached to perception and views roam the world offending people." The Buddha particularly cautioned against creating views from meditative experiences, as even profound states can become sources of clinging.

The talk addresses the discomfort that arises when we genuinely open to not knowing—feelings of vulnerability, fear, and insecurity. Fella distinguishes between reacting to the idea of not knowing versus actually meeting the present moment, sharing how she discovered that "every step was known" even while the mind projected fear about an imagined unknown future. Using Joseph Goldstein's skydiving analogy, she describes the practice as a progressive letting go—from initial enthusiasm, through fear of releasing, to the eventual realization that there is no ground, only endless changing conditions. This recognition, rather than being terrifying, becomes a profound relief and liberation.

What happens next?

This question of what happens next is such a driving force in us as human beings. We so want to know. We want to know what will happen next, what will happen tomorrow, what will happen next week, twenty years from now.

I've heard some of this in the meetings over the last few days, especially from those of you who are leaving—a sense of uncertainty about how it's going to be when you're home. And I know for myself at this point in the retreat, as a yogi staying for three

months, there's a little bit of that same uncertainty. The first time I stayed three months, I didn't know the teachers that were coming in, and that was pretty uncomfortable. My mind was turning over: How's it going to be? What's going to happen?

This tendency we have to want to know what's next is butting up against the truth that we have no idea what's going to happen next. Really, really no idea.

The more we practice—both on the large arc of practice in our lives and also on a retreat of this length—we begin to touch into this truth more directly. Actually, there are times when it feels like we're directly touching into this truth that we don't know what's going to happen next, but it may actually be more of an understanding of this truth.

We can understand this truth on many levels. On the more gross levels, very fundamentally, we do not know when our last breath will be. Accidents happen every day. Every day someone wakes up in the morning and it's their last day alive, yet they're not aware of that.

On a more refined level, a more moment-to-moment level, as the mindfulness gets stronger and more continuous, we start to see that moment to moment we really don't have any idea what the next arising will be. This became more obvious to me as I practiced, as I shifted from a directed attention to a more receptive kind of attention, a more open awareness where I wasn't consciously deciding what to pay attention to. Just this endless—sometimes it felt like an onslaught—of experience, and no idea what the next moment would bring.

This truth that we don't know what the next moment will bring is not a mistake. It doesn't have to be a problem. And yet our mind habitually comes back to this question: What's next? What's next? Thinking somehow that having an idea of what's next will control the uncontrollable.

This truth is related to the truth of impermanence—the changing nature of experience, the uncontrollable nature of experience. As we come more and more fully into the present moment, we see this truth more clearly.

There are so many ways that our minds obscure this truth, that we miss it in our everyday lives. Even here on retreat we miss it. A big part of what's in the way, what's obscuring this truth that we don't know what the next moment will bring, are our views, beliefs, agendas, thoughts—especially those connected to a sense of I, me, and mine.

We carry ideas about what's happened in the past, thoughts and views about what's happened before, into the present moment. And somehow our mind thinks, "Well, what's happened before, that's what's going to keep happening." Views and beliefs about who we are, what we do, what we're capable of. What we think we have been capable of, we project that this is what we will be capable of. We box ourselves in with these views based on what we think about ourselves, what other people think about us. We box other people in based on what we think about them—carrying our ideas and views and beliefs from the past into the present moment.

What might it mean to open to the possibility that we're not what we think we are?

We project into the future this idea of knowing, of thinking that we know what will happen, in ways that are so subtle. Like just sitting here this evening, you might envision what tomorrow will be like. Maybe you don't know exactly what it'll be like, but you have the sense that you'll wake up in the bed in the room that you've been in. We just feel like we know what's going to happen.

These ideas and concepts of what has happened, we take to be what will happen. At one point this nature of the mind got pointed out to me—this tendency to pick up yesterday and put it onto tomorrow, or pick up today and put it onto tomorrow. That's what it's going to be like. Or pick up last Tuesday and that's what tomorrow Tuesday is going to be like. Oh, it's Monday—pick up last Monday and that's what tomorrow Monday is going to be like.

When I joined the Peace Corps, I had a very odd experience as I was flying. I got on the plane and left my friends behind, left my house behind, packed everything up—everything that I was going to have for the next two years in a couple of suitcases—and flew to this little island in the South Pacific. I'd read some materials; this was part of this wanting to know. I tried to educate myself about what the place would be like, what I might see there, what the culture was like.

But as I was flying in the airplane, I had this very odd experience of thinking—it was kind of like my mind believed I wasn't going to get there because I couldn't envision it. I could not imagine what tomorrow would be like. It was a very strange experience. And then when we did arrive, it was this interesting realization: oh, okay, here I am. This is where I am now. I get in this line, get my passport stamped. Okay, I can do that. I didn't know what was on the other side of customs and immigration. But each moment was just the next thing, the next thing, the next thing. And that is actually how things unfold.

It was such a clear experience for me of how much we pick things up, how we create the future and then live that creation so much of the time, rather than really entering into just what's here, what's actually here.

When we carry things from the past into the present, when we carry things from the past and the present into the future, we also construct this present moment. We live in a constructed present, and mostly we are not so clearly aware of that. Everything that we experience, without exception, is a creation of our minds.

I'm not saying that there's not stuff out there. At least I think that you're out there, and I'm not just some brain in a vat imagining giving a dharma talk. I think this is happening. But what I'm saying is that my experience—the only thing I can touch—is a creation of this mind. And the same is true for you. All that we experience is a creation of our minds, and yet so often we do not recognize this. We take that creation to be what's out there, what's actually there.

This concept-making, this perception and conceptualization, is a huge way that this not-knowing is obscured. Really entering into this truth—that we do not know what this moment, this next moment will bring, that this unfolding is a mystery—becomes difficult. And a big piece of that obscuration is because our minds believe the concepts we are constructing to be reality.

This concept-making is useful, and so I'm not advocating that we live without concepts. I think our cultures might descend into chaos if we didn't have concepts and shared ideas—yes, we have breakfast at this time, lunch at this time. These shared values, these shared senses of things matter. And yet to not recognize that this is a construction of mind is a major way we mistakenly take what is impermanent to be permanent, what is unreliable to be reliable, what is uncontrollable to be controllable.

With this kind of understanding of concepts, thoughts, and views, we don't have to get rid of them. Perceptions—we're probably not going to be able to get rid of them. But we can know that they are concepts, they are thoughts, they are views. Understand concept as concept. Understand a view as a view, a perception as a perception. And we are recognizing these too as simply arisings—impermanent arisings in the mind.

As we see our thoughts, our perceptions, our concepts as something that's just arising, we get closer to meeting or touching into, fully opening to this truth that we do not know. So much of our belief that we know is tied up in our ideas around concepts. And when we see this concept being constructed as an arising, we see it's not what's actually out there. It is just something the mind is making up. It is creating it. It is imagining it.

And yet, as I said, the mind actually does a pretty good job of imagining. It does a pretty good job of being somewhat in the vicinity of what's going on out there. And yet, as we start to see this process of concept-making, even the aspect of perception—which is a more rudimentary form of a concept, just a bare recognition of what's happening—we see that they're really prone to making mistakes.

Recognizing concept as concept, recognizing perception as perception, we can hold it lightly and recognize: this is my perception, this is what I am understanding at this point.

The Buddha pointed to this danger around concepts, to how views and perceptions can really create a lot of suffering in our world. There's a famous teaching story of the elephant and the blind people. Many of you may be familiar with a version of this story, and it's found in the Buddhist texts.

In this teaching story, a king asked an elephant trainer to bring an elephant before a gathering of blind people in his kingdom. The trainer showed each person a different part of the elephant, telling each one, "This is an elephant." Some touched the legs, some the tail, some the trunk, some the side. When asked afterward to describe what an elephant is like, they each offered their understanding. Those who touched the leg said an elephant is like a post. Those who touched the tail said an elephant is like a broom. Those who touched the side said an elephant is like the wall of a storeroom. The story tells us they came to blows over what an elephant truly is—"An elephant is like this! An elephant is not like that!"

In this story, I notice there's a kind of deception happening, because the person showing each one the elephant said, "This is an elephant." They were being encouraged to create the view that this part was the whole elephant. Yet this kind of thing happens to us all the time. We create views based on direct experience. This is really pointing to something important: our views aren't constructed out of complete imagination—they're built on our experience. But we don't see that we're only getting a small piece of the picture. We think we have the whole picture when we've only got a part of it. And so we take our view to be the truth of what something is.

This story cautions us about creating views out of direct experience. What's so important is to recognize that they are views. When we can recognize, "Oh, this is a view," then perhaps we can hear other views. If we're not taking our view to be absolute truth, we can have a discussion, put the pieces together.

One of my favorite quotes from the suttas comes from the Aṭṭhakavagga, a text in the Sutta Nipāta. It goes something like: "Those attached to perception and views roam the world offending people." Holding tightly to views, we aren't able to see clearly.

The Buddha particularly cautioned us around views related to meditative experience. In the sutta Bhante has been mentioning—the teaching on the all-embracing net of views, with its extensive list of views people held at the time of the Buddha—many of the stickiest views come out of deep meditation experience. When we touch into something in meditation, something that feels so true, so deeply present, we can attribute some ontological reality to what we have experienced rather than recognizing that this too is an experience. The Buddha really cautioned us about creating views that arise based on our meditation experience.

This wanting to know—we can start to see it. I've heard some of you over these past weeks talking about this urge to understand, to know. The mind starts searching: What is it that I need to know? It can be uncomfortable. We can feel a sense of discomfort if we don't have a sense of knowing.

This begins to point to what happens for us as we touch into not knowing. As we begin to open to just what's arising—including recognizing that this concept is a concept arising, this belief is a belief arising—we begin to see that we don't know what's coming next. This can be uncomfortable. At a deep human level, we want to know. So we can start to look at that wanting to know, and the discomfort that comes with it.

By its very nature, insight is something we cannot anticipate. In some ways, opening to this truth of not knowing becomes a kind of practice for the opening to insight. Because we cannot know what we don't know. We tend to be drawn to the familiar. We like knowing that we know. We like paying attention and feeling certain about what we're paying attention to. We like that.

Sometimes we can gravitate toward what we're already familiar with, and it feels pretty good. Being right with the breath feels pretty good—knowing how the breath feels. And yet at some point in our practice, orienting toward what we're already familiar with, keeping the mind directed there, is not going to let us see something new.

Sometimes if we're in that place of wanting to know, we might be searching for something familiar to land on, or trying to figure out what the awareness is paying attention to. And the very act of searching might be obscuring something. It takes trust to open to this truth of not knowing.

On one retreat, I suffered a lot over wanting an insight—wanting to have an insight about impermanence. I really wanted that insight. Teachers had talked about things in the hall, and it seemed like that would be a really cool thing to see. And so I was suffering a lot because I wasn't experiencing what I thought I might experience.

At some point I was feeling into the wanting—wanting this insight, wanting this understanding. I was doing walking meditation out front here, and I noticed that the mind was creating a story. It was telling a story about being in the interview room with my teacher and telling my teacher that I'd had that insight. And we were laughing and celebrating, and it felt really good.

In that seeing, I realized: I have no idea what I want. What I want is to be able to tell somebody that I had that insight. So the idea that I wanted this understanding—I didn't know what that was. I wanted some perks or something that I thought would come with it. We don't know what we're looking for. We really have to enter into this not knowing.

Even in more ordinary ways, there can be things that we miss because we're looking for the familiar or orienting toward what we already know. Sayadaw U Tejaniya talked about a time when he was here visiting in Massachusetts. Somebody was driving him around in a car, and the driver mentioned that there was a deer alarm on the car—a high-pitched tone that deer can hear, higher than humans typically notice. He said to Sayadaw, "You can hear it if you try. It is possible to hear it."

So Sayadaw said he was trying to hear it, trying to find it. And he couldn't find it, couldn't hear it. Again, he didn't know what he was looking for. And then he said he relaxed and stopped trying. And he heard it.

This is a pointer for us—this relaxing and stopping looking. This kind of curiosity, not of "how can I see this thing," but more of "relax and what's here?" That supports a kind of investigation—a meeting of investigation that is not investigating something we already have our ideas about, but more of a "What's this? What's this?"

So what's the difference between this truth of not knowing and the not knowing of ignorance? In some ways, they're completely different things. The not knowing of ignorance actually gets in the way of seeing this not knowing of moment-to-moment experience.

Because in the not knowing that we've been exploring, we touch into really being present for moment-to-moment experience. Really being here. It points us to this truth of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable—to the nature of experience being impermanent, unreliable, and uncontrollable. It's about letting go of views, concepts, and ideas, or recognizing that views are arising, so that we can see into this truth.

The not knowing of ignorance is a not understanding of the nature of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. Because of views, we take things to be permanent, we take things to be reliable, we take things to be controllable. The not knowing of ignorance is bound up with these views and concepts, and not seeing that that's what they are.

Another question might arise: Okay, so views get in the way of seeing the nature of things as they are. So what's this wise view about? Isn't that just another view that gets in the way?

This reflection was one that was around at the time of the Buddha. There's a story of Anathapindika. I love this story. It's such a deep teaching, and it's given by a householder. Anathapindika was a householder, so that's a nice thing to reflect on. He was talking to some followers of other

religious perspectives, other sects. And they came up to him and said, "Tell us, what are the views that the Buddha has?" And Anandapindika said, "Well, you know, I can't tell you what the views are that the Buddha has." "Well, how about the monks? Can you tell us the views that the monks have?" And he said, "No, I can't tell you that either." So they finally asked him, "Well, can you tell us what your views are?" And he said, "Yes, I can tell you that, but first, why don't you tell me what your views are?"

And so they did, and each one of them offered their perspective—in this case, on some aspect of ontological reality. One of them said something like, "The universe is infinite. This alone is true, everything else is wrong." Another said, "The universe is not infinite, it's finite. This alone is true, everything else is wrong." And they had various views like this, again held in this way, kind of along the lines of the story of the blind people and the elephant—that this is what's true.

After they all told Anandapindika their views, he said, "This view of yours has either arisen based on something somebody else told you, or it's based on unwise attention to an experience that you've had. And clinging to that view creates suffering." They turned that over a little bit, but then one came back to him and said, "So what are your views?" And Anandapindika said, "Here's the kind of view that I hold: I hold the view that clinging to anything—clinging to views—is suffering."

They tried to use his own argument against him: "Well, you're clinging to that view too." And he said, "Well, when I see that I'm clinging, I see that it's suffering. And right there, the mind lets it go."

This points to what right view is about. It's about a view that is in alignment with the nature of experience—the impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience—and that clinging creates suffering. It's an experiential kind of view, a view about what's the nature of experience. It's not about what's the nature of some ontological reality. It's about understanding how clinging to experience creates suffering, and how not clinging is release from suffering.

So it's a different kind of view in a way. But at the same time, initially we do have to pick it up as a belief. We do have to pick up these teachings that the Buddha offers as a kind of belief. If we didn't pick it up as a view or as a belief, we would never step on this path. But what seems to happen as we practice is that we start, because of that view, to look at our experience in a different way. We start to recognize what's happening in our experience, not through the concepts but through what's arising and what's passing away.

Through holding that view and bringing the practice of mindfulness—these two together, mindfulness and wise view—then we see in our direct experience what leads towards suffering and what leads away from suffering. So again, it's experiential. And the experience of wise view, the understanding or the insight there into wise view, is the insight that clinging causes suffering, letting go releases suffering. It's a direct experience. It's not another idea. It's a direct connection with the actual experience of the truth of release.

You can experience this. When you see some wanting release, you feel the freedom of that. That's not an idea. That's the release from suffering. And so this way of experiencing lets us touch into things as they are, seeing the impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience.

We begin to touch into this truth that we do not know what the next moment will bring. As we touch into that more fully, it can be really uncomfortable—seeing this truth that we don't know, seeing how impermanent, unreliable, and uncontrollable experience is. At some very deep level, our system, the system of this being, just goes, "No. I don't like that. I don't want it to be that way." And so we resist it. We fight it.

We're afraid. There are many different relationships here—feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, fear—when touching into this truth, touching into this unreliability, this not knowing.

There are different ways this happens. When you explore and experience this—and I heard some of this in meetings today about some of you going home—there's a sense, a feeling of "Wow, what's waiting for me?" A little bit of fear. The idea of not knowing creates fear. On a kind of bigger level, a more ordinary or conventional level, we can experience this fear of not knowing. And on a more moment-to-moment level, we can also experience this fear of not knowing.

Sometimes this fear, or feeling of vulnerability, or feeling of insecurity is actually not based on the actual experience—it's based on the *idea* that you don't know. The idea that something's going to happen and I don't know what it is. The mind reacts to that. A kind of projection into the future. A little bit of imagining what's going to be waiting for me. "I don't know what's going to be waiting for me." And it's true that we don't know what's going to be waiting for us. But we're not actually in that. We're not actually responding to the fear of this deeper level of not knowing. It's more of a fear of an idea that we don't know.

This was pointed out to me on one retreat. Even on a very moment-to-moment level, this kind of fear can play out. I was experiencing a kind of fear about just realizing, "I have no idea what the next arising is going to be." And I was in this place of agitated fear around not knowing what the next moment's arising was going to be. "Am I going to be able to meet it? I don't know if I'm going to be able to meet it. I don't know what it is. How can I know if I'm going to be able to meet it?" And so the experience of fear was prevalent.

During one walking meditation—I was walking in the hall right outside the meditation hall—I decided, "Okay, I'm going to face this fear. This fear about not knowing what is going to happen." And what I discovered, as I decided to get curious about this fear and about the unknown, was that every step I took, it was known. And then the next step was known. There's nothing unknown in this moment's experience. I could see that the mind was projecting just to the next split second, not knowing what that was, and fear that "I'm not going to be able to meet this. I have to be able to control how I meet this." And it was just—in the next moment there was a step and there was the awareness of it. With that came the recognition that fear is not about what is actually unknown; it was about the idea that I didn't know.

This is one way that happens, and I think this happens a lot to us, both in this moment-to-moment way and also in our everyday lives. When we are thinking about not knowing, or not being certain about the future, feeling vulnerable or insecure—what is it that we're actually relating to? What are we reacting to? Often it's an idea, a construction of our minds that we're afraid of.

And sometimes there is this experience of a slipperiness to the mindfulness. It's like as soon as the mind is touching into something, it's already vanishing, and we don't even know what it is. So sometimes there's this feeling of just slipping, slipping, slipping—and nowhere to land. A more direct experience of this, a more visceral experience of this place of not knowing. And again, we can have different relationships to that—fear, confusion, anxiety.

It's really important to recognize that, because the path unfolds by noticing. Essentially, that fear, that anxiety is a resistance to this truth, to this experience, to this slipping away of experience, this passing away of experience. And so it's a form of clinging. It's a form of "No, it's not okay that it's like this." That is where, that is how the practice deepens—by looking at the clinging, by knowing the clinging. Sometimes in that kind of place you might look at the anxiety and see it too is just slipping away. Nowhere to land.

Joseph gives an analogy of the practice, a kind of summary of this talk in a way.

I think Joseph came up with this analogy about skydiving — that the practice kind of unfolds like skydiving.

Initially, perhaps you're strapping on your parachute and getting in the plane. Maybe there's some enthusiasm and excitement: "Oh, I'm going skydiving, this will be fun." You get in the plane and you're climbing, experiencing that. Then you get to the place where you've come to altitude and you're told, "Okay, it's time to jump out of the plane." You kind of look over the edge and it's like, "Yeah, no, I don't want to let go." So there's this clinging and this fear around the letting go, to step into that falling.

Then you finally get up your courage to let go, and you've got your parachute on, and you're falling. Initially it's a little bit scary, but then at a certain point you hit this place where it almost feels like floating — the place where the body has reached terminal velocity so that it just feels like you're floating. There's this delight of experience, a kind of joy and bliss of just being right there with the falling.

And then you realize you don't have a parachute. And then the fear really kicks in. You're trying to navigate — what am I going to do? How am I going to figure this out? There's terror, dread, imagining what it's going to be like when you hit the ground.

And then, he says, you realize that there's no ground. That's that understanding of not knowing — just this endless changing of conditions. No ground. And that is actually a relief.

Letting go like this requires a lot of trust. Part of our practice is recognizing this. The parachuting analogy is great because there are times when it's like, "No, I don't trust jumping out of this plane." There are times where we run up against our edges, and that's not a mistake — that's just running up against our clinging, and we simply know that. So we take the step of opening to, "Okay, this is what's here, and there's fear." Or, "This is what's here, and there's patience to be with it." Trust. And let go, and let go, and trust.

It's a process. The whole of our practice could be looked at as a deepening of this trust — to let go at deeper and deeper and deeper levels.

Sometimes meeting this unknown can feel like we're standing on the edge of an abyss, and we're asked to step into it. The trust there — hard, hard to trust that. And yet as we start to trust, we take the step into the abyss. And in the next moment, we find ourselves standing on the edge of the abyss.

CHAPTER 68

Supports for Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this three-month retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a detailed exploration of the foundational phrase from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10): "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world." She unpacks each element of this deceptively simple instruction to reveal the depth of guidance it contains for meditation practice.*
>
> *Fella begins with an overview of the four foundations of mindfulness—body, feeling tone (vedanā), mind states, and dhammas—before diving into the meaning of key Pāli terms. She explores how "abides" (viharati) points to a quality of being at home, settled, and relaxed with experience, while "observing" (anupassī) indicates a close, receptive attending. The phrase "body as a body" encourages direct, non-conceptual knowing—experiencing sensations like pressure, tingling, or warmth rather than abstract ideas about body parts.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes the crucial role of relaxation in meditation, offering practical guidance on inviting the body and mind to soften. Fella distinguishes between right mindfulness (sammā sati) and ordinary awareness, noting that the Buddha's approach involves bare, curious observation without the overlay of views, opinions, and reactivity. She describes how this quality of allowing becomes an expression of mettā—loving attention that accepts experience exactly as it is. The teaching concludes with Bhikkhu Anālayo's insight that "freeing from desires and discontent" happens simultaneously with mindful observation, making the practice itself the path of liberation.*

It was such a beautiful evening tonight. As I was coming over, I was seeing the light changing on the trees, lighting them up a kind of reddish color. Then I went upstairs to reflect and be a little quiet before my talk, sitting there watching the sky turn this beautiful red. I hope some of you got to see that.

The practice that we're doing here is really based on some instructions that the Buddha gave. We've mentioned this in the last few days, and I'm sure many of you have heard of the Satipatthana Sutta, which is a collection of teachings. Some people dispute whether the Buddha actually gave it front to back or whether it was a gathering of his teachings around meditation. But in any case, it's a very comprehensive description of the mindfulness practice.

The very name of the sutta, Satipatthana, means something like "establishing mindfulness." So that's what we're doing—establishing mindfulness in a way that supports the ability to see and understand our experience. It's a particular perspective of mindfulness.

The Satipatthana Sutta describes four establishments, or ways, or fields in which to collect the attention. Perhaps that's a way to look at it, or perhaps it's simply a description of what might be noticed in various areas of experience.

It talks about the establishment of mindfulness with the body, which is what we've been really focusing on these last days. Then there's the establishment of mindfulness with the experience of feeling tone—this very simple and basic experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. All experience has a kind of flavor of this sort. Every sight, sound, smell, taste, touch is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The third foundation is mindfulness of mind states. The sutta describes these pretty simply and encourages us to recognize whether greed, aversion, and delusion are present or absent, and whether the mind is moving towards concentration or not. So it's looking at the mind first with respect to greed, aversion, and delusion, and then how it's settling with respect to concentration.

The fourth foundation is a little harder to describe, but I'll say very simply that we could look at it—mindfulness of dhammas, or mindfulness of phenomena—as mindfulness of processes that will lead us either towards or away from suffering. In that sutta, the Buddha points to particular teachings: the hindrances, the six sense bases, the five aggregates, the four noble truths, the seven factors of awakening, and how an exploration of those experiences helps us to understand suffering and the release from suffering.

So that's a very quick overview of the Satipatthana Sutta.

What I wanted to explore this evening is that at the very beginning of the sutta, the Buddha gives a teaching of what Satipatthana is in brief. He's famous for these really brief summaries. I like this phrase—it contains so much in just a few words. I wanted to unpack it and look at how its words offer instructions and support for what we're doing here.

The phrase, which is repeated four times right at the beginning, once for each of the four establishments, is: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world." Then, "One abides observing feeling as feeling, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world." Likewise for mind states and phenomena, dhammas.

I'll start this exploration with the word we're perhaps most familiar with: mindfulness. It seems interesting to me, this word. Sati is the Pali word, and it is connected to a root meaning "to remember." So it's connected with remembering—remembering what? Remembering ourselves. But the way sati is used in the sutta gives us a clearer picture of what the Buddha is pointing to, and perhaps we can understand from another perspective what this mindfulness is that he's encouraging us to cultivate.

As we've explored here, and I'm sure you've explored on other retreats, mindfulness can be looked at as being present, being connected with experience, aware, witnessing, observing. These are perhaps some synonyms we could use to fill in what this word means. Connected with, aware with, feeling into experience, being with experience—or perhaps just knowing what's happening while it's happening. All of these words point in the direction of the experience of mindfulness.

It is a quality, a state of mind that we cultivate. And in my own experience of practicing, the longer I practice mindfulness, the less clear I am of exactly what it is. So it's okay if you're not exactly clear about it. There's a sense of knowing when I am clearly aware and mindful, but what it is exactly is hard to describe. These words point in the right direction: being with, feeling into, presence of mind.

The mindfulness that our practice is based on is rooted in a very ordinary, human capacity of our minds.

Our minds possess this capacity to know what's happening while it's happening—to be aware that we know. It's a kind of self-reflective capacity that we have as humans, this ability to know that we know. This itself is a neutral capacity of mind.

We can know that we know. We can be aware that we're angry, for instance. But we may not be knowing it in the way the Buddha is pointing to—with a kind of non-judgmental, detached observing of, "Oh, this is what the experience of anger is like." Knowing what's happening in the present moment as it's happening.

More often, the more ordinary way of being aware of anger—perhaps before we meet mindfulness practice—is to know that we're angry and to know why we're angry and who we're angry with and what they did wrong. There's a whole complex of views and ideas and opinions all wrapped up in that awareness of being angry. So it's not just simple: "This is what anger is like."

And that's what I think this points to. The Buddha recognized that this capacity we have to be aware in the present moment is really powerful when explored from this particular perspective. Just know what's happening in the present moment and be curi-

ous about that experience. What is it like to be experiencing what this is in this present moment? So that's my understanding of this direction the Buddha is pointing us with satipaṭṭhāna—the direction of wise mindfulness or right mindfulness.

Sometimes I explore the difference between right mindfulness and wrong mindfulness. Actually, in the suttas there is the phrase "wrong mindfulness," connected to the wrong eightfold path, which is motivated by wrong view and wrong intention, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort. These qualities that support us can be skewed towards freedom or skewed towards our habits and patterns.

If we think about this quality of being aware—knowing that we're aware, knowing what we're doing in the present moment—think about how a thief might be very aware in a house where they've broken in to steal something. Very aware of being very quiet, aware of every step, every movement. But the motivation for that awareness is not to just be curious: "What is it like to step? What is it like to reach? What is it like to touch?" It is: "I need to be really quiet so that I'm not caught, so that I can get these things and take them away." The motivation is greed, perhaps aversion if there's something they're wanting to take away from somebody, or anger at someone they want to take something from.

So the motivation is crucial. The Buddha noticed that this quality of being aware is very powerful when aimed towards simple knowing. What is this like? Beginning to dive underneath views, ideas, opinions, concepts, just to the bare experience.

As we explore this bare experience, what seems to happen is that when we explore, for instance, what anger feels like, we learn pretty quickly that it doesn't feel good, that it hurts, that it's painful. Actually, one of my early mindfulness practices was exploring anger because it was big. It was really ruining my life. So I decided, having met mindfulness, "Okay, this is what I'm going to see if I can get to understand. I'll get to understand anger."

The first time I actually woke up and recognized, "Oh, this is what anger feels like," it was like a shock. It's like, "Oh my God, this is awful. This feels horrible."

We learn pretty quickly as we start to look at the experience happening right now. This is what anger feels like. This is what joy feels like. This is what loving-kindness feels like. We feel very viscerally that the unwholesome qualities of mind—those based in greed, aversion, and delusion—are painful in the moment, directly painful. Qualities that are wholesome, supportive of the heart opening and connecting—love, compas-

sion, kindness, curiosity—those have a quality of softness, lightness. They have various flavors to them, but they generally have a feeling of moving in the direction of ease and peace and well-being.

With this quality of just curiosity—"What's this experience like?"—we begin to taste what experience is leading us to suffering and what is leading us away from suffering. We get a sense of what is suffering and what is well-being.

Our mind has convinced us that anger is somehow going to make us be happy. It's kind of amazing to watch that process. When we're not aware of the experience of anger, our minds delude us into thinking it's actually doing something good for us.

That part of the mind is willing to forego ease and peace in the present moment for the idea of revenge or the idea of getting something in the future. And so being aware right in the present moment takes us to that understanding. Wisdom understanding grows through that simple meeting. It's quite amazing.

I think the Buddha was brilliant to understand this. We don't have to find what's wholesome and unwholesome. By this simple practice of observing, it points itself out to us. This is the mindfulness the Buddha encourages us to cultivate.

Some of the other words in this phrase—"one abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world"—point to qualities of mind or attitudes that we could bring to mindfulness to support this kind of observing. I'm going to take some time to explore some of these qualities tonight. I probably won't get through the whole sentence, but just some of them.

The first word that really lands and resonates with me deeply is this word "abides." Even just the feeling of saying the word—abide, abide. The word is a translation of the Pali *viharati*, which is related to the Pali *vihara*, which means a place of living, a home. And so this is a sense of being at home with mindfulness. Mindfulness brings us home into the present moment. Abiding. Resting. Sometimes the feeling of being at home is a place of safety and a place of rest. That quality of abiding brings that sense. This is a quality to bring to mindfulness.

Other words that resonate with this for me: intimacy, being with, dwelling, receptive, content. At its core, what this really points to for me is relaxation.

Relaxation is such a crucial support for any form of meditation practice. Whether we're practicing mindfulness of the breathing, loving-kindness practice, open awareness practice, or focused concentration, relaxation is a deep, deep support. I did not know this, and I'm not sure I would have believed it in my first few retreats, especially

when I was trying to focus the mind. It didn't feel relaxed. It was like, "No, I'm supposed to hold on to this, I'm supposed to do this, I'm supposed to grab on and stay, stay, stay, stay." It did not feel relaxed. Over the years I did begin to hear what the teachers were saying. I'm sure they emphasized it. They probably emphasized it as much as I'm going to tonight. But sometimes it just takes a while to get in.

Relaxation is crucial. And we can explore this. We can begin with a container of relaxation in our meditation. I often will start there in my practice, relaxing the body—sometimes with a body scan, sometimes just opening and dropping in a kind of intention or invitation. Maybe the body is willing to relax right now. It's amazing sometimes that kind of invitation can be very powerful. You could try it right now.

Maybe the body can relax. Not trying to do relaxation. Just dropping that kind of invitation in. And see how the mind and body respond to that invitation.

For me, dropping that in, I can feel sometimes just a subtle "oh"—there was something that let go and I didn't even know it was being held. So I'll feel into that. I'll just drop that in and feel that releasing happen, and drop it in again. Maybe the body can relax. Feeling some more opening, softening.

As the body softens and relaxes, it creates the conditions for the mind to be a little more soft and relaxed. Not so wrapped up in thoughts and worries and opinions and views, but just willing to settle and be with experience.

Maybe the body can relax. And maybe, just maybe, the mind can relax—inviting that as well. This relaxed attention.

As we relax, as the mind relaxes, sometimes very naturally the mind lets go of some of its ways it's caught and whirling and spinning. As that tension releases in the body and the mind, there can just be this very natural "oh yeah, and I'm aware now." Awareness is here.

So it can be a very relaxed way into touching into the recognition that we're aware, with very little effort, allowing the relaxation to support this recognition of being aware of just this in the present moment—mindful, not pushing, not striving, and not drifting.

So "abides." Abide observing. This next word, *anupassī* in the Pali, translated here as "observing," means basically to look at closely, see clearly, closely observe, touch into repeatedly. So we abide observing. This might feel like a bit of a conflict—settling back, relaxing, and yet connecting. I'll talk about that in just a moment.

It can be, and this to me points to the fact that relaxation and connection are not opposites. We can connect with relaxation.

"Abide observing the body as a body." This next phrase: "Abide observing the body in and of itself." This to me gets to that pointing I mentioned earlier—just knowing the experience directly, just what's happening in the present moment. Not our ideas about it, our views, our opinions. The body in and of itself.

Tonight I'll just explore this one through the perspective of the body, since we're exploring the body more in these first days.

So meeting the bare experience of the body, just the sensation level of experience. We often think of our body in terms of parts—hand, head, shoulders, knees, feet. Sometimes when I'm talking to someone who's newer to the practice, I'll ask them, "What are you experiencing right now? What are your sensations?" And they'll say, "Well, I feel my knee right now." Knee is a concept, right? It's a reference to a portion of this fathom-long thing sitting here. But the experience of knee—knee is not an experience.

Let's look at hand, actually. Let's make it something a little less charged, since perhaps you may have some sore knees right now. Hand. Hand is a concept. We can think about our hand, know what it does. It picks up things. It holds on to things. It moves things around. Knowing our hand as what it does—that's the conceptual level of hand. That's not the experience of hand.

So touch in right now. Put your attention in that area of hand. What sensations? What's the actual sensation level of experience in hand? Pulsing, tingling, stiffness, throbbing, pressure, heat, tension. That's closer to the direct experience. Those are words, and words are concepts, but the experience is much closer to those words than it is to "hand."

And this is, I think, what this is pointing to. We understand or know the body as, in and of itself, as a body. This also, I feel, encourages a non-interfering awareness. Just to know what is actually happening with the body. Not the opinions and ideas and views and relationships we have to it, but just—this is what it is. This is how it is right now. This is the body right now. This is the experience of body right now.

Of course. The experience of the body is like this. This begins to bring in wisdom. It begins to bring in understanding. It points to the impersonal nature of the body. It's kind of just this collection of sensations that we have very little control over. It's human experience. This is human experience. What is the experience of body underneath perhaps concepts, views, ideas about it, opinions? Just the sensations.

This is what we're pointing to in the instructions.

Touching into the breath and the body. We could use breath here too: one abides observing the breath as the breath. Just a sensation. Pressure increasing, releasing. Maybe a sense of vibratory energy expanding and contracting. A flow of sensations. Coolness at the nostrils. A kind of coolness in the throat. The breath in and of itself. Abide. Abide connecting with the breath as it is.

This combination of "one abides observing" points to something important for me. To abide feels receptive—settle back, let experience come to you. You don't need to go out and find things or look for things. Just settle back and be with what's here. That's the quality of abides.

Observing brings in a little bit more of directing, of choosing perhaps, attending to some particular area of experience: the breath, the body, sound—those three areas we've been encouraging. This is the gathering and collecting of attention so that we can be mindful.

Mindfulness has a wide range of ways it can be experienced. Mindfulness can be receptive, where we settle back and simply notice what's arising in the present moment without choosing or directing the attention. And mindfulness can also be connected with choosing and directing attention—we can choose to attend or aim toward the breath, the body, hearing.

This is an important piece, because early in my practice I thought that if I wasn't choosing what I was aware of, then it meant I wasn't being mindful. But sometimes there are moments in practice where something else is happening that's very strong, and we can't necessarily choose not to look at it. There's a strong sensation in the knee pulling the attention—I'm not choosing to do it, I'd rather be with the breath. In those situations, perhaps we abide with that experience, bringing in the breath alongside it, but not trying to push away what's demanding attention.

So this "abide observing" allows us to connect with an experience like the breath, to aim or direct—okay, that's what I'm going to pay attention to for now, that's where I'll set the intention. But then we settle back and simply see what's there, rather than trying to find what's there. We allow there to be an abiding with the breath, a resting with the breath as it's showing up.

This has been said multiple times: just as it is. We don't need to find exactly how it's being experienced. Just this—what is it, how is it being known right now? How is mindfulness able to know it right now? That is this abiding and observing together.

It's like tuning a radio. You tune to a particular channel, narrow the bandwidth of what's being received. But the radio doesn't go out at that bandwidth and grab the radio waves. It's receiving all of that and then simply looking at this channel. It's a receptive quality rather than going out and grabbing.

This receptive quality of attention can be very supportive. It supports a relaxed knowing, a relaxed observing of whatever it is that you're choosing to cultivate as a stable place to land the attention. So this is really pointing to a receptive quality of awareness. Relaxed. Relax and receive—two words that maybe are different flavors of this sentence that the Buddha offers. Relax and receive.

Another word that I think is implied in the text here, especially in this phrase "observing the body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states," is *allowing*. Observing the body as it already is, what is happening, without trying to fix it or change it. This is allowing the body to be as it is. So we cultivate an attitude of allowing, allowing things to be as they are.

This is actually one of the kindest things that we can do for ourselves. It brings in the quality of mettā. Annie in her talk spoke about how mettā is woven into our practice, and it's woven in right in the mindfulness practice with this quality or attitude of allowing—allowing your experience to be as it is.

Just imagine what it feels like when you have a friend who is so willing to accept you completely as you are. A friend who doesn't want you to change, who is willing to be there with you when things are hard, celebrating with you when things are going well. This friend who just lets you be who you are. There's a real sense of care and connection, a feeling of being loved. That is what this quality of mindfulness feels like—loving attention.

So right in the mindfulness practice, this quality of mettā is being cultivated as we explore just allowing ourselves to be just as we are. It's like we learn how to belong to ourselves, this sense of being cared for just as we are. It's beautiful. It's a beautiful quality of the mind. It's about allowing all of our human experience, opening to all of it.

This allowing perspective isn't about agreeing or disagreeing with what's happening. We can allow things to be as they are and not like them. But what it is, is a recognition: this is what is happening. What is happening is already happening. What we're observing has already happened. So it's here. We're really connecting with that truth of this moment—it's here already. Wishing it weren't this way is just suffering.

But allowing, opening to experience as it is, is also not about passivity. Allowing really helps to open us, especially in our daily lives. Here on retreat, particularly in our sittings, we can really just allow what's flowing through us, really be that friend sitting with ourselves. "I'll be here with you for everything." And there are times in our lives, and there may be times here also, where the opening to experience points us to, "Oh, something actually does need to change here."

So this perspective of mindfulness isn't about just letting things roll over us. It supports connecting with a skillful response—not out of greed, aversion, or delusion, but out of compassion. Compassion is allowing connected with the quality of loving-kindness. When that allowing meets something that needs to happen, or something that may need to change, the perspective of allowing connects with compassion, a wish to alleviate suffering.

So allowing is a key support for our practice, but there are times when we can't command ourselves to allow. And this is where we step back a little further—to allow that we're not allowing. This is what's happening: I don't like it, it feels like I can't allow it. But can I know? "Yeah, not liking is what's happening. Okay." Be that friend who is just okay with you not liking this thing. That's okay. So we step back to just check in: can I not try to change this not liking, but just allow it?

the non-allowing. It feels like moving into a bigger container. So relax. Receive. And allow.

Another word in this phrase: ardent. This has the quality of diligence, wholeheartedness, connecting to experience. It's a place where commitment to the practice comes in—persistence, where effort is really pointed to. We can't just abide. The dude abides and floats off into the ether. There has to be a connection. Ardency.

And yet, there's a balance. Abiding and ardent. Relaxation and effort. These two are not opposites. They can support each other. There's a way that we can make effort in a very relaxed way. We can dwell and be really connected to experience.

A key for this kind of balance between abiding and ardent is a light touch of effort—just enough effort to be present right in this split second. That's all, actually. Can you know a breath right now? How about the sensations of your hands? Another breath. The sound of my voice. When I name each of those experiences, probably there was just a moment of connecting with that experience. Not too hard. Just for a moment. Just right there.

What is harder is sustaining it. And this is where we often get tight in our practice. Kind of the idea that we sit down and think, "Okay, I'm going to be mindful for forty-five minutes." It's like we pick up the whole forty-five minutes in that first second. And that's a recipe for tension. But you can just be aware of sitting, and here's a breath. And how about another one?

Joseph offered on one retreat I taught—he may still offer it at times—what he calls the secret teaching of practicing with the breath. All you need to do is make enough effort to be with half a breath. Just the in-breath. Can you be with an in-breath right now? And then at the end of that in-breath, can you be with the out-breath? Just enough effort for those few moments. That's the lightness of the effort. Just connecting, receiving for that moment, those few moments. How does the in-breath feel? How does the out-breath feel? How about the next in-breath?

And after a few of those, the mind will probably wander, and that's okay. At some point you'll recognize that the mind has wandered, and you can come back to just another half a breath. A light touch, over and over and over again.

Now, don't pick up the "over and over and over again." You mean I've got to do this for six weeks or three months? No, you just have to do it right now. That's it. That's all there is anyway. This is all there is—this moment, that's it. Six weeks from now doesn't exist. Just this moment. Aware now. And again. And again. How much effort does it take to be with this?

It's often a lot less than we think.

"One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, free from desire and discontent for the world."

That last phrase I don't have time to go into in great detail, but one thing I'll mention: Bhikkhu Anālayo, in his exploration of this sutta—many of you have probably seen or perhaps read his book *Satipaṭṭhāna*—when he describes this phrase, looking at this particular piece, "free from desires and discontent for the world," he says that the Pali used here (and I'm not a Pali scholar, so I can't confirm or deny this, but I trust Anālayo), this word *vinaya*, which we actually chant—*vinaya gedam*—we chant that in the sutta that Greg is teaching us tonight. *Vinaya* means "freeing from," and it can be understood as happening simultaneously with everything else going on in the sentence.

So we could say that this phrase might read: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world." This freeing from can happen simultaneously with the process of mindfulness.

And this is what we do. Something challenging arises—desire, discontent, greed, aversion. Desire and ill will, the first two hindrances. Mindfulness can be brought to those, and that's the very work of freeing ourselves. We free ourselves by being with them and understanding them, understanding how they affect us. As I said earlier, understanding the stress they cause.

We understand that they are stressful—that when we're caught by them, when we're caught by desire and discontent, we believe the story they're telling us, which is: "If you get this thing, if you get rid of this thing, then you'll be happy." We're caught in that belief, essentially deluding ourselves that this is good for us. And we're not noticing how it's affecting us here and now, the stress it's creating on our system here and now.

So this attending to it, bringing mindfulness to desire and discontent, is the process of freeing ourselves from these challenging states. At times we may be able to set them aside, but sometimes it's not possible. And then allowing, abiding, relaxing with, receiving, opening to can be a very powerful way to explore them. There are times to say no to them, definitely, and we'll talk about that more in the talks that are coming.

So this phrase—"one abides observing the body as a body, ardent, mindful, fully aware, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world"—it really brings together the what and the how of our practice. The what of our practice: body sensations, mind states, moods, emotions, processes of body and mind, all these foundations of mindfulness. What we are experiencing—this body, this human body, these processes of body and mind. Body as a body. Feelings as feelings. Mind states as mind states. Phenomena as phenomena.

What we're paying attention to, and how to pay attention—the attitude or the way we bring attention to it. Relax. Abide with some diligence, some perseverance, some heartfelt connection. With kind, loving attention. Allowing. Receiving. Receiving the experience.

All of this creates the conditions—relax, receive, allow—creates the conditions for the mind to understand, to learn what this being is. It's a doing. It's a being. It's not an "is." It's a process. And we understand the processes of this being that lead us, get us caught, take us into our habits and patterns. And those processes that free the mind, release us from those habits and patterns.

Our organism fundamentally wants to move towards well-being. That's good news. Because as we see the stress of a challenging mind state, very naturally the mind, the body, the being wants to move in the direction of releasing it when it understands it.

Relax. Receive experience. Allow it to be as it is. And let the learning happen. The wisdom will develop with mindfulness cultivated in this perspective.

Let's sit for a moment.

*

Thank you for your practice.

CHAPTER 69

Relax Connection with the Breath

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this retreat guidance session, Andrea Fella offers practical instructions for settling into breath meditation through relaxation rather than effort. The talk begins with the traditional chanting of refuges and precepts (both five and eight precepts for different practitioners), then moves into detailed meditation instruction.*
>
> *The core teaching emphasizes creating what Fella calls a "container of relaxation" before connecting with the breath. Rather than immediately focusing attention on breathing, practitioners are guided through a systematic body scan—softening the face, neck, shoulders, torso, and eventually the interior spaces of the body. The instruction includes using gentle mental invitations such as "May the body relax" and "May the mind relax" as surprisingly powerful tools for releasing tension, rather than trying to force relaxation.*
>
> *Fella introduces a particularly nuanced technique of connecting with the breath through "peripheral awareness"—similar to soft-focus vision where one sees things at the edges without looking directly at them. This approach addresses a common difficulty where aiming or focusing creates tension. The teaching encourages receiving the breath rather than seeking it, befriending the experience exactly as it is, and using only enough effort to connect with half a breath at a time. Questions from practitioners about balancing postural alignment with relaxation are addressed, emphasizing that the goal is not a "correct" posture but whatever supports relaxed attention.*

This morning we'll start by chanting the refuges and precepts together. For those of you continuing on five precepts, as we chant the precepts together, after you finish chanting the fifth precept, you can just fall silent while those of you who are taking the eight precepts will continue and chant the next three. Then we'll all come back together again to chant the final Yidang Meisi Lang.

Those of you who are on eight precepts, how many of you have never chanted those last three before? A few of you. So I'll do those three call and response, a few words at a time, particularly for the seventh one. But we'll chant everything else together.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa

Buddhang saranam gacchami
Dhammang saranam gacchami
Sangam saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi buddhang saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi dhammang saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi sangam saranam gacchami
Tatiyampi buddhang saranam gacchami
Tatiyampi dhammang saranam gacchami
Tatiyampi sangam saranam gacchami

Panatipata veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Adinnadana veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Brahmacharya veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Musavada veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Sura meraya majapamadatana veramani sikapadam samadiyami

Call and response:
Vikalabhojana veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Nacca gita vadita visukadassana malagandha vilepana dharana mandana vibhusanatana veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Uccha sayana maha sayana veramani sikapadam samadiyami

All together:
Sadhu sadhu sadhu

Each morning, in offering these instructions, we've been exploring ways to settle and collect the mind with an anchor for the attention. We've suggested three possible anchors: the breath, whole body sensation, and the experience of hearing. You may by now have a sense of which of these is more comfortable for you to settle in with. We've also been pointing to ways to gather and collect the attention in a relaxed way, and each of us finds our own approach to doing that.

Today I'll offer one way that has been very helpful for me to settle naturally and easefully with the breath. The guided portion will focus on collecting the attention with the breath, and as we come to the end, you're welcome to shift to hearing or the body if you're using a different experience to gather and collect the attention.

Allow the posture to be relaxed. Our skeleton is actually designed to hold us upright, and we can relax all the muscles around those bones. Find a posture that's balanced. You might want to rock a little bit and find a posture where you can actually relax the muscles around the bones.

In settling in to connect with the experience of breathing, I've found it so helpful to begin by creating what we might call a container of relaxation. Rather than starting with attending to the breath, I start with relaxing the body. We can do this in a systematic way, through a slight, gentle scan through the body.

Perhaps the muscles of the head and face can relax. I find softening the face to be particularly useful—allowing all the muscles around the forehead, the eyes, the cheeks, the jaw to soften. Relaxing the crown of the head, the back of the head, the neck. The shoulders. Softening the arms and hands.

Relaxing the torso, all of those muscles around the rib cage. Sometimes a deeper breath at this point can really help to stretch and expand those muscles, and then soften and relax on the out breath. Perhaps another deeper breath, with the emphasis on allowing this part of the body to really relax.

Softening the muscles across the abdomen, the lower back and middle back. That can be an area where we almost subconsciously hold tension. So perhaps let that area hang forward a little bit. Softening the hips, inside the hip sockets, the legs, the feet.

There's also sometimes the possibility of working from the outside of the body inward, to soften more deeply inside the body, in this core area. Perhaps there can be a relaxation inside the throat. Perhaps the area around the heart can relax. Perhaps the stomach and intestines can soften and relax.

As the body relaxes even just a little bit, it creates conditions that support the mind to soften and relax. You may notice a little bit of softening of the mind. One of my colleagues, Gil Fronsdal, has used an analogy to support the relaxation of mind which I've found useful at times: as if the brain were a muscle, perhaps the brain can relax.

And sometimes there can be a little more release that's possible by dropping in a request, just an invitation: May the body relax. Not trying to do it, not searching for any place to relax, but simply dropping in that invitation and seeing how the body responds. May the body relax. May the mind relax.

As there is a little bit of relaxation of body and mind, awareness can be more easily available. So are you aware? And how is that awareness feeling into, connecting with, being with the breathing? The breathing that's already happening. There's no need to aim or focus or try to find the breath. Maybe have the sense of letting the breath come into awareness—receiving the breath as it is.

With an openness and a curiosity: how does it show up? Not looking for any particular sensations, but just being available to connect with the sensations that are happening while you're breathing, wherever that is for you. It may be a broad area of experience in the torso. It may be a little more contained around the nostrils or in the throat. It may feel like a movement or a flow of sensations—the expanding and contracting of the chest, the rising and falling of the abdomen.

Allow the mind and the body to stay relaxed as much as possible. And if you find tension creeps back in, perhaps drop in that request again: may the body relax. And connect with the breath, allowing the breath to be as it is.

For some of us, bringing attention to the breath can make it hard to let go into just the breath breathing itself. If that's the case for you, just notice: this is how it is to pay attention to the breath right now. This is the experience. This is how it feels. However it is, allowing it to be. Allowing your experience to be exactly as it is—this friendly, receptive, caring attention. Befriending your body, befriending the breath.

A light touch of effort, just enough to connect with half a breath. How does this in-breath feel? How does this out-breath feel? And doing it again. And again.

There will be times when other experience arises and pulls at the attention. For now, we're still exploring staying with the breath. You can gently acknowledge that experience, maybe with a light touch of a note—hearing, or thinking, or sensing—and then reconnect. Relax, perhaps, because sometimes when the attention is pulled there can be tension that comes in. So relax, and reconnect. How is this breath?

If the attention is pulled more strongly and it feels like there's not an easy way to let go or set aside that other experience, maybe there can be an opening to: well, that's happening. There's thinking happening, and the breath is happening. There's thinking and the breath. This is a little broader container, perhaps, but it allows the attention to stay connected to the breath even as other things go on around it. Hearing and the breath. Other body sensations and the breath. Thinking and the breath.

The guided offering this morning is really just one way to explore and support a relaxed container for the practice. For myself, that kind of exploration of relaxation at the beginning was really supportive, because this body and mind was very tense. It was

helpful to take the time to go through—often a body scan—especially depending on when I sat down and how much tension there was. And that can come and go during the retreat.

And so as the retreat moves on, there may be days that you sit down and just feel very relaxed at the beginning. When that happened for me, I would simply invite a little more relaxation, just use those invitations. These invitations can be surprisingly powerful as a way in, especially as the mind settles a little more.

On retreats where I was doing this more focused practice, I would settle in, check in—okay, pretty relaxed—and then just drop in. Maybe there's a little more relaxation. "May the body relax"—and feel, not do it, but just feel into how the body responds to that. And then, "May the mind relax." And then, "May the attention rest with the breathing." Again, not trying to aim at the breath, but inviting the attention to just connect. "May the attention rest with the breathing. May the breathing be comfortable and relaxed."

Those invitations supported the connection to the breath to be infused with relaxation for me. If you find this useful, play with it. If you don't find it useful, just let it go. There are so many different ways in, and what I find is that we each find our way based on things we've heard in teachings, in instructions, and things that come to us as we practice.

A question arose about the relationship between relaxation and maintaining an erect posture—about how one might work to find an upright position that involves some effort in the lower spine, and whether that creates a contradiction with the relaxation approach.

I think it really depends, and you can play with both. See what supports the mind to be most settled. If you actually find that using a little bit of tension in your lower back to keep the posture upright helps—sometimes a little bit of tension down there can allow other things to relax, and that's fine. Or you could just play with what I've found for myself: finding a spot where, even if it's a little slumped, everything can be relaxed, and that supports the mindfulness. We're really not looking for a correct posture, but rather what posture will support a relaxed attention. You can play with both and see what actually is supportive. And it may be different at different times.

I'll offer one more tool that I've used to support a very relaxed connection with the breath. This one may be a little less intuitive. It uses the way our mind can look at things on the periphery of our attention.

In the visual field, for example, if you're looking straight ahead, you can also see things off to the side in your peripheral vision—not by looking directly at them, but by softening the gaze. Not aiming at looking straight ahead, but softening and just kind of taking in what's there on the periphery.

That kind of softening of the gaze can also happen in our minds, in connecting with the breathing or other objects as well. You might just play with that now: explore a large container and the breath, not looking directly at the breath, but allowing it to kind of come in from the sides.

For me, I found that aiming was where the tension got the most tight—when I thought, "Okay, I'm going to look right here at the nostrils."

You can also have the intention to connect with the nostrils at the nostrils, but not look directly at it. It can take a little time, but play with that. It feels like a broader attention that's connecting here, but not looking at it directly. For me, that brings in again a little more softening in the mind that is connecting with the attention. That can also be a kind of knowing the breathing—you're aware that you're breathing without focusing on particular sensations.

This talk was given during a meditation retreat. The original transcript has been lightly edited for readability while preserving the teacher's voice and meaning.

CHAPTER 70

Awareness of Thoughts and Thinking

Andrea Fella · 1h02

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Andrea Fella offers detailed guidance on working with thoughts in meditation practice. She begins by framing the fundamental purpose of practice: learning about our minds to understand how they participate in suffering (dukkha) and cultivating qualities that move us toward ease and freedom. The talk emphasizes that mindfulness has an almost magical quality—when we observe reactive states non-judgmentally, they naturally diminish, while wholesome qualities (paramīs, brahmavihāras) grow stronger when recognized.*
>
> *Fella makes a crucial distinction between being lost in thought and being aware of thinking, encouraging practitioners to recognize that moment when mindfulness returns as an opportunity to understand what mindful awareness of thought actually feels like. She categorizes thoughts into 'active' or 'energetic' thinking—often connected to emotions like anger or fear—and 'drifting' thoughts that arise when the mind is relaxed but not quite mindful. For energetic thoughts, she suggests naming the category (planning, arguing, judging), noticing the audience, and exploring underlying emotions. For drifting thoughts, she recommends connecting with the quality of mind itself, which is often spacious and calm.*
>
> *The teaching addresses the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa)—impermanence (anicca), unreliability (dukkha), and not-self (anattā)—as they manifest in thinking. Fella notes that thoughts particularly reveal the not-self nature of experience: we don't choose what thoughts arise, and mindfulness returns unbidden. She also discusses working with beliefs as a subtler form of thought, and offers practical strategies for when difficult thought patterns overwhelm our mindfulness, including broadening awareness and gentle redirection rather than suppression.*

What are we doing here? That question can come up in a variety of tones of voice. It can be asked with frustration—"What am I doing here?"—or it can be a legitimate kind of curiosity. What is this? How does this practice work?

We do like to encourage you not to think too much about that, but I'm going to say a few words at the beginning here about our purpose, about what we're doing, in a simple way.

We're trying to learn about our minds. We're trying to understand ways that our mind gets caught and participates in what we call suffering, and to cultivate qualities of mind that participate in moving in the other direction—towards ease, towards peace, towards freedom.

Essentially, looking at our minds does this quite naturally. When we observe and get curious about what this experience is, whether it's something reactive or a beautiful, wholesome quality of mind, mindfulness has what seems almost like a magic property. Winnie mentioned this the other night: this ability, when we are mindful of something in a non-reactive, non-judgmental way, to transform our experience. If what we're meeting is reactive—a reactive emotion such as anger, confusion, frustration, irritation, annoyance, anything rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion—when we're mindful of that, it creates the conditions for it to diminish in our experience, to get weaker. Because we understand that it's suffering. Mindfulness and wisdom work together to help us understand that suffering, and very naturally, the mind wants to move in the direction of letting that go.

And when mindfulness meets or connects with wholesome qualities—Tara mentioned a whole list of them the other night in the paramis: generosity, energy, wisdom, patience, love, equanimity, all of the brahmaviharas, mindfulness itself—when mindfulness recognizes these wholesome qualities, it creates the conditions for them to grow stronger.

So really, all we have to do is be mindful. And very naturally, over time, the reactive things will diminish and the wholesome will increase.

Partly this happens through how we meet experience and get to know it. At first, when we are beginning either a period of practice, a retreat, or are earlier in our practice, what we're getting familiar with is what particular experience feels like—what is sometimes called the specific characteristics of experience. The body has these sensations, these qualities of pressure, heat, coolness, vibration, tingling, pulsing. Those are the specific qualities of the sensations of the body.

But every experience, no matter what is happening, has what we might call general characteristics. Everything that happens in our bodies and minds is impermanent. It is unreliable because it's impermanent—unreliable as a source for lasting happiness. And it is not me, not mine, not who I am.

This meeting of experience with mindfulness begins to point out these general characteristics to us. We see all of these body sensations—tingling, pulsing, vibration—as impermanent. We see our mind states as impermanent. We see thoughts as imperman-

ent, emotions as impermanent. And since impermanent, unreliable. We find we can't control what's happening. Often we see we're not in ultimate control of these body sensations. Did I decide for this tingling to happen? It happened. So we're not in control of what arises, and that points to this characteristic of not-self.

We see that every experience can reveal this to us. We don't have to wait for some special experience to notice that it's impermanent. Every experience can show us this truth. And when we see experience as impermanent, unreliable, and not-self, quite naturally our minds recognize: this is not worth clinging to. Impermanent things are not worth clinging to.

I've heard this description for a long time, and I think it came from a yogi—I can't attribute a source to it—but this yogi described suffering as being like rope burn from grasping at changing phenomena.

You know, when a rope drags through your hand, the movement of that rope burns your hand. If you let go of the rope, it stops burning. The sense of clinging to something that is impermanent creates a suffering like rope burn. And so our minds begin to understand that and start to let go—quite naturally—start to let go.

We've been exploring different phenomena in our instructions in the morning, and there's been a theme, a thread that has been carried through. When we've talked about body sensations, these are impermanent. Mind states, these are impermanent. Thoughts, these are impermanent. And so we're really learning how to meet all of these different experiences with mindfulness.

Some experiences can be more challenging than others. We tend to get caught—we each have our favorite emotions to get caught with, and certain body sensations we probably get caught with. And we all also tend to get caught with thoughts. It seems to be a human phenomenon that we get absorbed into our thoughts and spin and worry and plan. So it's human.

This morning Tara talked about working with thoughts, and I'll talk a little bit more about it tomorrow, but I thought to take a little more time to just unpack it this evening—working with thoughts, different kinds of thoughts, different ways to work with them. These are, as Tara mentioned this morning, just another experience that can be known as an impermanent, unreliable phenomenon.

Looking at thoughts also is a real pointing to that not-self quality. Because so often when a thought arises, it's kind of like, "Well, where did that come from?" It's not self. It came from conditions. It arose based on habits, patterns, things from your memory. It's

just an arising that happened. You didn't try to make it happen. It just happened. And so looking at thoughts really can help us to understand this, experientially connect with this understanding or teaching around not-self.

Sometimes people have the idea—and it can be a subtle belief or an obvious one—that what meditation means is having a mind that gets quiet, without thoughts. That sometimes happens in meditation. I think some of you have experienced it; many of you who've talked to me have mentioned that. And it's very pleasant, one of the things we like about it.

This just reminded me of a study I read. The headline was, "People would rather shock themselves than be left alone with their thoughts." People were given the opportunity to sit in a room quietly for an hour. There was a buzzer there that they could shock themselves with, or they could sit there and be with their thoughts. And people chose to shock themselves. So this is what we're dealing with—we don't like thoughts. Learning to have a more friendly relationship with thoughts can be useful.

It's possible for the mind to get quiet and not have thoughts in meditation, but that's not necessarily the goal. Our aim is this continuity of mindfulness that meets experience moment to moment and understands it as experience in the present moment—whatever it is: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, body sensations, things arising in the mind, emotions, moods, thoughts—being with moment-to-moment experience as it's arising and recognizing that it's happening right now. That's our aim in mindfulness practice. And so if thoughts arise, we can explore the possibility of being mindful of them.

Now it is challenging. Being mindful of thinking, of thoughts, is challenging because they have this quality—we are so habituated to following the thoughts, to getting caught in them, to thinking about them. That's what we've done our whole lives. So of course we get caught in thoughts. Of course. Deciding to sit down and meditate is a teaching on not-self right there. You sit down: "I'm going to meditate. I'm going to be with my breath."

You sit down determined to be with your breath for fifteen minutes. And what happens? A minute, two minutes in, you're thinking. Did you tell yourself, "I'm not going to pay attention to the breath anymore, I'm going to pay attention to thinking now"? No, it happened. It's not self.

And then, even more amazing, we're thinking, we're all lost in thought, and suddenly mindfulness returns and we become aware that we're thinking again. Did we decide to have mindfulness return? No. Again, it's not self. It arose because of conditions, because you planted seeds of mindfulness earlier. So right there, just watching the mind wander and come back—a teaching on not self.

In exploring thinking, we need to understand the difference between being lost in thought and being aware of thinking. I think we can intuitively know this because we all understand that moment when we wake up, the moment when mindfulness returns. There's a difference in quality between being lost in some story or memory and then having mindfulness return—that moment when, "Oh, aware, I'm aware." That quality of difference begins to point out what it feels like to be lost in thought and what it feels like to be aware. So getting familiar with that distinction is important.

In that moment when mindfulness returns, often what we become aware of is that we are thinking. And immediately most of us judge that: "I'm thinking. I shouldn't be thinking. I should bring myself back to the breath." But right there in that moment, you are aware of thinking. So that moment of mindfulness returning into thought is a great opportunity to recognize what it's like to be aware while thinking. Take a moment to notice that. Thinking is happening. Aware of that.

There are many different options for what to do next. It can simply be noticing the thought. But often one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says what people do in that moment is they shoot the thought. "Thinking!" And then it goes away because there's such an intense focus on it. But there's a kind of intensity to that—"I'm thinking"—and it's almost like that note obliterates the thinking. It's not really a natural release of thinking. It's a kind of overwhelming of thinking through that noting process, through that intense aiming and shooting, as he says, shooting thoughts.

So when we become mindful or aware—oh, thinking is happening—can there be a gentler awareness of thinking? So that there is a connection with the capacity the mind has to think and know that we're thinking at the same time. That's what we could call mindfulness of thinking. We are thinking and we know that we're thinking.

When we are not aware of the thinking, we're often just pulled into our thoughts, our habits, our patterns, often connected to deep conditioning. Reactivity can arise. We go down a train, a rabbit hole—I sometimes call it a rabbit hole. We go down a rabbit hole and it can take us a while to come back out because there's so much conditioning around getting hooked into thoughts.

So beginning to recognize the difference between being hooked and being aware of thinking—just curiosity about that. What is that difference? And that moment when you recognize that you've become aware is a prime moment to get curious about that. Aware of thinking. It's happening. The mind can do that.

One thing I like to distinguish is that there are so many different kinds of thoughts that happen. You might have noticed that.

things like that. But there's also—you know, somebody mentioned the narration kind of thought, and then there's daydreaming kind of thoughts, and there's just drifting random thoughts. So there's a lot of different kinds of thoughts.

And roughly, in terms of talking about working with thoughts, I like to distinguish between what I'll call active or energetic thinking, where there's a kind of investment in it, maybe. There's a pull into it. There's an energy with it. I call that active thinking. And the other that I'll distinguish right now is what we might call something like drifting thinking, where there's not much of a charge. It almost just feels floaty. There's often not a lot of emotional stuff going on in there. It's just a drifty kind of space.

And there are very different ways to work with those kinds of experiences.

So I'll start with talking about the active thinking or the energized thinking, because that's often where we can struggle. That kind of thinking is often connected to an emotional pattern. And we'll talk in a moment about making those connections.

But one of the first things that can be useful with a kind of thought pattern that is really engaged is something Tara mentioned this morning, which is to kind of name it—connecting, taking a step back from the content and noticing the type of thinking in terms of a category, like planning, remembering, judging, fantasizing, arguing. It's connected to the content a little bit, but it gives you a bit of distance from the story or the narrative that's connected with the thought. So you can name or note that just very lightly. Arguing, arguing is happening. Arguing.

These kind of energized thoughts, energetic thoughts, active thinking—it kind of feels like we've been hooked onto them. So there's some engagement with them. And often it feels like, while it might have arisen unbidden, it's kind of like we've jumped on the bandwagon. Yeah, I really want to think about that.

So this kind of naming the thoughts helps us to take a step back and just notice the type of thoughts. And it also begins to point out—Jack Kornfield sometimes would say, what are your top three favorite tunes? I was the angry thinker. That was my number one hit, anger. So you begin to get familiar with the kinds of patterns, all different ways in.

I mean, some of you have talked about planning, you know, being a planner, and it's like, oh yeah, I'm planning what to have for lunch, planning how to brush my teeth, I'm planning—you know, here there's not much to plan, but we plan. So that planning is the habit. So just begin to notice the habitual qualities. This is noticing something about the specific characteristic of this kind of thinking. Planning tends to be directed at the future. Remembering at the past. So we can have different relationships with different kinds of memories in that way.

Our habitual thoughts, the ones that we find are our top three—I would say those are often related to old and deep patterns. Things that have happened to you before. Ways that you've engaged in your life from the time that you were a child. These are deeply conditioned habits. And so again, of course they arise. You can't expect to come and sit in the hall at IMS and leave your mind outside. It comes in with us. Sometimes I say on these retreats, this is your mind 101. You are learning what your mind does, how it does it.

So again, with these energetic kind of thoughts, if you find them having this, you know, naming them as planning or remembering—another piece that can be useful with these thoughts that have a lot of energy to them is just check in. Who's the audience for this thought? Am I talking just to myself, or do I have a large audience? Or is it one specific person that I am trying to convince that I'm right?

Kind of get a sense of it. Often when we're thinking, we're not just talking to ourselves—we are talking to someone. And so having a sense of that: Is there an audience? Whose voice is the thought in? Sometimes thoughts are images. We'll talk about this more in a bit. Sometimes they're images. Sometimes they're as if we're talking to ourselves, or as if someone else is talking to us.

We might hear something in one of our parents' voice, or in an old teacher's voice, or in our boss's voice. Just notice these things. They are part of the process of how our mind does thinking. We don't have to do much other than recognize: "Okay, yeah, arguing and trying to convince this person I'm right—that's what's happening right now." Just noticing. We can notice that this is happening in our own minds.

When we're really lost in the thoughts, we believe it's happening to us right now. It's kind of startling. I got this shown to me very clearly at one point when I had had a painful breakup with someone. It was maybe a year into the breakup, and I was still processing, still dealing with this. I began noticing at times that I would wake up into thoughts and be really confused, because in the thought, I was right back in the relationship. It felt like I was there. Then I'd come out and think, "Wait a minute, that's not even—that was a year ago. That's not happening right now." It was happening in my mind.

Beginning to recognize this—naming these energetic thoughts, recognizing the audience, recognizing whose voice it's in—helps us see that this is happening in our minds. This is not actually happening.

Another useful piece here: when you notice that you're thinking, you come into awareness and recognize, "Yes, okay, I know I'm thinking, I know I'm planning, remembering, judging, fantasizing"—whatever that is. Another useful step is to take a broader view, kind of opening up a little bit and checking out: How am I relating to this fact that I'm thinking?

This is often where judgment comes in. We don't like the fact that we're thinking. The attitude to our thoughts is often related to the fact that we're practicing meditation. We're sitting down and meditating, and we have the idea, "I'm not supposed to be thinking." When thinking arises, we get annoyed with ourselves. The attitude might be annoyance. So take a moment to check out: I know that thinking is happening—what's my relationship to noticing that?

Over time it can become really neutral. It's just like, "Oh yeah, thinking is happening. That's not a problem. That's just what I can notice right now. It's another experience." But as we begin to become familiar with working with thinking, we will often see a relationship that is resistant. We don't like it. Or the other side of it might be that we just want to put down the meditation altogether and go back into that fantasy—it was way more pleasant than feeling all of this stuff in my body. So there can be both the greed, the desire to go back into the thinking, but often there's the relationship of aversion, not liking, wanting it to go away, having a conflicted relationship with it. So acknowledge that. Thinking is happening and I don't like it. That's what's happening right now.

With this active thinking, I mentioned a few moments ago that there's often emotion related to it, connected to it. Tara mentioned this morning to check in: Is there an emotion related to the thinking? Thoughts are sometimes an emotion's way of trying to get our attention.

For instance, if you're ranting at somebody—"I'm right, I'm right, you're wrong, I'm right"—maybe it just feels like judging and arguing. But what is the emotion here? It might be fear or anger, the flywheel off of which those thoughts are coming. When we can connect with an emotion, it's often already happening; it's just a little below our conscious awareness. We may not be consciously mindful or aware that those emotions are there.

Opening up to whether there are emotions present with this thought is not a trying to dig. And it's very important, I think, not to look for specific emotions. If you're having thoughts of arguing, for instance, it's not so helpful to ask, "Well, is there fear here? Is there anger here?"

But more just, what kind of emotions are here? Is there an emotion here? It's kind of opening up with that question, being available to see if there is an emotion present.

When I've explored it in this way, more than once I've been surprised by the emotion that's been there. When I'm not looking for the emotion, when I'm not thinking, "I know what the emotion should be, there must be anger under here"—if you're looking for an emotion, you may construct it and you'll find it. But if you're more just willing to let the experience show itself to you, sometimes we can be completely startled and not at all expect what is here.

I had an example of this in my daily life. I was driving, and my mind was consumed with planning—this spinning, intense energy of planning. I wanted to be present for driving, so I kept coming back to the hands on the steering wheel, trying to be present. I was skipping over the thought a little bit. I wasn't exactly pushing the thought away, but I was also not engaging with it. Just, "Okay, stop. I'm going to pay attention to driving." And it just kept coming. It was so strong. It kept coming and coming. Finally, with my hands on the steering wheel, I just said, "Well, what else is happening here?" Just that simple question—what else is going on right now with this planning? I mean, it was not pleasant. It was intense. "Got to do this, got to figure out this, got to make sure this person knows this thing and that person knows this thing."

When I stopped and just asked, "What else is happening here?"—I was really happy. I had no idea I was happy. And as soon as the mind actually opened to that, all of that planning thought went away. In retrospect, what I saw was happening was that the mind was trying to figure out how to hold on to this happiness. How can I make sure that everybody knows everything they need to know so that I can feel this happiness—when I wasn't even feeling it?

So opening to that curiosity, to what is here, can be so surprising. In the middle of being curious about depression and depressed thoughts, I noticed mettā. That was... what? And again, it was just an opening to "what else is here?" Oh, there's mettā here. Not at all what I expected. There can, of course, be—in the middle of arguing and frustration thoughts—anger and hatred and all of those things. But I just want to point out: don't look for anything in particular. Just be curious about what shows up, and then work with it as we've talked about working with emotions in the body, being with it in the body.

Often when we connect with the emotion that's underlying thoughts, the thoughts will dissipate. Because as I said, it's like the thoughts are often, in this kind of energetic experience, the emotion's way of trying to get our attention. So when we finally connect —"Oh, this is what's happening"—the thoughts may dissipate.

In trying to be aware, mindful of extremely strong thoughts, these energetic patterns with a lot of emotional charge to them, it's helpful to really have the wisdom to understand whether or not the mindfulness can actually meet the experience. Sometimes the energy of a reaction, a thought and the emotion with it, can have more momentum than our mindfulness has momentum. And it feels like our little stream or trickle of mindfulness is swamped by a tsunami. If trying to be mindful of a pattern like that just pulls you right back into it, if you're just swamped by the energy of the emotion, then that's not the time to try to be mindful of that pattern.

There's a number of things we can explore in that moment. It's not what we would call pure mindfulness, but it's skillful means to support us to stay present rather than getting lost. An important part of this is that we're letting go or redirecting the attention to something else. But it's important to do that in a way that's not a repression of that strong energy, the strong thought, the strong emotions with it—to not be repressing that.

It's more like what I would do at times. Anger was my big thing. I would get lost in worlds of anger. And as I began to practice with it and notice how strong it was, notice that I couldn't quite be mindful of it in that moment, it would be like I would bow to it. I'd say, "I see you."

I see you're really asking for attention, but mindfulness isn't quite strong enough at this point, so I'm going to turn my attention to something else. That was the whole conversation I would say to myself a few times, and then it just translated into "not now" with a very gentle tone, so that it had no aversion in it. Just "not now." And then I turned my attention to something else.

There are different ways to turn our attention. Depending on how strong the energy is, it might be that you can just let that energy still be there but expand, and let yourself know there's lots of other things happening in the present moment. Just remind yourself there are thousands of things happening in the present moment other than this thing. Sometimes it can feel like we're pulled by a magnet to pay attention to something that's very painful, very difficult. And just the reminder: yeah, that's happening. And seeing is happening. Hearing is happening. Well, there's that thing again. And seeing is happening. And hearing is happening. And there's sensations on my feet. And oh, there it is again. And seeing is happening.

I would rotate through my senses and just broaden to expand the field of attention. Rather than being collapsed in on this one thing, it just got broader. You can also just redirect the attention, turn to something else. That can be a little harder if it's got that really strong magnetic pull to it. But if you can—and I did that with the anger—I said "not now." I was often walking when this happened for some reason. Anger would take over when I was walking. And so I would acknowledge the anger and I would say, "Well, you can take a walk with me, but I'm going to pay attention to my feet." That was a way to just redirect. I wasn't attending to it at all, but I also didn't tell it it had to go away. So these are gentle ways to hold these challenging emotions and turn the attention elsewhere.

Now, if these emotions are really strong, often they're felt in this area—in the torso, throat, chest, stomach. Powerful emotions often have sensations in this area. And so for myself, I found coming back to the breath was not always useful in this kind of place, in terms of redirecting the attention. Because of all of that tension associated with those emotions in the body, as soon as I tried to be with a breath, all of it would be clenching. It just reminded me of it and I was right back in it. That may or may not be the case for you, but give yourself permission to not necessarily come back to your breath if it's your anchor. Let yourself broaden with some challenging emotional states. Broader awareness, or turn to hearing. Hearing can be great there because it's not in this area of the body, that experience of hearing.

I have lots more I could tell you about working with difficult thoughts, but I want to get to drifting thoughts, so I'll shift in that direction.

These kinds of thoughts are much less energetic, and often actually some of these thoughts come when the energy is a little low or when the mindfulness is a little weak. These kinds of daydreams, random thoughts that seem—you find yourself seeing images or thinking about people you don't know. They're talking about things you're not

interested in. It just seems random. There's not a lot of emotional connection either. It's just like, why am I hearing people talk about that? Something in your mind is making connections and you're aware of it.

Often I have found for myself that when that kind of thinking is happening, and it feels like a drifting or a daydreaming quality, or maybe you're even seeing images, dream-like images—those are also thoughts. What I like to suggest is this: you can use the noting if you like, you can explore "daydreaming is happening, drifting is happening." But what I find most useful for myself in that space is to connect with and become aware of the quality of the mind that is drifting. It's often quite relaxed, quite spacious, and quite non-reactive. It's just not quite mindful.

So we're bringing, essentially—that state is candy. If just a little bit of mindfulness is brought in there, it can open us to a relaxed, open, nonjudgmental, aware space. So with that drifting thought, that's often one of the first things I encourage people to check. Can you know the quality of the mind that is drifting or daydreaming?

Touch into that. And then potentially use the noting for that quality—spacious, calm, peaceful, relaxed. Touch into the quality of the mind there, rather than the fact of the thinking. Because the thinking there is not so interesting. It's just the mind relaxing and doing its random brain-firing things. It's not something that's often terribly relevant for us. But the quality of that mind is really useful. We can connect to it and find... I have found at times when I connected to that, it's like feeling the mind dropping into a completely new terrain of awareness—broad, spacious, relaxed, and receptive.

We can also, in this time or place where there's not so much charge to thinking, be curious about and recognize how the thinking is happening in our minds. Tara mentioned this also this morning—that we essentially can think in any of our sense modalities. Seeing and hearing are two of the biggest ones. We often will see images here, or hear our thoughts as if somebody is talking to us, like it's a radio. So we're talking to ourselves. It comes in through an imagined hearing and an imagined seeing as our thoughts.

But we can also think in all of our sense modalities. I have at times experienced having scents or smells come in, very rarely tastes, but I've had that occasionally. And then, more often for me—I was a dancer—a memory of movement, the feeling... we can have kinesthetic thoughts. To give you a flavor of that right now, being with yourself, imagine that you're going to stand up. Is there any sense—some of you may have felt this—when I do this, sometimes I have a sense of that feeling of the movement, almost. If you

just imagine, "I'm going to stand up," it can almost feel like the standing has happened and you haven't stood. That may give you a clue of what a kinesthetic thought would be like.

So we can think in all these different modalities. And sometimes it's useful to acknowledge, as a part of recognizing the process of thinking, how the mind is doing its work. It's not the content we're interested in here so much as how the mind is thinking. It's thinking by creating images. It's thinking by creating sounds. I would sometimes use the note for the sense modality to notice the thought. Rather than noticing "drifting" or "thinking," I would notice "seeing." This is a seeing thought. I knew I wasn't really seeing, but it was acknowledging that the thinking was happening through that sense modality.

This was really helpful at one point. During one of my three-month courses, I think I watched every movie I've ever seen—including seeing the titles in the font they were in in the movie. As soon as I saw an image arise from those movies, I would note "seeing," and then it would vanish. And then I might see another. This got to be pretty fun, actually, because I could watch a movie in about seven seconds. It would produce the image, I'd note "seeing," and that one would vanish. Then another frame would appear, half an hour later in the movie, and "oh, seeing," and that one would vanish. I would just watch these thoughts arise and vanish. Again, just watching them, noticing them, not having a conflicted relationship with them.

In talking about the noticing—for instance, with the drifting thought, noticing the quality of the mind—what's the quality of the mind that's thinking? That's noticing, in a way, how the thinking is affecting experience. In this case, it's almost more that the thinking is a byproduct of something else that's happening. The mind has relaxed, it's become spacious and calm, and there's not enough mindfulness, so random thoughts appear. So we're noticing what's going on with the thoughts. Thoughts are happening—and what else is happening with the thoughts? That's a good general tool.

What else is going on while this thought is happening? How does thinking affect experience?

Thinking is a powerful conditioning force in our minds. When thoughts arise—and we often think of emotions as coming up first and then thoughts following—but thoughts can also arise first. We can be in one of those random, drifty spaces and because of association, stumble into some thought that reminds us of somebody we had a conversation with, and then we're back in that argument with them. So it was kind of

like we drifted out of mindfulness. It wasn't like there was a lot of emotion, but the thought arose and then we started having that argument, and that thinking generated emotion.

So there's a cycle between thought and emotion, thought and emotion. And generally being curious about what else is happening with the thinking begins to unpack or unweave some of what has been conditioned by thoughts and some of what the thoughts might be conditioning.

Sometimes I call this noticing—like when you wake up into thinking. I talked about this at the very beginning: when you notice that thinking is happening, take the opportunity to recognize, "Oh, I'm aware of thinking. Here it is." As opposed to immediately, "Oh, thinking, let me come back to the breath." There's something that's happened there. While you've been wandering, something has been shaped. Thinking has shaped your experience in some fashion. And so see if you can take that in. I sometimes call this noticing the landscape that you're waking up into. Or notice the planet that you're waking up on.

It may be that the thought you're waking up into has shaped an emotion of anger, fear, confusion. It also may be that the thought has shaped some wholesome qualities. This was another really big aha moment for me around working with thoughts—just being curious about, okay, what else is here with this thought? Like that happiness, you know? Like a wholesome quality of happiness.

I was having a lot of thinking about some friends. I was sitting right about there on a three-month course and thinking about friends from the Peace Corps. They were coming up repeatedly in my mind. "Yep, thinking, come back to the breath." Doing that, shooting the thoughts as Sayadaw Tejaniaya was talking about. "Thinking, come back to the breath." It's like, "They're not here. Go away. Breath. Breath." And it was so potent though. It was such a strong pull. They kept coming back.

And finally, it's kind of like—you know what happens when you surrender? It just is so much easier. It's like, okay, this is what's happening. What else is here? It was mettā. And I was like, "Oh, wow." Just this expansive quality of feeling, "I love you." The thoughts stopped. And the mettā remained.

So what planet is actually there with the thoughts? I often find that we think we can set it aside and come back, but it's more like an aikido move. Open to what's here and connect with it. And see what happens next.

There are a couple of other kinds of thoughts that I'll mention briefly, just to touch on them. And if these are happening for you, you can check in with the teacher you're meeting with.

This morning somebody mentioned narration as a kind of thinking. In addition to how Tara talked about it, I find sometimes that narration happens and it's just a really neutral thing, you know. It's just like I'm walking down the hallway and I go into the bathroom and turn on the light, and the mind is saying, "She's walking down the hall. She went into the bathroom. She flipped the light switch. She thought about telling Joseph about this experience." Just a continual narration of what was happening. It drove me nuts for a while. And I think really it's just an experience that we seem to do. We tell ourselves the story of "me" constantly all day long. And at certain points in the meditation, it becomes obvious that this is happening.

A way to work with that narration, at least for me, is to really acknowledge the not-self nature of it. I couldn't stop it. That's a useful exploration around not-self—can I make this not happen? Can I turn this off? No. Okay, it's not-self. It's a process that's unfolding, and what I can do is be aware of it. So that narration can be worked with in that way.

Another kind of thought—almost not a thought, not a thought in the way we normally think of thoughts at least—are the deeper perspectives we carry: views, beliefs. These are a kind of thought in a way. Beliefs are a kind of thought. They're not often consciously recognized because they are a perspective we're looking through. We're not really knowing that we believe something—it's just true.

One way to begin exploring this area is when there's some kind of struggle, where it feels like you're caught. You're aware of it, you know you're caught, but you just keep staying caught. You can keep working with it in that way, but sometimes it can be useful—because when we're caught like that, there is some kind of belief happening. A little bit of curiosity, "What's being believed right now?" can sometimes allow that belief to bubble into consciousness so we can become aware of it.

With beliefs, they aren't exactly on or off. We have ranges of beliefs. Sometimes when a belief is exposed, when it comes up, it's like, "Wow, I don't even believe that." We're not trying to stop believing or stop the beliefs, but just to see them. Sometimes when those beliefs come up and they're not really believed anymore, it's like, "That's an old belief. I don't believe that anymore." Those old beliefs can operate below the surface because of their habitual conditioned nature, but when they're exposed, they can sometimes just release.

Then there are those beliefs we're really on board with. That one comes up—"I'm to blame"—and yep, I'm on board with that. So just notice: if you see a belief, you can be curious about how strong it is. You don't have to stop believing it. Those strong beliefs will not go quietly, but they may be willing to be seen.

There can be a kind of release or relief when we see something—that whole pattern of struggle and confusion, and then to see, "Oh, I think I'm to blame here. Yeah, actually, I think I'm to blame here." The mind can relax a little when it sees what's actually going on. Even if there's still a sense of that being believed, when it's exposed to mindfulness, there can be that sense of, at least it's being seen. Maybe there can be an okayness about knowing that. Like Bruni mentioned the other night—"I don't like this." Yep, that's what's happening. I don't like this. And the heart can go, "Yeah, oh, it actually feels good to be acknowledged." I don't like this. Yes.

So beliefs can be really helpful to explore, especially when we're caught in something. The belief won't always show up, but you could just give yourself that opportunity: What's being believed here?

So that was a lot. Sometimes my teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya would say, just let the talk—you don't have to try to remember it. Let the talk be like dharma rain, just raining into your system. The rain falls and goes into nooks and crannies, just filters in through the soil. At some point, some piece of that rain may nourish the understanding of something. And you don't have to go looking for it. So you don't have to remember anything I said.

But at some point when you're working with something, it might arise—oh, beliefs. So just trust that process.

Let's sit for a moment. Trusting the process. Opening to just how it is. Appreciate yourself for what you're doing. And if it feels hard to do that, borrow my appreciation. It's an amazing thing that you're doing.

Thank you for your practice. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 71

Understanding Delusion

Andrea Fella · 1h06

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of delusion (moha), the most subtle and fundamental of the three unwholesome roots described in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). While greed (lobha) and aversion (dosa) are relatively easy to recognize, delusion by its very nature is much harder to see.*
>
> *Fella presents three progressive levels of delusion: First, the simple loss of mindfulness—being lost in thought, spaciness, or sleepiness. Here she shares a personal insight about how states like spaciness can actually be met with awareness rather than fought against. Second, delusion operating through our personal and cultural conditioning—the views and beliefs we've absorbed from family, society, and direct experience. She discusses confirmation bias, privilege, and the Buddha's teaching from the Brahmajāla Sutta (DN 1) about how even deep meditation experiences can become sticky views. Third, the most fundamental human delusion: mistaking what is impermanent (anicca) for permanent, what is unreliable for a source of lasting happiness, and what is not-self (anattā) for self.*
>
> *Practically, Fella encourages investigating: What is being believed right now? What feels permanent? Where am I looking for happiness? She emphasizes that non-delusion cannot be manufactured—it arises through insight—but we can incline the mind toward curiosity about how delusion operates. When moments of clarity fade and confusion returns, she counsels trust in those insights rather than self-judgment, recognizing that unwinding delusion is a gradual process.*

The other night, Bruni talked about mindfulness of mind—awareness of particular, really simple aspects of mental experience that are useful to pay attention to, as described in the Satipatthana Sutta.

The first part of that teaching talks about noticing the presence and absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. Bruni spoke quite beautifully about working with this and its value. Greed, aversion, and delusion form a list of three that the Buddha spoke often about, emphasizing the importance of understanding these states. They are described as the three unwholesome roots, the three tendencies of mind from which all unwholesome mind states arise. In fact, he described freedom—Nibbana—in the simplest way as the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion.

I really like that definition. It's so simple. It also feels like something we can get a taste of, a sense of the direction that the mind is headed in this practice. For moments, we may experience times when it feels like greed, aversion, and delusion are not arising. The peace of that, the ease of that, the spaciousness of that, the non-problem of that is quite lovely.

The practices the Buddha taught—mindfulness, the practice of observing what's happening in the present moment while it's happening—as we've discussed, the simple practice of mindfulness from the perspective that Winnie so beautifully pointed us to with the Eightfold Path, Wise View mindfulness with that perspective, creates the conditions for transformation. When we are observing greed, aversion, and delusion with this perspective, it creates the conditions for them to diminish, to weaken, to fall apart, for us to get that taste of release from greed, aversion, and delusion. So they are really worth paying attention to, getting to know, looking at, and becoming familiar with.

Now greed and aversion are relatively easy to recognize. We know that feeling of wanting, of pulling, of being pulled towards something—the feeling of "gotta have, gotta have." We know the feeling of aversion, that wanting to be separated from, wanting to not have that thing, that experience, that person, that idea, that thought. In the meetings I've been having with those of you I'm meeting with, people are describing pretty clear experiences of recognizing greed and aversion.

Delusion, by its very nature, is much harder to see, to recognize, to experience and understand. It's not so hard to recognize, "Oh, this is greed. I know greed's happening." But to recognize, "Oh, this is delusion happening in the mind"—not so easy.

So tonight I'd like to explore with you some ways we can begin to recognize delusion and begin to work with it. Recognizing it is the biggest part of that work.

Delusion can arise following on from greed and aversion. Greed arises, we want something, we get it perhaps, we get a hit of happiness from it, and the perspective that we get is, "Okay, having that thing made me happy, so I need to keep that thing, I need to hold on to that thing—that will be what makes me happy." That kind of idea or belief that having anything is what ultimately makes us happy is a form of delusion. Greed and aversion can create perspectives or filters in the mind—views where we're seeing through the lens of aversion or greed, and then everything is colored with that. That's a form of delusion. Our minds are obscured by this filter.

But delusion itself is more fundamental than greed or aversion. Ultimately, greed and aversion are based on the tendency of the mind to have delusion. If the mind did not have the tendency toward delusion, greed and aversion would not arise. We'll talk about that more as well.

Tonight, in exploring this topic, I'd like to look from what we might think of as the more obvious forms of delusion through to some subtler forms, and then ultimately to some very fundamental forms.

The first level I'd like to look at is basically losing awareness—not being mindful, disconnection, uncertainty, confusion, often manifesting as sleepiness. Just this disconnection from experience.

The second level is delusion that operates even when we are aware. This is a kind of delusion based on views, beliefs, and ideas—things that we've grown up with, perspectives that we have taken up just because we've grown up in them. We're swimming in the soup of those perspectives and we can't see that we're seeing the world from that perspective. This is a more individual layer of delusion, based on whatever soup each of us grew up swimming in.

Then there's a deeper level, a more profound level of delusion that it seems we all share as human beings—basic distortions where we mistake reality to be something it's not. This one too operates when we're aware. So we'll go through each of these.

The first form of delusion is basically not being aware. Mindfulness is gone. We're lost in thought, perhaps believing the fantasy or construct of whatever the mind is creating. I might have mentioned this the other night, but at one point, after a long relationship broke up—maybe even a year or so after—every now and then my mind would get lost in fantasy, and it created that world of being back in that relationship. When I came back out of being lost in thought, it was very confusing, because in that space of being lost in thought, the mind completely believed it was back in that relationship. That's delusion—in that space, lost in thought, believing something that's not real. Living in an unreal world. We do this so much in our world of thoughts.

We can also be lost in states of mind—spaciness, sleepiness, dullness, the sloth and torpor and restlessness flavors of the hindrances. But none of those are inherently non-mindful. We just have a very strong habit of not being mindful in those states.

This became very clear to me at one point. I was sitting at my table, having a meal, and while I was eating my mind kept spacing out—losing awareness and drifting off. I was practicing with being present. It was like I said to my mind, "Come back and be

with eating. Pay attention to eating." And seconds later, it would be spaced out again. This happened several times. Come back to eating, space out. Come back to eating, space out.

At some point, I decided—or perhaps wisdom kicked in—and it encouraged me to just be curious. "Well, okay, so the mind is spacing out. Let's see what happens if I just try to be aware while the mind is spacing out." I felt like the mind went and hovered somewhere above my head, sitting up there. And it was very restful. It felt very relaxed and peaceful.

What I recognized in that moment was that I was really tired. I was exhausted, and I had been yanking my mind back—"Do this! Do this!"—and my mind was saying, "Look, you're trying too hard. Just rest, relax. It's time to relax. We're too tired to pay attention to something in particular." And yet it was quite easeful to be aware of that state of what I had called spacing out. It was spaciousness. It was easeful. It was relaxing. It was restful.

The mind hung out in that state for maybe twenty or thirty seconds, and then the state shifted. It was kind of like a foggy space, this foggy state—diffuse, fuzzy. Not a lot of precision to what I was noticing. I wasn't really attending to particular senses or body sensations or smells or sights. Just this fuzziness. "Oh, fuzziness feels like this."

But after thirty seconds or so of just being with that, letting the mind rest, it was like on a sunny day where the sun slowly dissipates the fog. And then there was quite an alertness in the mind and a clarity of body sensations and smells and sights and sounds. Being aware of eating at that point was just very natural.

So that state of spaciness—I had thought of it as not mindfulness. There's a habit of not being mindful in those states, but I would say pretty much every state of mind, except perhaps non-mindfulness itself, we can be mindful of. Sleepiness. Dullness. Fogginess. Restlessness. All of them. We've talked about this possibility of waking up into them.

We may think of these states as inherently delusive states. "I can't be mindful if I'm sleepy." That thought itself is delusion. If you find yourself thinking, "I'm too tired to meditate. I'm too spacey to meditate. I'm too whatever to meditate"—just don't believe that thought. It's a deluded thought. It's delusion at work.

We can be aware of whatever it is the mind thinks is in the way. Be aware of tiredness, aware of sleepiness, aware of spaciness. We can also begin to get familiar with the quality or feeling of what that disconnected mind feels like.

When the mind returns, when there's a kind of waking up and mindfulness returns—in that moment, often there's a particular response. It depends on what you're doing, but often we judge ourselves. It's like, "Oh, I've been lost in thought. I should be mindful. I should bring my attention here." And that actually can obscure something very useful to see in that moment. All those ideas and thoughts about what I had been doing, how my mind was wandering, what I should be doing instead—that's a very common response. So just notice that, of course, when it happens. Judging, believing something needs to happen.

But in that moment, it is possible—the more continuous the mindfulness is cultivated, the more we're just okay with mindfulness coming and going and seeing that mindfulness comes and goes—the more we can be aware right as mindfulness arises. And in that place, when mindfulness is arising into something, there's a kind of lingering taste or scent of what it was like in the moments before. So the moment of coming back into mindfulness, there's a lingering feeling or sense of what that disconnected, non-mindful state felt like. We can begin to get a taste of that sometimes in this space.

Sometimes we're waking up into something stronger like anger or aversion, and then we actually get a taste of that state, a really clear sense of it. Or we might wake up into thinking and get a really clear sense of, "Oh, this is what it's like to be aware of thinking." But sometimes if we're returning from one of those vague, diffused, disconnected, fuzzy states, the return of mindfulness is like waking up into that state, and you get a sense of what it's like to be mindful of this. There's a little bit of a recollection, an awareness—it just felt like I wasn't here. Like the mind wasn't here. We can get a taste of that, a flavor of that. We can begin to get familiar with that kind of feeling of having a veil or a haze in front of our minds as we're exploring and connecting with experience.

So that's the kind of delusion related to mindfulness being lost—and ways to explore a little bit there, particularly that moment of waking up. This is what it feels like to be aware right now. And a moment before, there was a flavor or feeling of what it was like to not be aware.

The second kind of delusion I'd like to talk about this evening is delusion connected to our personal conditioning, that soup we've been raised in. Some of this has to do with things we experienced personally—how other kids treated you on the playground, or just ways there was engagement with you in your life. Some has to do with familial patterns and habits. We all have our own conditioning from our families.

Some of my friends and I sometimes talk about differences here. In my family, teasing was not a loving thing. And one of my close friends came from a family where teasing was a very loving thing. So there's a little bit of a disconnect between us sometimes around teasing. This is just our own conditioning.

This kind of conditioning can come from family, from our own experience, and also from cultural conditioning, our culture's ways. There's so much of this that we're simply not aware of how we've been conditioned, how we've been shaped. The practice really helps us to uncover these patterns, these habits, and to see that they have been conditioned.

But when we don't see them, they're basically operating underground. These habits, patterns, and conditions are operating beneath the surface. And we often just take them to be the baseline of reality. We don't see that they're a perspective on reality—we take them to be reality. We think we're perceiving things accurately, but we're seeing them from a particular lens, a particular view.

It can be hard to see that we're having this kind of perspective, and very hard at times even to see evidence to the contrary—evidence that it is a perspective. This is well documented in the psychological world, in a field that studies confirmation bias. These studies show over and over again that we tend to take in information that agrees with what we believe, and we tend to actively ignore or simply not recognize information that does not agree with what we believe. We can actively discount information that disagrees with what we believe.

In fact, some studies examining the divisions so apparent in our country right now, particularly around politics, have shown that if you give people evidence to support the other side's perspective—in a reasoned, rational approach using just evidence and facts—people tend to get more entrenched in their views. It's very difficult to shake ourselves out of these perspectives. This is how delusion works so powerfully.

I want to give some examples of this kind of delusion. There are many, but I'll offer a selected set. One kind of views we hold are views about ourselves and others. We have beliefs about who we are, what we're capable of. We have beliefs about other people. This one is really quite easy to start seeing.

Many of you, most of you—I'd say probably all of you—most of the people here you do not know. You don't know much about them. You don't know what they think. But that doesn't stop us from having all kinds of views and opinions about them. On that first day of the retreat, we talked about Vipassana romance and Vipassana vendetta.

These things tend to spring out of this kind of delusion—views and opinions about someone based on very little information. We think we know who someone is, what they are, how they are, what they're capable of.

We can begin to recognize that our thoughts and ideas here, especially because we don't know people, are just that—ideas. This is harder to see when we know people well. We categorize people; they do something repeatedly, or even just once or twice, and we think, "Well, that's who they are." We can recognize when we're doing this with others, especially when we don't know them. We can recognize when other people are doing it to us. But it's so hard to recognize when we do this to ourselves.

We have ideas, views, and opinions about ourselves that are deeply embedded. Many of our challenges in life stem from some kind of belief we hold about ourselves, our capabilities. My own pattern of self-hatred—a pattern I worked with for many years—was deeply conditioned. Beliefs like "I'm a failure," "I'm no good," "I can't do things right." It shocked me, actually shocked me, when I began to see that this was a pattern in my life, because until I came to meditation and started looking at my mind, I thought I was very competent. I would not have said self-hatred was part of my equation.

But then I started looking at what my mind was telling me in the practice. It was very challenging. This was a perspective operating under the surface—this perspective of "you're no good, you can't do things right"—propelling me to try to prove myself wrong, to do everything competently and well and right, to prove that all those imagined people in my mind who thought I couldn't do things were wrong. But all of that activity of accomplishment was really rooted in this belief, this delusion that I was a failure somehow.

So it's hard to see sometimes what beliefs are operating in our own minds. I mentioned this exploration around thoughts—to check in when there's a struggle happening, when there's a lot of thoughts going on—"What's being believed?" This can be a useful exploration at times. If there's even just something that seems really confusing, like the mind is spinning and whirling and you think, "What's going on? I have no idea"—well, what's being believed? Perhaps "I should know what's going on." Maybe it's that simple. So that question—"What's being believed?"—can be very powerful in supporting a seeing through of the delusion that's operating.

Views and beliefs about ourselves are one form. Cultural views, the perspectives of our culture—how those come in—are another. These are often not spoken. They are perspectives that we absorb simply because we are so deeply swimming in the soup of our culture that we take things in without question. Simple things, for instance, like

how close you stand to a stranger when you're talking to them. Whether or not you make physical contact with someone when you're talking to them. How close do you need to be to make physical contact with somebody? These are things nobody sits down and tells you. These are things we absorb.

So this is a lot of how these cultural perspectives come in—just through living, swimming in the soup of our culture. And sometimes we can notice that these perspectives are operating when we find somebody behaving differently than the norm. We might feel really uncomfortable if somebody comes up and stands right next to us while we're talking to them. It's like, "That's not right. That's not how we do this here." But it's just a perspective. It's just a convention, really.

And so we can start to see some of these perspectives, these cultural perspectives, conventions. Travel is a great way to see this. If you go spend some time in another culture, you'll get a taste of what your perspective is. Some of these simple, almost neutral perspectives, really. Standing three feet or five feet away from somebody—these are things we can begin to just see as almost neutral conditionings, what we've grown up with.

And then there are some other conditionings in culture that are way more insidious and way more harmful. In the culture of the United States, for instance—and I don't know that I really, I mean, I think I did hear this at times—but there's this idea: America is the land of opportunity. If you work hard enough, you can live your dream. That's a view that's embedded in the culture of the United States. Sometimes these perspectives come because we're immersed in it. We're immersed in it. We're told it repeatedly.

This particular view of the United States being a land of opportunity, that anyone who works hard enough can fulfill their dream, ignores—is not really taking in—the inherent advantages of being born with a certain gender, a certain skin color, with parents who have a certain economic status. There's a kind of privilege that some people have that others don't have, and there's not an equal footing, really, of opportunity for everyone.

So not recognizing that this is a view, a perspective, not seeing how some advantages are conveyed on some and not others, can lead to a kind of denial around this privilege of being in a white body, in a socioeconomic status that has more resources at their disposal. And there's that saying some of you may recognize: that some of us are born on third base and think we're hitting a home run.

So just that—this perspective or view that there's equal opportunity without seeing the varieties of experience that come in, that opportunities are not all equal—this kind of thing creates so much suffering. Delusion is not a small thing. When we're acting from delusion, it can have major ramifications. Now standing two feet or five feet away—maybe not major ramifications. But there are many perspectives that we do not see, these views that we grow up in, that are so damaging. And if we are here to see suffering and find ways to let go of it, this is an area that we need to look at. How is our delusion working?

Another example of perspective that creates a lot of suffering: sometimes views can be created not just from swimming in the soup, but from our own personal experience—yet without getting complete information. One teaching story from the time of the Buddha, which many of you may be familiar with, is the story of the blind people and the elephant. In this teaching story, the Buddha tells of a king who asked the blind people in the kingdom to be shown an elephant. And so some of the people were touching the elephant in various parts—some touching the trunk, some touching the feet, the legs, some the side of the elephant, some the tail, some the ears.

And then when they were asked, "What is an elephant like?" some said, "Well, an elephant is like a post." And some said, "An elephant is like a broom"—those who touched the tuft of the tail. Some said, "Like a wall of a storeroom"—those who touched the side. And none of that was—I mean, that experience itself was not delusion. That's what they experienced. But what happens is that we tend to, getting information, we get partial information about something, and then we create a view: this is what this thing is.

And this teaching story says that the people were comparing their views. "Well, an elephant's like this." "Well, that's not right. An elephant is like this."

"No, you're wrong. An elephant is like this." It's the holding to the view, holding to the perspective, not admitting that there may be a different perspective or a broader perspective that can encompass all of them—that's where the delusion is. That's the delusion. Believing the perspective.

Even here, and this is the confirmation bias at work, somebody says, "Well, to me it felt like a wall of a storeroom." "Well, that can't be right because it sure felt like a post to me." The belief in our own experience—and I think this is even more insidious when we have had direct experience. We had direct experience of something, and then we create a view: "This is what the experience is like."

In one teaching, a deep teaching on views found in the first sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya called the All-Embracing Net of Views, the Buddha describes a whole range of different views and perspectives that people hold to. These are speculative views about the nature of reality. He described how many of these views come to be, different perspectives, and points out that some people say the world is infinite, others say the world is finite. There were ten—I can't remember them all, and it's not important that I give you all ten. What matters is that people were asserting all these different perspectives of what the world was like.

And then the Buddha explained how these views get formed. He said what happens is they go into meditation and have an experience of the world being infinite. They come out of that meditation and say, "I've touched reality. This is it. The world is infinite." Somebody else goes into meditation and sees this really infinite, vast space and then bumps up against something that feels finite on the outside of that and says, "Oh, that's wrong. It's actually finite."

The Buddha actually cautioned us in that particular sutta about views that arise based on deep meditation experience. He said those are some of the most sticky views that we have. Based on direct experience we can really cling. This happens in daily life where we have direct experience, and it happens in spades in meditation practice. We think we found it, and then we try to recreate it, and we suffer. And we argue with people about it.

That was the whole point in the sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya—how much people argued about these different perspectives. They would just contradict each other: "You're wrong, this is not—I found this from my direct experience." "Well, you're wrong, I found this from my direct experience." Where does that go?

So the Buddha encouraged us not to cling to views at all. Now, views can be useful. Right view, for instance, is a useful view. And it can be potentially helpful, like the simile of the raft where we float across a flood using a raft, using the effort of our hands and feet to get across. In that example, the Eightfold Path is equated with the raft. The Buddha talks about putting the raft down when you get on the other side of the flood—it's not so useful to you there. So not to cling to it once you've crossed the flood. But while you're in the middle of the flood, you have to hold on to the raft, understanding this is skillful means, this is useful now—not somehow inherently true for all time.

In the simile of the raft, the Buddha asked: once you've crossed the flood, is it useful to pick up that raft and carry it around with you on your head? No, it's not. Put it down. Put it down. He's really encouraging us not to cling to views. We can use views in our practice.

We use views in our practice. We use views in our lives. They're helpful in our lives. There are many other examples of this kind of delusion, but I want to move on to the most insidious form of delusion—what I sometimes call human delusion. These are delusions we all share, views that cloud our perception of experience at a very fundamental level, distortions of reality itself.

There are three basic distortions, and these will be familiar to you. We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. We tend to take what is unreliable as a source of lasting happiness to be reliable as a source of lasting happiness. And we tend to take what is not self to be self.

This kind of delusion operates and functions even when we are aware. My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya says that delusion does not mask the object—it doesn't mask the experience. It masks the nature of the experience. So we may be aware of an experience and not be aware of its impermanent nature. This is the direction Vipassana practice moves us, helping us to begin seeing through these fundamental distortions.

These delusions, these mistaken perceptions, seem to happen often based simply on the way our bodies and minds work. The mistakes around these three areas occur because of how our bodies and minds are put together.

Take, for instance, perceiving what is impermanent to be permanent. Some of this happens because we tend to relate to experience through ideas about experience rather than through the direct meeting of what's actually happening. Concept can mask change.

Perhaps we can see this in terms of what we hold on to at a more ordinary level. We have an idea or a view about who someone is, and we hold on to that. It stays with us, and we don't tend to see when they change. We have an idea about them, and that concept masks that they can change.

This happens at other levels too. An example from my own practice: I was practicing at Shwe U Min monastery in Burma with Sayadaw U Tejaniya. Most evenings, as it was getting a little bit dark, I was meditating in my room, and I often heard this squealing sound. The squealing sounded like a pig to me. So I was noticing the squealing and seeing an image of a pig in my mind. This was a concept. Also, the sound seemed distressed to me. And so—pig, distressed—my mind leapt to create this idea that on the other side of the monastery wall was the local butcher, and that what I was hearing every evening was pigs being slaughtered for the market the next day. There was a lot of compassion, a lot of sadness.

Now, I knew that the idea about pigs being slaughtered was a story. I knew that I did not know that's what was happening. But I was not prepared for what I discovered one night when I was taking a walk instead of meditating in my room. I was walking up and down in the middle of the monastery, and there were all these bats flying around, and they were squealing.

The whole idea—not only the story about the slaughterhouse on the other side, but that it was even a pig—I knew that the idea about the slaughterhouse was a story. I did not have a clue that the idea of it being a pig was also a story. That one I believed until, fortunately, evidence to the contrary appeared. Seeing the bats and hearing them squeal, I actually believed that was what was happening.

This is how concept, when we glom onto it, obscures what's actually happening, and that can often obscure the changing nature of experience. Concepts are useful, and it's useful to recognize them as concepts. We're not going to live our lives, we're not going to be able to navigate even walking through this room, without concepts. If everything were just form and color, we wouldn't do a very good job of walking through the room. So concepts help us navigate the world, but we need to recognize them for what they are.

Concepts also come with baggage. Concepts often come with ideas, views, opinions.

So recognizing concept as concept is important. Concepts can mask change. Another thing that can mask change is simply that change happens so fast. Our system creates a continuity, puts things together so that it feels more stable and solid.

Sayadaw U Pandita used to talk about the fire stick. If you have a stick with a fire burning on the end of it and you whirl it in the air, you'll see a circle. It looks like that circle exists, but it's an illusion. It's an image that's created because our vision has a persistence—it holds on. And that persistence through our sense bases is one of the reasons that it's hard to see impermanence.

So the rapidity of change, that fast moving fire stick, is an example of how rapidity of change creates the illusion of stability. But this is happening all the time—this belief in stability, belief in solidity. We actually know through particle physics that there's way more empty space than there is solidity. It's really about how fast things are moving that things feel solid. And in our minds, when we look at our minds, we can start to see the rapidity with which things happen, the conditioned nature of what's arising, and how our minds put things together and then put a concept on top of it.

So the rapidity of change can mask change, and concepts can mask change. As we begin to meet experience directly—I heard that Annie talked about the Bahiya Sutta, the sutta of "just in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, the sensed is only the sensed"—that meeting of experience begins to take us below the level of concept and toward meeting the direct changing nature of experience. This is a main encouragement in our mindfulness practice: to begin to be curious about the impermanent nature of experience. We can begin to become aware of this by looking deeply at what seems to be solid. Look at what seems to be stable, what seems to be permanent. You'll find that it's not. It may not show itself as impermanent quickly, but it will reveal itself to be impermanent.

We also take what is unreliable to be reliable as a source of happiness. We take sense pleasure—our minds basically work this way. We get something we like, it feels good. Not only does it feel good to get the thing that we want, it feels good to have the wanting go away. So there's this double hit of happiness in the split second moment that we get something. And our minds don't quite understand that this is just a fleeting moment of happiness. We glom onto it, we create the idea, a concept arises around it, and we believe that this is where I get my happiness. Maybe it stays for a little while, maybe. But mostly what happens is that we are holding on to an idea, and it's the idea that is giving us that happiness—because reality does not hang around for very long.

We believe in some ways that sense pleasure is as good as it gets. But sense pleasure is so unreliable, so fleeting. Getting what we want, we get a moment of that, and it further conditions the idea that getting what I want is where I'll be happy. Our minds are really short-sighted, basically. We're designed to go for the quickest hit of pleasure. And then when that fades, we think: when was the last time I was happy? Well, when I got something that I wanted. So let me find something else that I want. And then I'll get that. And then I'll be happy again. And we're essentially in this cycle.

So this is greed at work. I talked about greed at the beginning. It's that leaning towards, that wanting. That wanting itself is the greed. That leaning towards is the greed. The delusion embedded in greed is that having the thing will make me happy. That's pure delusion—the belief that there is some reliable happiness to be had by getting that sense pleasure. Likewise with aversion; it's very similar.

We want to get rid of something unpleasant, something we don't like. The idea that separating myself from something unpleasant will make me happy—that is the delusion underlying aversion. The aversion itself is that wanting to separate, that pulling

away. The delusion is the belief that forms its foundation. This is just useful information to know. Really useful to know. It's hard to take in, and yet we can start to see these patterns at work and recognize the unreliability of sense pleasure.

The Buddha gave us a simple teaching on this. He said, yes, getting what you want feels good—that's the gratification of sense pleasure. But notice how long it lasts. That simple teaching, noticing the impermanence of sense pleasure, begins to point to that underlying delusion. The belief that having the thing will make me happy is not a reliable way to move towards happiness.

So becoming aware: Where am I looking for happiness? Do I think that having that third dessert will make me happy? It's amazing to me sometimes when I look at this, really look in the moment. I mean, I know in my intellect that having chocolate is not going to make me ultimately happy. But in the moment of eating that chocolate—oh, does the mind believe it. Look at it. It's stunning how deluded our minds are, even when we know intellectually.

We begin to understand delusion by looking at these ways the mind does these things. We begin to move in the direction of non-delusion by understanding the delusion. So these various things I've pointed to: look at the views. What views are you holding? What beliefs are happening? What feels like it's permanent right now? How is a sense of self showing up? Get familiar with these perspectives that the Buddha pointed to as places of delusion. Start being curious.

Non-delusion is not something we can do. It's an insight. When we understand—when we understand—oh, the mind was clinging to that because it thought it was happiness, and it lets go. Insight is not something we can make happen, but we can incline our minds in the direction of curiosity for seeing delusion.

Another important piece is that sometimes we see through delusion. That experience of something falling away, a veil falling away, and it's so clear. I understand that clinging is suffering, and why would I ever cling again? It just doesn't make any sense. It seems so clear. And then, twenty minutes later, it's not so clear. We're clinging again. And it's like, wait, what? Didn't I know this?

When that happens, don't second-guess that understanding. It's not as obvious as it looks when the insight is happening. If it were, we would just live there. We would understand that and be living in that. We have to meet these truths over and over again. It's a slow process of unwinding.

And yet one of the beauties of that is this: if you can trust those insights, trust that understanding of yeah, clinging is not helpful, clinging to something that's impermanent is not helpful—when we see that and feel that directly and know that as a direct experience—then when we are clinging to something, we can know. This is the deluded mind working. We can directly recognize. We've known the clarity, and we can see: yep, this is confusion, the mind is just confused right now. We don't have to beat ourselves up for it, but simply recognize: okay, delusion is here, and I know delusion is here.

I'm aware that delusion is working.

Let's just sit for a moment.

I'll leave you with a quote from Nisargadatta: "Do not try to understand. It's enough if you do not misunderstand."

CHAPTER 72

Dependent Co-Arising (Paṭicca Samuppāda)

Andrea Fella · 1h02

In this profound dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a clear and practical exploration of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent co-arising), one of the Buddha's most fundamental yet challenging teachings. She presents this twelve-link chain not merely as an abstract philosophical concept, but as a moment-to-moment process we can directly observe in our own experience. The talk illuminates how ignorance conditions mental formations, which shape consciousness, and how this cascade ultimately leads through feeling (vedanā) to craving (taṇhā), clinging (upādāna), becoming (bhava), and the arising of suffering.

Fella emphasizes the practical application of this teaching, particularly highlighting the critical junction between feeling tone and craving as a place where mindfulness can interrupt the habitual pattern. Drawing on the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), she explains how suffering itself can become a condition for either continued ignorance or for faith and liberation, depending on whether it is understood with wisdom. She shares insights from her own practice, including how recognizing craving as suffering—rather than focusing on what craving wants—can be profoundly liberating.

The talk concludes with the encouraging teaching that every link in this chain can become an object of liberating insight. Referencing teachings from the Majjhima Nikāya, Fella explains that seeing the impermanent nature of any arising—whether contact, feeling, craving, or clinging—can lead to freedom. This understanding transforms dependent origination from a description of how we suffer into a map for awakening, showing how our meditation practice creates conditions that naturally break apart the cycle of suffering.

Sometimes I wish we could all just sit here in silence for the whole time. It's just so lovely, the stillness in this room. I so appreciate it. I appreciate your practice.

Tonight the topic is dependent co-arising, sometimes called dependent origination. It's a teaching on the conditioned nature of the arising of suffering—a foundational teaching of the Buddha, fundamental, and yet also quite challenging. We could say it's an elaboration or a detailed exposition of the second noble truth: with the arising of craving is the arising of suffering. The origin of suffering is rooted in craving. Dependent origination is a detailed unpacking of that—not only how craving leads to suffering, but how craving comes to be and what follows.

This is a complex teaching. There are twelve links in this chain of conditions that the Buddha described as leading us into suffering, and we will cover them all, so fasten your seat belts. And yet, as Winnie said the other night, you don't actually have to try to track everything and hold onto it here. It's about letting the teachings come in. Let yourself be still, receptive, and listen. Sometimes in that space, things will land in a particular way of understanding. I think this is why the Buddha repeated himself a lot—because it helps to hear these things over and over. You might hear one piece of it one time and another piece of it another time.

The complexity and profundity of this teaching was pointed out by the Buddha at one point to Ananda, who came to the Buddha in gratitude for the teaching of dependent origination. Ananda said, "It is wonderful, it is marvelous how profound this dependent origination is and how profound it appears. And yet it appears to me as clear as clear."

The Buddha's response to Ananda was, "Don't say that, Ananda"—to the "it appears as clear as clear" part. Because Ananda at this point was not yet an arahant. The Buddha said, "Do not say that, Ananda. This dependent origination is profound and appears profound. And it is through not understanding, not penetrating this truth, that this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe."

So this understanding—penetrating, directly seeing, not at the conceptual level but at the experiential level—understanding this teaching is equated with full liberation. The full understanding of this teaching frees the mind.

The other thing Winnie pointed out the other night, which I always like to remember when I'm giving a Dharma talk, is the number of times that in the suttas it's described that people awakened, that people experienced liberation while listening to a Dharma talk. This is one of the five ways that people can wake up—listening to the Dharma. Another one of those five ways is teaching the Dharma. We can wake up teaching the Dharma, so there's hope for all of us.

I hope to make this exploration of dependent origination tonight clear and practical—not just some concepts to think about, but pointing to ways you might be able to see this even in small pieces in your experience. I've found even just seeing little bits of this unfolding in my experience to be very powerful. I have found this to be very profound in my own practice. That's what I hope to convey: how can this teaching support our practice with looking at our experience?

This teaching is a very clear description of how suffering happens in our minds. It's a description of the unfolding of phenomena, and it's a human pattern. The Buddha is not saying some people experience this and others don't. So we can begin to understand our own suffering as conditioned. Just this is powerful. Even if we don't see how the conditions are unfolding, that understanding that it is conditioned can really support the mind to settle back and be willing to witness, to not take it so personally, to not think it's my fault that this is arising—to understand that this arising is conditioned. It comes about through past conditions of my life, past choices, choices and conditions of the mind right now. This is just the way things unfold. This description here is a general description of human suffering.

So we can begin to see the impersonal and human nature of this process and not feel like somehow we've been singled out to suffer.

The links in this chain traditionally begin with ignorance. With ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. With ignorance as condition, thoughts, ideas, emotions—all of those mental tumblings come to be. I'll describe all of these links in a moment, but really what I want to point to here is that the foundation of this teaching is ignorance. This is where the Buddha begins.

Suffering arises in connection with ignorance—with not understanding impermanence, unreliability, and not-self, with not understanding the Four Noble Truths. This is a mental phenomenon. And this mental phenomenon of not understanding leads to other mental formations that are based in that not understanding: choices, actions, emotions, thoughts that are rooted in that lack of comprehension.

One important piece here is that suffering and its conditions are based in mental phenomena, not in the physical realm. Suffering arises in the mind. That may be hard to believe when we're experiencing a physical unpleasant experience. But we've been exploring this, looking at where the actual suffering is. There is unpleasant physical sensation, and then really, when we look at where the struggle lies, it's because we don't like that unpleasant sensation. We want it to go away, we feel like it's out of control. We are really reacting to the mind's relationship to that unpleasant experience.

The other important piece around this teaching is that this chain of conditions unfolding toward suffering describes conditions—we're not locked into a causal process here. There is causality, but it's conditions arising that tend to lead onward to other conditions. And a key teaching here, the good news, is that there are conditions that can support this process leading toward suffering to fall apart, to not lead to suffering but instead to lead to happiness, to the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion, to freedom, to love, to compassion, equanimity, and balance of mind.

So while this chain describing how suffering comes to be may sound depressing—it describes the typical human process when we are not aware of what's going on, and even sometimes when we are aware we just get to see this happen like dominoes falling—it is not the necessary result of these conditions arising. Up to a point, once craving arises, it's like the dominoes are tumbling toward suffering. But before that, noticing feeling tone, we can bring mindfulness to vedanā and not have the craving reactivity follow on from that.

This teaching points to the trajectory that our minds habitually take. But part of what it's pointing to is that it's not necessary for the mind to do this. It's just what it's been deeply conditioned to do. And the Buddha described conditions that can support a different trajectory altogether: hearing the Dharma—one amazing condition that supports the mind moving in another direction—mindfulness, wisdom, the practices that we're doing.

Let me read through these links without too much explanation, and then walk through them with you.

The traditional place it begins: With ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. With mental formations as condition, consciousness comes to be. With consciousness as condition, mental and physical processes come to be—this is *nāma-rūpa*. With mental and physical processes as condition, the six sense bases come to be. With the six sense bases as condition, contact. With contact as condition, feeling. With feeling as condition, craving. With craving as condition, clinging. With clinging as condition, becoming. With becoming as condition, birth. With birth as condition, old age and death. And the Buddha says that this is the entire mass of suffering.

This chain is understood to have a cyclic nature. With this unfolding of the entire mass of suffering, what tends to follow is more ignorance. Unless that suffering is seen with wisdom, our tendency is to keep doing what we've been doing. This cyclic nature, we could say, is the wheel of saṃsāra, the round of rebirth.

This teaching is described at times as certain pieces of it representing a prior life leading on to the conditions in this life, and the conditions in this life then tumbling forward if not seen, if not understood—

practiced with in the way that we're doing, tumbling on to a next rebirth. But the teachings and the suttas also speak to this teaching as a moment-to-moment unfolding. When ignorance is arising in the moment, the mental formations that arise with it tend

to lead us on to crave when feeling is happening. This is the way I've explored this in my own practice, the way it feels very practical to me. And so this is the way I'm going to explore it tonight—to look at this as a process that's unfolding moment to moment.

I'd like to start our exploration a little bit in the middle of the chain, with some of the links that are easier to recognize in our direct experience. For me, in hearing this teaching, starting with ignorance, I was immediately confused. And so it helped me to think about starting with where we can actually feel this.

We have bodies and minds—this link of mental and physical processes. As conditioned, the six sense bases come to be. Based on this mind and body, we have these sense organs: eyes, nose, tongue, skin, ears, and mind. We've got these six sense bases. Based on the consciousness that we have, and on our mental and physical processes and these six sense bases, we receive experience.

We've been looking at this. This is a foundational part of Vipassana practice—to look at what the contact is, what we're actually experiencing moment to moment. This is the next link: with the six sense bases as condition, contact comes to be. Contact with the sense bases: sight, sound, smells, taste, touches, and things arising in our mind. We've been watching this, so this part of the chain is pretty familiar. We have our senses, and when there is consciousness—well, actually, even sometimes when we are asleep—there is contact with these sense bases. Whether we are mindful or not, this contact happens. We experience these sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. And emotions, thoughts, mind states, moods arise through the sense door of the mind.

With contact as condition, feeling comes to be. This is a link we've talked about. Greg did a whole talk on feeling tone. Every one of these physical contacts, every sense impression that we have, has a feeling tone. It's pleasant, it's unpleasant, or it's neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

This feeling tone itself is based on conditions, as Greg mentioned the other night. What we've done in the previous moments may affect the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the sense object. For me, I found this interesting and fun to play with in eating—to see how the feeling tone changes in the same kind of food, taking a bite of the same food moment after moment, after eating other foods. One thing I've noticed for myself, something I did even as a child: milk after a cookie I experienced as pleasant. But milk after a pickle was unpleasant. Through this kind of example, you can see that the pleasantness or unpleasantness is based on conditions. It can also be based on moods or emotions in the mind, on things that have been going on. We'll get to this a little more in just a bit.

Each sense impression has a feeling tone. It is said that all beings—arahants and unenlightened beings alike—experience this pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Up to this point in what we're talking about now—the body, the mind, the sense bases, the contact, the feeling tone—the Buddha said that people who are awakened experience this, and people who are not awakened experience this.

And he actually points out, I think maybe one of us talked about this: What is the difference? He actually asked his disciples at one point, "What is the difference between someone who is awakened and experiences feeling tone and someone who's not awakened? Someone who is free from greed, aversion, and delusion and experiences feeling tone, and someone who is subject to greed, aversion, and delusion and experiences feeling tone—what's the difference between them?"

And he goes on to say: well, if somebody who is not awakened feels an unpleasant feeling, they beat their breast, they weep, they wail, they say, "Woe is me! Why me?" And they suffer. Basically, craving arises, clinging arises, identification arises, suffering arises—in dependence on that feeling tone. But someone who is awakened, someone who does not have greed, aversion, or delusion in their mind—when they feel a feeling tone, they feel a feeling tone. When they feel a pleasant feeling, they feel a pleasant feeling.

So this is the place where the tumbling on towards craving happens. Craving is the next link: with feeling as condition, our habitual response arises—not just because of how we've been raised in our families, but simply because of our humanness.

Our habitual response is when something pleasant happens, we like it, we want more of it. When something unpleasant happens, we want to get rid of it, we want to push it away. We've talked about this a lot too, so I'm not going to dwell on this part too much. It's simply the habitual nature of our minds to go in this direction.

It's like we're a simple automatic automaton that wants to maximize pleasant experience and minimize unpleasant experience. So we go towards pleasant, away from unpleasant. Even single-celled creatures do this. This is deeply evolutionarily natural—that we move towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant. Our minds add stuff to it: the desire for it, the holding to it, the craving, the clinging.

So we habitually—again, this is the habitual process in our minds—we habitually want to act on this wanting and not wanting, this craving. With craving as condition, clinging comes to be. We want to figure out how to keep it. The craving is a kind of leaning towards something. The clinging is the picking it up.

We could say that craving is the reaching out or heading in the direction of that pleasant thing, whether it's a physical pleasant experience or some idea of a kind of person we'd like to be. There's a leaning towards it. And then the clinging is when we've picked it up. We've reified around it. We have it.

Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about this distinction between craving and clinging as being almost a matter of gradation. He says the craving is like a thief reaching out to grab something, and the clinging is when they've picked it up.

The process of clinging also functions with aversion. It's the clinging to "not this." I was struggling with that at one point in my own practice. How is this clinging? How is this aversion clinging? And I realized I was clinging to anything but this. Just give me anything but this—a kind of holding to "this is not okay."

In fact, what I discovered in the way aversion works is that it's like, if I didn't like this table, the aversion is like being stuck to this table trying to get rid of it. Like I've got sticky glue on my hands trying to push it away. That's the clinging with aversion. We can't just let it go.

With feeling as condition, craving comes to be. With craving as condition, clinging comes to be. With clinging as condition, becoming.

Now, becoming—Thanissaro Bhikkhu had a great phrase for this. Becoming is kind of like the intention towards an identity, an intention towards the one who has control. Thanissaro Bhikkhu describes becoming as the intentions and actions that rally in the service of clinging.

So we've got this thing, and our whole being starts to shape itself around the having of this thing, the needing to control this thing, the idea that it's mine. Intentions and views come into being here. This experience is actually pleasant—it's a feeling. This is the place where it feels like we've got something, we've picked it up, and there's just this moment of "I figured it out. I've got this under control. I know how to get there."

So this is that becoming. We like it. We like the feeling that we know where we're headed, that we know how we'll get there. It's like the intention towards—we're not there, but we feel like we know we're going to get there. It's like anticipation or something. Pleasant, a pleasant feeling in that rallying of "I'm going to be able to control this thing."

This just came up—I just remembered this. In the stories of Winnie the Pooh, Piglet asks Winnie the Pooh what his favorite thing in the world is.

And Winnie the Pooh said, "Well, honey is a really wonderful thing, but there's a moment just before I eat it that's even better."

That's that sense—"I'm gonna, I'm gonna."

So this is becoming. Following on from becoming, there's a kind of reification. Birth is the next link in the chain—a reification of an identity. Things become much more solidly mine. *This is mine. This is who I am.*

This can be obvious or subtle. It might be something like, "This is my cup. This is my sitting spot." You find somebody sitting in it and you really feel how much it's *my* sitting spot. If you walk in and see somebody else sitting in your sitting spot, those feelings of congealing around mine, me, myself arise.

From this place—well actually, I think from craving, starting from craving—suffering is going to follow. When craving arises, there's already suffering arising. When we feel into the feeling of craving, there's already suffering there. When we're not paying attention to the feeling of craving, we may miss that it's suffering because we are focused on what the craving wants.

This was a very useful way for me to understand this in my practice. When I noticed craving and could feel the experience of "this is what it feels like to want"—doing walking meditation and watching myself want to look at people, the feeling of the pull, the instability—not following through on the wanting, but just feeling the wanting. Feeling that sense of tension and tightness. Watching to see how this wanting unfolded, I saw that there was suffering with the wanting. But when the person went out of my field of vision, the wanting to see them disappeared. And the suffering disappeared. So there was this really clear understanding that the wanting itself was suffering.

Noticing how these links unfold—the exploration of this process of sense impression, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, identification—wherever you notice yourself, wherever you notice what's happening in the present moment, you might notice it's in that terrain somewhere. And noticing what's here in that moment: craving is suffering, clinging is suffering.

Becoming has a pleasant feeling tone. This, I think, is part of how the cycle propels itself—why we get hooked here. First of all, we can get hooked in this cycle partly because, when we don't see the craving as craving, we are focused on what the craving wants. We're focused in the future. We're focused on this idea: "I will get this thing." We're focused on that idea of the thing that we're going to have. And that idea is pleasant. So we're missing the fact that we are suffering in the present moment because our mind is pleased by the idea that it might get the thing.

When we can actually begin to see craving as suffering, this is an insight. We don't like it—we don't like the unpleasantness of it—but it's an understanding. The Buddha pointed this out to us. Understand suffering, he said. See that craving is the cause of suffering. With craving, when the craving arises, suffering arises. So that's one reason why we tend to get caught in this cycle: delusion masks the suffering of craving. Delusion convinces us that getting that thing will make us happy.

And lo and behold, when we get the thing and cling to it, what happens there too is that the wanting ends when we have a hold of it. At that point we're kind of in the becoming piece. "Ooh, I've got it. I've figured it out." The becoming itself is pleasant—the idea of "I'm in control. I'm going to make myself have this happiness for the rest of my life."

So there's that pleasantness of becoming. There's also the pleasantness of the wanting going away. That's a huge piece of how this cycle perpetuates itself.

When we don't see that craving itself is suffering—when we don't recognize the suffering nature of the craving—and then we get the thing we wanted, the suffering goes away. What we come to believe is that the only way to make that wanting and suffering go away is to have the thing. That's what our minds believe, because that's what we've learned. That's how we've engaged for our whole lives. I get something I want, and it feels good.

And then what our minds do with that—because of the impermanent nature of what we've gotten, or the impermanent nature of the identity that was born there, the happiness of that identity of having something—how long does that last? Usually not very long. So there's a feeling of dissatisfaction when the pleasure of the becoming goes away. When the pleasure of having that thing gets less enticing, what does our mind say? Well, when's the last time I felt good? It was when I got something I wanted. So what do I want to want? We go searching for something to want.

You can feel this in spades. I sometimes call this "Google mind"—sitting in front of the computer, thinking, what do I want to look up? Just this feeling of subtle dissatisfaction, a sense of, I'll feel good if I get some information about something. What can I think of to get information about? Our minds only habitually know that getting something we want is what will make us happy, and so we're propelled on this chain.

Fortunately, there is understanding the Buddha offered that can help us step out of this cycle.

So these are the pieces of the chain we've talked about in many dharma talks. This is just putting them together in a different way.

Now I want to go back to the beginning of the chain. Since this is a cyclic pattern, there's a way in which ignorance is itself conditioned by suffering. We went through the cycle to the point of becoming, the birth, and then that birth leading to the entire mass of suffering—old age and death. Something that comes into being will fall apart. There's no way around it. Something that has a condition for arising cannot stay together forever. It will fall apart. And because we cling to what has come together, that falling apart is experienced as suffering—the entire mass of suffering. This pattern, this cycle we're in, tends to perpetuate the ignorance.

The Buddha points to suffering being one condition for ignorance. He said suffering results in bewilderment, which is essentially ignorance. When we're suffering, there's this sense of, why me? Why am I singled out for this? A kind of confusion. This is the terrain of ignorance, or it leads to search.

The main definition of ignorance is not understanding the Four Noble Truths—not understanding suffering, not understanding the cause of suffering, not understanding the possibility for the cessation of suffering, and not understanding that there is a way to the cessation of suffering. This ignorance is also defined by not understanding the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience.

So the basic condition for suffering to lead to ignorance is for suffering to not be understood. That first noble truth—the Buddha said suffering should be understood. I love that. There's the framing of this in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: There is suffering. Suffering should be understood. That itself is an insight—when the mind turns and recognizes, this is worth understanding rather than just reacting to. Suffering should be understood. When suffering is not understood, ignorance arises.

On the other side, the Buddha said suffering can lead to search. If we meet teachings at this point, when we're in that space of suffering—if we meet teachings that talk about the possibility for freedom from suffering—this is one of the weak links in the chain. There's another teaching that says with the arising of suffering, suffering is not only a supporting condition for ignorance, but suffering is a supporting condition for faith. This understanding that there is a way, even at a reflective level, just that willingness to step in, to practice, that feeling of confidence, of capacity—that is a supportive condition for the unfolding of a different set of conditions leading to freedom, a natural unfolding towards freedom.

This is also the good news. What we're doing here is directly supporting this movement towards freedom. It doesn't happen on our timeframe. We don't get to control that process. But we cultivate the conditions, and the process naturally moves in that direction.

So we're going to continue talking about ignorance conditioning mental formations here, because we're talking about Paticca Samuppada, not the transcendent version of that.

With ignorance as a condition, mental formation comes to be. One of my understandings here is that ignorance in the propelling forward of this chain—when ignorance is arising, basically feeling will lead to craving. When ignorance is arising in the moment, feeling... I mean, it's not like ignorance arises and then feeling arises later. In every single moment, feeling is arising. When ignorance is arising in the moment, feeling leads to craving. Because the mind doesn't understand. The mind is caught by believing that something impermanent, unreliable would be permanent and reliable. So in some ways I feel like ignorance is kind of like the thing that would pick up all twelve links simultaneously. With ignorance as condition, this whole thing comes to be.

But ignorance comes and goes. In this practice we see that. Sometimes ignorance is arising. We feel the way that feeling leads to craving. We see that. But that very process of seeing it is helping to undermine the ignorance.

So ignorance shapes this not understanding suffering, the belief that there are things that are permanent, reliable, self. Taking things to be permanent, reliable, controllable, our mind kind of orients in the world towards choosing, acting, deciding based on those beliefs. Based on not understanding suffering, based on the belief that there's something permanent out there to hold on to, something reliable that will make me happy, a me that I can control navigating through this world in a reliable way. We choose things, we decide things, we act based on those beliefs. And these are mental formations. These choices, these actions, the emotions that follow—this is mental formation.

So due to ignorance we take the most obvious move to get rid of unpleasant and move towards pleasant, which simply leads us through this cycle over and over again. We think we're acting to alleviate suffering, but we're actually reinforcing the patterns of this cycle.

With ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. Now, there are a lot of these mental formations. We each have our own personal mental formations based on our own conditioning. I talked about this when I talked about delusion, how we have our own views that arise based on our familial, our cultural upbringing, all of that. We have our own views that arise from what we've experienced. But there are also views that we just absorb, cultural views, a kind of collective misunderstanding. We don't go at this, we don't come at this all by ourselves. We are surrounded by people who also

are misunderstanding things to be permanent, reliable, and controllable, also misunderstanding the nature of how suffering comes to be. And so there are views that come from our cultural background.

These views can be a big source of suffering—ones that we didn't opt into, but were just steeped in the soup of. Mental formations, for instance, around the concept of race. These are simply ideas, beliefs, views. There's quite good evidence in the DNA of our bodies that there's no reality to race. It's a belief, it's an idea. Mental formations. And here we can really touch into just how much suffering occurs based on ideas. This collective ignorance can condition a kind of collective picking up of mental formations. So it's not just internally that these mental formations are created. They're created in conjunction with how we live in the world. These are hard to see. These kinds of mental formations are hard to see.

With mental formation as condition, consciousness comes to be. This one is a little bit confusing perhaps. The way I understand this is that our views, our habits, all of these mental formations, what's arising in our mind—these mental conditioned patterns in our mind, whether views, beliefs, or emotions, thoughts—these shape what our consciousness picks out of experience to pay attention to.

You might get a sense of this from looking at what you've seen when you're caught in a particular emotion. For myself, I worked with a lot of anger. When there was anger arising in the mind, the mind would tend to look for things to be angry about. It would be like a filter on the mind. Or perhaps if I was angry, I would see somebody looking in a particular way.

They'd have a kind of funny expression on their face and I'd think that they hated me. Who knows, maybe they just had some gas. But the mind will interpret reality and pick out of reality all of the sense impressions, things that confirm or correlate to the moods, the views, the mind states, the emotions we're having, reinforcing them.

This is related to what I talked about the other night: confirmation bias. Our minds tend to find things in the world that agree with what we believe, maybe even based simply on an agenda. Our mind orients to picking out of experience what we need to see in that moment. It's a useful pattern, this kind of focused attention based on an agenda. And yet we need to understand it because this is really where delusion comes in. We think we are seeing experience, meeting experience as simply microphones and video cameras that are accurately taking in the information around us.

So these mental formations shape what our consciousness pulls out of the environment. And with consciousness as a condition, our mental and physical processes are shaped. The state of our consciousness affects our mental and physical processes. Flavored by anger, for instance, our body may become tense—the mind state shapes the physical body. We tend to experience things as unpleasant when we have anger arising; it shapes the feeling tone of experience. We perceive things as being directed against me when we're angry.

So now in this chain we're back to where we started: with physical and mental processes as condition, the sense bases and contact arise. The conscious body-mind organism experiences input from the six sense bases and there's contact with the world. But we see now that we are not starting from a neutral place. The mind is already flavored with mental formations that have been shaped by views, opinions, ideas, beliefs that are shaped by ignorance, confusion, misunderstanding. And so these filters, these views tend to reinforce our existing perspective. The cycle tends to reinforce itself.

Now we can be curious about all of this. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, offered a really simple way to explore this—you don't even have to think about all the links. He said, just see if you can understand what the job description of your mind states is. This is the mental formation. What do these mind states do? How do they act?

I just went through it with anger. Anger tends to shape our physical body to have tension, tightness, heat. Anger tends to shape our experience as being unpleasant—we could say that's part of the job description of anger. So how does anger affect us? Curiosity about that question, "What is the job description of this?"—that was a fun way for me to begin to explore. So what's the job description of depression? Let's watch this one for a while. How does this one function? What does it do in the body and mind?

Now the good news here is that the processes of mindfulness, what we're practicing here, creates conditions that break this chain apart. There's a big emphasis on looking at feeling tone. Over and over again in the suttas, the Buddha emphasized the feeling tone of experience. Notice the feeling tone—and that points to feeling tone being the place where, if you see it with mindfulness and wisdom, it short circuits that link to craving. This is a place where we can be very curious. Feeling tone is a hugely helpful tool in exploring where the mind tends to tip into craving.

And there are also teachings that point to this: we don't have to try to work our way back to "What's the feeling tone here?" If what you're experiencing in the moment is confusion or anger or a sense of identity, a sense of self, a feeling of becoming, there's a teaching that points to every single link of this chain. Seeing that factor...

The framing of it is like the Four Noble Truths—it's an understanding structured around that same pattern. So he says, for instance, if you're noticing clinging, you can see in that moment: this is clinging; this is how clinging comes to be; this is the arising of clinging; this is the ending of clinging, if you see it ending; and this is the path leading to the ending of clinging. He goes through that pattern with every single one of these links.

All of these links are simply arisings. Contact is an arising, feeling is an arising, craving, clinging, becoming—they are arisings. And so whatever arising you are seeing, it's not like we have to work back and say, "Well, where was the feeling tone? Let me go back to that and then I'll be able to be free." He points to the freedom that's possible just through clear seeing, right in whatever is arising.

This points to me too, to that kind of cutting through of ignorance. In the moment, seeing, "Oh, this is craving arising"—it cuts through the ignorance that believes that craving. And it gives that possibility of some freedom. You may even feel a shift, an insight, an understanding, a kind of taste of wisdom there. "Oh, this is just craving. I can be with this."

So in this teaching from the Majjhima Nikaya, seeing with each link, noticing the impermanence of each link essentially, is what he points to. One here and now makes the end of suffering. Seeing the arising of craving, understanding craving, the arising of craving, the ending of craving, and the way leading to the ending of craving—seeing the impermanent nature of any of these experiences. One here and now makes an end of suffering.

This is possible with the practices that we are doing here.

May the benefits of our practice together be the supportive conditions for the freedom of our own minds and for all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 73

Non-Clinging and Freedom

Andrea Fella · 57 min

> *In this profound dharma talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella guides practitioners through the challenging yet liberating terrain of deep practice where the mind confronts the impermanent, unreliable, and not-self nature of experience. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's refrain about observing arising and vanishing, she illuminates how thoroughly seeing impermanence naturally leads to non-clinging and freedom.*
>
> *Fella unpacks the progression described in the suttas: seeing that the five khandhas are impermanent leads to nibbidā (disenchantment), then virāga (dispassion), and finally liberation. She acknowledges that this process isn't always pleasant—practitioners may encounter fear, boredom, feelings of oppression, or a sense of groundlessness as the mind grapples with having nowhere stable to land. These difficult emotions reveal deeper layers of human clinging, and the practice is to notice our relationship to impermanence rather than trying to escape these feelings.*
>
> *The talk beautifully distinguishes between the withdrawal from clinging and withdrawal from experience itself—when clinging falls away, intimacy with experience can actually deepen. Fella addresses the common misconception that freedom would be flat or emotionless, emphasizing that the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion opens vast space for love, compassion, joy, and wisdom to act in the world. Each person's expression of freedom would be unique, shaped by how non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion naturally manifest through them.*

I'm feeling a lot of happiness sitting here and seeing you, knowing what you're doing. A lot of delight. Even if it may not feel delightful to you, there's a deep, deep appreciation and joy that you are here.

We've said a lot that this is not easy—this commitment to watching our minds, seeing what's happening, how our conditioning plays out, the patterns and habits of mind, orienting and attuning to the impermanent nature of experience.

Sometimes practice is delightful, when we see something clearly or when we settle back and mindfulness is just right there, easily seeing phenomena come and go. Sometimes it's joyful. Some of that joy is because in those moments the mind has that meas-

ure of freedom—those moments of temporary nibbana that Greg mentioned—largely absent of greed and aversion, and maybe with greatly weakened delusion. It's a very happiness-producing state.

And yet, as the practice deepens, as we start to see our minds more thoroughly and settle below the story level, the narrative of our particular lives, we start to meet the ways our minds as humans sometimes just don't want to see the truths of impermanent, unreliable, not-self. Just don't want to see that. It can be very unsettling to begin to taste the deeply impermanent nature of experience.

And yet this is the path for us. As we start to see the deeply impermanent nature of experience, resistance arises around that. Basically, the feeling of just wanting there to be somewhere to stop, somewhere to land. Can't we just stop for a moment? Can't I just rest somewhere? The deeply impermanent nature of experience sometimes points out that there's nowhere to land. Groundlessness. And so the path unfolds through noticing how we're relating to that. It kind of points out where the deeper levels of human clinging are happening.

We've talked a lot about impermanence and its connection to understanding the unreliable, the dukkha nature of experience, and the not-self nature of experience. The Buddha pointed so much to the teaching of impermanence over and over again. He encouraged us to cultivate the perception of impermanence in many ways, in different places.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, in that refrain we talked about earlier in the retreat, there's an encouragement with each of the foundations, with each of the exercises, to notice the impermanent nature of experience: "One abides observing in the body its nature of arising, or abides observing in the body its nature of vanishing, or abides observing in the body its nature of both arising and vanishing." And a few sentences later in that refrain, it says, "And one abides independent, not clinging to anything in this world."

There's a connection here between understanding impermanence and the release from clinging. This happens because seeing the impermanent nature of experience, our mind directly sees and understands that there's nothing to cling to, and that clinging will just produce stress and suffering in the mind. It directly understands, seeing that impermanent nature of experience, that it is unreliable. It is not a place where I could land and say, "I'll be happy here," because it's just going to slip away.

There's the understanding of not-self, the sense of self often being felt as a thing, something stable. The seeing of the impermanent nature of all experience reveals that what we take to be self is not what we think it is.

In one sutta, the Buddha more thoroughly emphasizes seeing the impermanent nature of experience. It's a teaching around the aggregates, and I'm going to condense this here into a fairly short paragraph: Seeing clearly that form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness are impermanent, one experiences disenchantment. Experiencing disenchantment, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, the mind is liberated.

Annie mentioned these words before—disenchantment and dispassion. I'd like to explore the process around what this part of the suttas is describing, what happens here. Seeing impermanence deeply, one becomes disenchanted. Becoming disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Let me unpack this a little bit.

Disenchantment is a translation of the Pali word nibbida. This disenchantment comes with a thorough understanding that the ways we usually engage in the world just don't lead to happiness. We see that the habit of clinging is based on an illusion or a misperception that there is something stable to cling to, something solid or stable to land on and hold on to.

The seeing of impermanence helps us recognize that the idea that I'll find happiness through clinging is a mistake, a misperception. It's an illusion. We become disillusioned, disenchanted with the idea that clinging and craving are going to somehow make me happy, do it for me.

We see this essentially through deep connection with directly seeing the impermanent nature of experience. This is not talking about an idea of impermanence. This is talking about the direct experience of impermanence.

Seeing, for instance, the arising and passing of sensation, sound, thoughts. Sometimes this experience of impermanence becomes quite strong. It becomes very rapid, and we're really directly experiencing the incredibly rapid nature of the arising and passing of experience. Sometimes we see mostly the arisings, sometimes the vanishings, sometimes both the arisings and vanishings together—as that sutta pointed to, the Satipatthana Sutta: "One observes the body in its nature of arising, in its nature of vanishing, or in its nature of both arising and vanishing." We can see impermanence in all of these ways.

When we see the arising of experience, we understand that it's coming into being as a conditioned phenomenon. It wasn't there before, and now it's here. So we understand that it has been conditioned. When we see the vanishing, we understand something else. Sometimes when I began really seeing things vanish, I understood that the mind actually believed in their permanence. It was shocking when something went away, because there was a way the mind had latched onto it, created an idea about it, thought of it as stable somehow—and then it's gone. What happened?

So the seeing of impermanence at this level deeply undercuts these misperceptions, these ideas. We've been enchanted by the notion that there are stable things out there, that there's a solid sense of self. This enchantment becomes revealed as a mistake, essentially. We see we've been caught in the spell of delusion, enchanted by delusion.

Sometimes we feel this too in our relationship with dukkha, even with senses of self that we know are not so helpful. I was talking to one of you the other day, and the image came up: it feels like a comfortable old shoe, this habit, this pattern. It just feels so familiar. The mind gravitates toward that familiarity, even as we see that it's not so helpful.

Knowing that we're caught by that spell is the first step. We can be in this old shoe of the sense of "me," and we know it's just an illusion. We can know that but still not be able to convince ourselves to step out of it. Just noticing the nature of that experience, knowing that it is a misunderstanding—that's where we begin to see through the delusion.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, the monk, scholar, and practitioner who offered us recent translations of the suttas—a truly amazing gift, putting all of the suttas into more accessible language—had this to say about the experience of disenchantment. He often wrote commentarial descriptions around various suttas, and around one that describes this word disenchantment, he wrote: "Nibbida signifies, in short, the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which supervenes when the illusion of their permanence, pleasurableness, and selfhood has been shattered by the light of correct knowledge and vision of things as they are."

A serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena—that's how he terms this disenchantment. I would say that is perhaps the end result when the mind has thoroughly understood. But in my experience, at least in this terrain of seeing how the mind is enchanted and is becoming disenchanted, the process of becoming disenchanted doesn't feel as pleasant as this describes.

There's an image in the suttas describing this quality: a dog with a bone that has no nourishment left in it at all. The marrow is gone. It's such an old, dry bone that the dog looks at it and it appears useful, looks like something good might be there. But he picks it up and realizes—no, nothing there for me. That withdrawal, that sense of "there's no nourishment in this anymore"—that's perhaps where disenchantment has thoroughly penetrated.

But the process of becoming disenchanted has a lot more ups and downs to it. As we start to see the deeply unreliable nature of experience, our minds do not like this. We would rather it be any other way. We try to bargain with reality. We try to figure out some way to construct a little pile of something that we can land on. So there are many emotional flavors in the relationship to deeply seeing the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience.

I think this is actually revealing the deeper human forms of clinging to wanting things to be stable. There are different relationships we may experience as the mind begins to grapple with the fact that reality is not what we'd like it to be. Getting what we'd like—we can do that. We can be on that cycle of getting something we want and being happy for a split second or two. And then there's the dissatisfaction, and we wonder if we can get something else we want. But we see the uselessness of that. Even seeing the uselessness of it doesn't stop us from keeping trying. Maybe there's something I can land on here.

At one point in my long retreat, I think I was at the Forest Refuge, I watched the mind do this over and over again. At this point, the wisdom was strong enough to know it was not going to find anything to land on. No place solid or stable to land on to say, "I can rest here. I can finally just be okay with this experience." And I could see that the mind just kept going into this loop: "There's got to be somewhere to land, somewhere to land, somewhere to land."

And my mind was okay with it doing that. It was just like, "Oh yeah, you're welcome to look. You're not going to find anything. Have at it. Try." Because I couldn't stop it. It was not self. It was a deep, conditioned, human wish for there to be somewhere I could settle and be stable. And so I couldn't stop it, but I could see that it was a futile process.

There would be times where the mind would kind of let go of that searching. And there would just be this okayness with the not landing, okayness with things as they are—impermanent, unreliable, not self—this okayness with that. And there would be such a release and a feeling of ease. And three seconds later, the mind was at it again. I just watched it over and over again.

So this process of disenchantment, it's meeting our very, very deep conditioning. Seeing it once or twice is probably not going to do it. It's a process of seeing and understanding the relationships. In seeing the impermanent nature of experience, there are many different relationships we may have to seeing impermanence—a few of those flavors.

One of them is this experience of nibbida, which is sometimes translated as disgust or revulsion. I don't particularly like that translation. I much prefer disenchantment. But sometimes the emotional flavor of seeing impermanence at this level can have that quality. It can feel like revulsion. Just don't want to see that. Or how you might feel, for instance, if you see something dangerous. And you know that way is really dangerous, like seeing a snake. There's a kind of recoiling that we have if we see a rattlesnake—the body, the being will just pull back and recoil from it. It's out of a sense of danger, but there can be a feeling of revulsion, like "don't go there."

So this quality of nibbida can have that flavor. That's not the most common flavor that I've experienced, but occasionally that has come up—that feeling of just *ohh* with being impinged on by sense impressions, this continual impingement of changing sense experience.

Sometimes the relationship to seeing the impermanent nature of experience can be a feeling of oppression. There have been times where I've been sitting and just feeling like it's so much sensation—body sensation, seeing, hearing. It's like a chaotic experience of the being experiencing all the sense impressions, and just the wish for it to stop. Just, "Oh, this is too much." A sound feels like a screaming pain. A thought feels like glass going through the mind. Sometimes it just feels so intense, these sense impressions. Again, this is not the most common way that I've experienced it, but there are times when it feels very oppressive.

It can also bring up feelings of fear—as strong as even terror sometimes—to see how rapidly things are changing. Just the feeling of there's nowhere to land. That sense of things changing so rapidly. Fear can be a relationship that happens there.

Some of the easier, more tolerable ones include a feeling of homesickness. My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya pointed to this one—that the homesickness is like wishing you could go back to that delusion. It's homesickness for delusion. But you can't go back, because there's enough clarity in the mind that the only way through is forward, toward seeing this impermanent nature of experience.

Sometimes, as the impermanent nature of experience begins to get more familiar, and perhaps you've let go of or seen through the terror and fear, the practice continues to deepen. The encouragement here is to notice. You're noticing impermanence, and you notice the relationship to it. That's the basic instruction. The practice deepens by noticing the relationship to what is happening, because that relationship to impermanence reveals different kinds of clinging, different levels and layers of clinging.

At a deeper level of clinging, sometimes the impermanent nature of experience just starts to feel really boring. It's like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know." Just really boring. The mind gets disinterested: "Yeah, it's another sense impression. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting—yep, yep, know that, yep." The mind just gets bored with it or disinterested. These are other flavors of the relationship to impermanence. It's really important to notice these.

Sometimes for me it's felt like, "I'm done. I don't want to practice anymore." When I first noticed that experience, that feeling of not wanting to practice, I felt betrayed by my mind. I thought I had to stop not wanting to practice, to transform that belief into wanting to practice. Then I actually heard somebody report their experience. I was with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and the person before me was experiencing things a little ahead of me in the practice, so it was always inspiring to hear what was happening for her. One time she described, "Yes, not wanting to practice arose, and I noted it."

I was like, "You can do that?" It was eye-opening for me. So yes, you can do that. You don't have to convert not wanting into wanting. You don't have to somehow believe that the not wanting isn't there. You can just know that it's there—and you're back in the practice. Not wanting to practice.

There are many relationships that unfold as we meet the deep experience of impermanence. When you start to see some of these flavors of relationship, know them. Be aware of them. Recognize there's this sense of impermanent experience, and there's confusion, and there's fear, and there's boredom, disinterest, not wanting to practice. Know the relationship to the experience.

Knowing that relationship is what helps the mind let go, to become free from that. We've been talking about this all along. As soon as we attend to something that is a form of greed, aversion, or delusion, the conditions of mindfulness weaken it. So this is the medicine: noticing the relationship.

I'd also say, just recognizing that this terrain of becoming disenchanted is the terrain of practice where it doesn't necessarily feel very pleasant—and yet it is the deepening of practice. There are times when the deepening of practice is not pleasant. A little bit of a shock. We don't put that in the brochure. I don't think we have a brochure.

As the mind begins to let go and to understand that it is not worth clinging, it moves through that disenchantment to withdrawal. But withdrawal is a funny word. Bhikkhu Bodhi termed it a serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena. But really, it's a withdrawal from clinging. And that's where we get entangled.

The clinging is what ties us or tangles us to objects. What happens as the clinging falls away is that there are objects in the knowing and there's simply no entanglement with them. But it does not necessarily feel like withdrawal, in my experience. It can feel very intimate—in fact, even more intimate than being tangled with something, because the tangle, the greed, the aversion, the confusion, obscures some of the experience. So the falling away of clinging is a withdrawal from the clinging. The disenchantment is a withdrawal from the clinging. But the experience can be very intimate when the clinging has fallen away.

As this happens, the mind moves towards what's termed dispassion here. The Pali term for this is *viraga*. In this place, basically, the mind has thoroughly understood that holding on to impermanent, changing phenomenon makes no sense. The literal—the Pali literal definition, the word *viraga*—literally means "to fade out." I like that. The word is basically one that would be used about a piece of cloth that has been dyed a particular color and is set in the sun, washed, set in the sun, washed, set in the sun—the color fades out gradually over time.

So this term, *viraga*, for dispassion, speaks—even the use of the word here speaks—to the gradual nature of the process. It's a slow process, the way the mind begins to let go, to let go of clinging. And over the course of practice, we may experience deeper levels of letting go. The fading out is like the deepening of how the mind lets go of certain layers or levels of clinging.

At first, the first levels or layers of clinging might be the way the mind understands that attachment to sense pleasure is not really going to make me happy. We gain that understanding, and the major craving and aversion around sense pleasure may begin to get a lot weaker. Many of you have probably noticed this over the course of your practice—how certain kinds of reactivity that had been so familiar are no longer quite so strong. Some of you have reported this on the retreat too, things that happened earlier on where you're now noticing that reactivity isn't arising anymore. This is the fading out. Those kinds of reactions are not happening.

So the first level of fading happens often around the major things—the major habits and patterns, the main ways in which our minds have habitually oriented towards finding happiness in various ways. That first level might be deepening through craving around sense pleasure. And then we start to find we're craving around the practice. We want those states of concentration. We want that peace. We want that ease. We want to see things really clearly. And so this is attachment, another level of attachment.

Possibly—I think I mentioned this a couple of days ago in the morning—the mind may cling to the practice, it may cling to states of concentration as a support for letting go of greater reactivity. But at some point we start to see that attachment, that clinging. And then that begins to weaken. That begins to fade out.

This experience of the fading out of clinging can come and go—the gradual nature of it. There may be times when the mind is so clear and it's just so obvious that picking things up and holding on to them is creating suffering. And the mind just won't go there. It's like you can even think of things that you might want and it's like, "Nah." It just doesn't go there. It doesn't want to pick them up. And then, ten minutes later, there we are, picking it up again.

This is how it works. It's so deeply conditioned. We get to see moments of clarity like that, and then we get to see the mind get hooked again. It's noticing it's caught again. Explore the possibility of not judging that. There are periods of time, maybe the first few years of practice, where it's like, "I've seen this already—why do I have to see it again?"

And at this point it's like, oh yeah, there it is again. It keeps happening. And yet, what I've seen in my own experience is that not only is it easier because I'm not reacting to the fact that it's coming up again—that's huge. What a relief that there's not that extra level of suffering around habits and patterns re-arising. But there's also the understanding that there's something more to learn here. There's still clinging, there's still craving. I'm glad that this is arising because I get to see the clinging and craving again. And the being with it helps to weaken it—so much easier when there's not that sense that it's a problem that this thing is arising.

So the dispassion has this fading out kind of process. There may be disenchantment and dispassion, and then maybe we're back to being enchanted. Disenchantment, a little bit of a sense of that dispassion of the mind just releasing the clinging—the clinging just dropping away.

There's another aspect of dispassion that feels like freedom. Freedom is not about getting anything. One definition of freedom: "This is the peaceful. This is the sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana." So in this, dispassion is used as a synonym for nibbana—mind having let go.

Gil also mentioned another definition of nibbana that we've discussed before: the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. Or we could say the non-arising of greed, the non-arising of aversion, the non-arising of delusion. And so another way to experience or understand dispassion is as the non-arising of craving, the non-arising of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The experience of release that we have when the mind lets go—there's a kind of delight to that. It feels good when the mind lets go. We feel the release from a vice grip. And that's the mind moving towards dispassion, that release. And yet, the release itself, that experience of release—it's something beautiful, it's sweet in a way. And yet the deeper form of release is that there's nothing left to release. The mind just doesn't even pick things up to hold on to them anymore.

So you might get a flavor of this. Try to feel into this a little bit. Think back to childhood—did you have a favorite game or toy or something? Maybe just remember a favorite toy. I had a big teddy bear that was about the size of me. It was my favorite thing. I carried it everywhere. It had no fur left. Both eyes were gone. And yes, I was very attached to it. And over time, you age, you grow up, you don't need that teddy bear anymore, you don't need whatever your favorite toy was anymore. Maybe you go back to it every now and then, but you find it's not satisfying you the way it used to. You lose your interest in it, you lose your dependence on it.

So this losing interest—that disinterest flavor there is kind of the stage we might say is, in the analogy, disenchantment. Losing interest in that. And then dispassion—like as an adult, when was the last time you thought about that toy? I didn't even think about this teddy bear until just now. The mind just doesn't even think of picking this up anymore. There's no interest or disinterest. There's no interest or disinterest around this toy to arise. This is the flavor of dispassion. There's no movement to pick up things to hold to.

And the practice deepens by seeing the ways in which we're enchanted, to be present for how we're enchanted, to see how we hold, to notice those relationships, feel that fear of loss, feel the disinterest, the boredom—all of those relationships. The practice leads through seeing how we've been enchanted.

Bhikkhu Bodhi writes about realizing freedom.

He uses the language "realizing the unconditioned." This is a term—the unconditioned. The mind free from greed, aversion, and delusion tastes a flavor of the unconditioned.

Here's how Bhikkhu Bodhi describes this: "Though the realization of the unconditioned requires a turning away from the conditioned, it must be emphasized that this realization is achieved precisely through the understanding of the conditioned. Nibbāna cannot be reached by backing off from a direct confrontation with samsara to lose oneself in a blissful oblivion to the world. The path to liberation is a path of understanding, of comprehension, and transcendence—not of escapism or emotional self-indulgence. Nibbāna can only be attained by turning one's gaze towards samsara and scrutinizing it in all its darkness. The understanding of the conditioned is the way to the unconditioned."

This description of freedom in the suttas, in many places, is primarily described by what it's not. This freedom, this unconditioned—non-clinging, the ending of craving, the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. It's nothing to pick up or own. There isn't any picking up or owning here. It's the non-arising freedom.

There's a sutta in the Sutta Nipāta where someone has asked the Buddha to describe what a liberated person is like. The questioner says, "Having what vision, being of what character, is one called peaceful? Tell me about the Supreme Person."

The Buddha responds: "A person who is not angered, not frightened, not boastful, not fretful, who gives wise advice, who is calm, restrained in speech, who is indeed a sage. A person who is not attached to the future, who does not sorrow over the past, who finds solitude amidst sense contact and is not guided by fixed views. A person who is retiring, not deceitful, not covetous, not greedy, not impudent, not arousing contempt, who does not engage in malicious speech. A person who does not relish pleasure, who is not arrogant, who is mild and of ready wit, who is not credulous, who by nothing is repelled. A person who does not take on the training in hopes of material gain, who is unperturbed if they get nothing, who is not hampered by wishes and not greedy for flavors. A person who is even-tempered, ever attentive, who does not suppose that they in the world are equal, superior, or inferior, who is free of conceit. A person for whom there are no tethers, who knowing truth is not tethered in any way, and in whom no wishes are found for existence or non-existence. This is someone I call peaceful."

Most of that description is what they are not. It's interesting to me, this image of someone free from greed, aversion, and delusion. What is that? What does that evoke for you? This is someone who could be completely free, someone whose qualities the Buddha describes as free from greed, aversion, and delusion. There's a lot of room for different actions arising.

I think we sometimes have this idea that being dispassionate—even the word "dispassion" makes it sound like you don't care, almost. But free from greed, aversion, and delusion doesn't mean we lack feeling or action. Part of the issue here, around this idea that somehow being free would be a kind of boring place to be... There was a question in the bowl the other day about whether the Buddha sang or danced or laughed. And I don't know. I have no idea. But I think that question is based in perhaps this idea that what it sounds like we're talking about here sounds like it would be very flat. Freedom may sound like it would be very flat—completely chilled out, non-reactive in a way that just sounds flat.

I think that's partly because the vast majority of our lives have been guided by greed, aversion, and delusion. When greed, aversion, and delusion are running the show—get what you want, you'll be happy; get rid of what you don't want, you'll be happy—when they're running the show, they cannot fathom there's another way to live. Those qualities of mind do not have the imagination to understand that if greed goes away, the problem goes away. If greed goes away, the suffering goes away. These habits or ways we've typically lived our lives—greed, aversion, and delusion think experience would be very flat without them. They cannot fathom a life with love, compassion, joy, and equanimity running the show.

We've said this before, but compassion acts, wisdom acts, love acts in the world. Without greed, aversion, and delusion, there are sixty-eight different possible expressions of freedom in this room—all of us, a different possible expression of freedom based on how non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion manifest in us. Love, wisdom, compassion—how they manifest in us. I've met some amazing people up in the hills of Sagaing in Burma, and they're very different.

One teacher, very calm—you just want to sit quietly in his presence. Another teacher laughs all day. There's a lot of room for different expressions of freedom.

What might be your expression of freedom? What might you be like without greed, aversion, and delusion? Don't limit yourself to some idea that freedom must be flat or lifeless.

Dispassion, you know, sounds flat. Why would I want dispassion? But it's dispassion around the habitual ways in which we've clung to things. It's no longer clinging. The absence of craving for the world doesn't mean an absence of feeling. There's a huge heart that resonates in empathy with the world. With greed, aversion, and delusion, that heart is limited. Without them, it's vast.

I bow to your practice. Carry on. Keep going.

CHAPTER 74

The Simile of the Cloth

Andrea Fella · 1h01

In this talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers an inspiring exploration of the Vatthūpama Sutta (MN 7), the Simile of the Cloth. The Buddha's teaching uses the image of a stained cloth being dyed to illustrate how the mind, when purified of its defilements (kilesa), naturally absorbs wholesome qualities. Andrea emphasizes that while initial work is required to understand and abandon reactive patterns—anger, ill will, contempt, envy, and other mental stains—the subsequent unfolding of the path feels more like sliding toward liberation than climbing a hill.

The talk traces the natural progression described in the sutta: from abandoning defilements, confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha arises, leading to what Gil Fronsdal calls the "gladness pentad"—gladness, joy, tranquility, happiness, and concentration. Andrea connects this to the teaching on transcendent dependent origination, using the beautiful image of rain flowing naturally downhill to fill streams and eventually the ocean. She explores how this process is spiral rather than linear, with repeated cycles of seeing, letting go, and deepening understanding.

Particularly moving is Andrea's reflection on how our reactive patterns are actually entangled with a genuine wish for well-being—they're confused attempts to find happiness. Rather than cutting out these tangles with a scalpel, mindfulness acts as a lubricant that allows the threads of love and truth to untangle naturally. The teaching culminates in the brahmavihāras—mettā, compassion, joy, and equanimity—arising naturally in a purified heart, ultimately pointing toward complete liberation from clinging to any experience, even the most wholesome.

We're at a very interesting point in the retreat in that for about half of you, the retreat is coming to an end, and for the other half of you, you're right in the middle of it. So reflecting on what to share this evening, I thought of exploring a teaching about one way the arc of practice unfolds from one of the Buddha's discourses.

The discourse I'd like to explore this evening is called The Simile of the Cloth. It offers a description of how the path of practice can unfold. What I find inspiring about this teaching is that it points, at the beginning, to what we have to do to really get on the path of practice—how we engage—and then once we're there, it points to a very natural unfolding, a process that sounds almost more like you're on a slide heading towards release rather than having to climb up a hill.

This teaching on the simile of the cloth begins with the simile itself. The Buddha is talking with some of his followers about a cloth that has a lot of stains on it. He asks if that stained cloth—even if it's a white cloth—if it's been ground in the mud or has various kinds of stains on it, and you dip that cloth in dye, what happens when you take it out? The cloth takes up the dye, but in the areas where it's stained, the dye looks different colors. So the cloth does not look very purely dyed if it has stains on it.

Now the word used for stain, the Pali word, is *kilesa*. That word is often translated as "defilement," but it literally means stain. This is one of the main places where it's used—in this discourse where it's talking about this stained cloth. We can consider this word *kilesa* to be a simile for the mind having stains, which are not inherent in the mind, just as the stains are not inherent to the cloth but can be removed.

The simile goes on. The Buddha says, suppose a cloth is pure and bright, and a dyer dips it into some dye or other—it would look well dyed and pure in color because of the purity of the cloth. Later in the sutta, there's a reference to inner bathing, the kind of inner washing of the mind, which helps to release these stains.

One thing I want to point out about this simile is that there's some work that has to go into removing the stains from the cloth. You can't just put it in the vat of dye and wish that it would dye beautifully. You have to do the work of scrubbing, rinsing it with water, scrubbing again, rinsing it with clear water, and checking to see: is the cloth more pure in color? There's some work that goes into removing the stains.

But then, when you put the cloth into the vat—and you do have to put the cloth into the vat—once you put it in, the cloth absorbs the dye. Very little work is involved. You don't have to push the dye into the cloth. You put the cloth into the vat and it takes up the dye.

The Buddha points to wholesome qualities of mind, saying that when the mind is not stained, a happy destination may be expected. The analogy of the dye, in a way, represents wholesome qualities of mind. As the mind, through the work of the practice we've been doing, begins to release the hindrances, begins to release these reactive emotions and patterns and habits, very naturally it begins to take up the wholesome qualities of mind—especially when we incline our mind in that direction.

This sutta describes the progress of what happens over the course of a lifetime of practice, or lifetimes of practice. The Buddha starts by describing a whole list of different defilements. I'll read them out in a moment—it's a great list if you're looking for what might be going on in this mind. He says that once we know these are defilements—I'll give you a few of them: ill will, anger, resentment, contempt—once we know, re-

cognizing that they're defilements of mind, one abandons them. We'll go into what these words mean and how this process unfolds. Knowing that they're defilements, one abandons them. Having known and having abandoned them, confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha arises.

This points to part of how the practice works: once we see these reactive emotions and have experienced some of their letting go, we know this works. That's confidence. Confidence grows as we see this process of abandoning at work.

With confidence, the description begins to sound like a natural unfolding. With confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, it is said that inspiration and gladness in the Dharma arises. From that inspiration and gladness, rapture, tranquility, and concentration arise. Again, this is described as a very natural process.

From there, it describes one abiding in the mind of *mettā*. With that mind of *mettā* and awareness, there's an inclination or pointing towards understanding the nature of all experience as impermanent, unreliable, not self. Because the mind is so stable, abiding in *mettā* with concentration, gladness, joy, and delight, the mind releases. Essentially, one turns the mind towards insight, towards understanding.

the mind will let go.

For me, this overall teaching about the direction of the path is inspiring because it means the path opens to us and invites us. It almost pulls us along. Wisdom pulls us along. We don't have to figure out the wisdom.

The other piece of this that I think is useful to remember: this is described as an arc of practice. It sounds like it happens with one stage simply following another. And in a way it does, but my experience of it is more of a spiral. There's some experience of letting go of the defilements, of the reactive patterns and habits of mind, an experience of freedom in that moment that brings in a lot of confidence, delight, joy, happiness resulting from that experience. So right there, there's this almost immediate tumbling forward in the process that's described. Sometimes the heart opens to metta in that space. And then something happens, another level or another layer appears. To me, it feels like this work of cleaning the cloth. We clean the cloth and it's as clean as we can see, but then as we go further, we notice, oh, there's actually a little more there. So there's more seeing, knowing, abandoning of the staining that can happen. It really is a spiral kind of process.

So this first part—what are the defilements or imperfections, the stains of the mind? Covetousness and unrighteous greed is a stain of the mind. Ill will, anger, resentment, contempt, insolence, envy, avarice, deceit, fraud, obstinacy, rivalry, conceit, arrogance, vanity, negligence—all imperfections that stain the mind. And then for each one of these, he says, "Knowing that ill will is a stain of the mind, one abandons it."

This is what we've been doing: looking at what arises in our hearts and minds, sometimes the reactive habits and patterns. When those arise, we observe them. Now this word *abandon*—often it sounds like an active kind of process. We may even have some relationship with this word based on our history with it. I think often the word abandon is used in a way that is not such a positive thing. We talk about children who have been abandoned. But the word also, in its definition—I looked up the definition and there are some definitions that really resonate for this teaching about what it means to abandon these stains.

One definition of abandoning is to leave a place because of understanding its danger. That would be like "abandon ship." When the boat is going down, you don't stay on the ship. You understand the danger. This is a natural movement of the heart, to remove oneself from a place of danger. And so we can sometimes see, with observing anger, ill will, contempt, greed, we can sometimes feel the danger of those in the way they produce suffering in our hearts and minds, and in the way they incline us to engage unskillfully in the world and potentially harm others. We can see the danger. And when we see it, when we feel into that danger, sometimes there's a very natural withdrawing from that. Not something we have to push away, but it feels more like the heart just says, "No, not going there."

Another definition for abandoning is to let go of something we understand is not valuable for us. And again, this is what we begin to recognize so clearly about these reactive states of mind. We feel, "This is not helpful, this is not valuable," given our history with these difficult states of mind. I certainly have seen in my own practice, especially in the first few months, really looking at anger—at some point I truly saw that my mind believed I was getting something out of it. It could believe that partly because it wasn't actually acknowledging the impact of it personally, here and now, on the body and mind, and also on how I engaged in the world and impacted others. It believed I was making myself happier by having that anger, and it was exposed as being a lie. The mind directly seeing: this is not valuable. Again, with that seeing, the mind begins to let it go.

It doesn't let it go once and for all upon seeing that once, unfortunately. It seems like the habits and patterns are so deep that the letting go, the seeing, needs to happen many times, because some part of our system says, "Yeah, but I know it really has to help"—that deluded part of our mind believing that anger helps us, that greed helps us.

So in our practice, this abandoning, this releasing, this letting go, can have a more organic feeling to it that comes just through understanding. If we look at this understanding—knowing that anger is a defilement of the mind, knowing that anger stains the mind—when we see that, when we understand that, there can be a natural abandoning. One abandons it.

And there's a big place right in the middle of practice where sometimes the mindfulness is not quite strong enough to see the danger or the lack of value directly in the moment, but our minds know this is not helpful. We may see ourselves getting pulled in, we may see the reactivity getting stronger, and in those cases we take some action to turn our attention to something else, to settle our attention, ground in the body again. So there can be the active form of abandoning here in the practice—and we've been doing this for five and a half weeks. This is a big place of what our practice is about, this understanding.

And really, in some ways, as the understanding gets strong, it's like that's the work of the practice: to understand the suffering. That's the enjoinder the Buddha gave us about the first noble truth. There is suffering. Suffering should be understood. And if we make that movement to understand suffering, the rest of the path just begins to unfold and the reactive habits and patterns begin to unravel.

The next piece of the text addresses what happens having known. "When one has known that negligence"—I'll pick one at random here—"when one has known that negligence is a stain of the mind and has abandoned it, one acquires unwavering confidence in the Buddha. One acquires unwavering confidence in the Dharma. One acquires unwavering confidence in the Sangha."

Now, this unwavering confidence that's described here is, I think, part of where the practice becomes more of a spiral. There is often, in the moment of seeing how reactivity can be released, a sense of, "Wow, there's a possibility here." There's a direct understanding of the direction of the practice, of the possibility. For myself, the first time I really saw and understood that the mind did not have to follow that intention towards anger, so much gratitude just coursed through me. My sense was, "Wow, this practice works. This is possible." There was a surge of confidence in the practice, and at that moment I think I knew I was going to be doing this for the rest of my life.

And yet, I would not say it was unwavering confidence. It might have been unwavering in that moment. But confidence has definitely wavered over the past twenty-five years of practice. It's definitely been a spiral—confidence growing and then wavering, confidence growing and wavering.

The unwavering confidence described here is a description of someone who has entered the stream, their first taste of awakening. There's a deep understanding and no longer any doubt in the possibility of freedom. With stream entry, freedom is not continually present, but there's been this taste of that possibility. And so this deep understanding of these reactive habits and patterns can give us this taste of freedom.

This confidence that arises—confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—gives us inspiration to continue because we see in those moments that it's possible. We understand it's possible, and we also understand we're not there yet. So there's a strong sense of spiritual urgency, and the arising of inspiration and gladness in the Dharma, that sense of gratitude. The Dharma—it's possible. This teaching is helpful. There's this inspiration.

The text says, "When one has given up, abandoned, and relinquished the imperfections of mind *in part*, one considers thus: 'I'm possessed of unwavering confidence in the Buddha,' and gains inspiration in the meaning, gains inspiration in the Dhamma, gains gladness connected with the Dhamma."

So the imperfections of the mind are abandoned *in part*. More work to do. But the gladness, the confidence, the inspiration propels us onward.

And the next part just lists this tumbling forward: "When one is glad, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body becomes tranquil. In one whose body is tranquil, one feels pleasure. In one who feels pleasure, the mind becomes concentrated." Again, it just describes this as a natural unfolding.

This set of qualities—gladness, joy, tranquility, happiness, and concentration—appears in several places in the suttas, where these five qualities are linked and pointed to as arising naturally one from the other. My colleague Gil Fronsdal calls these "the gladness pentad." Five qualities related to and arising out of gladness. The gladness pentad—it's a lovely phrase. I don't know if he made it up. When I googled "the gladness pentad," the only places it came up were in connection with Gil and with his students who teach. Perhaps it appears in scholarly works, but I'm not certain about this term. In any case, it occurs multiple times in different contexts in the teachings.

I think it's worth taking a little time to linger here and reflect that based on the understanding, the abandoning of the defilements of mind, this process unfolds where these beautiful qualities of mind and heart—joy, delight, tranquility, happiness—are present. This path has a lot of joy in it.

The other day in one of my meetings, someone was asking about joy in the practice, and why isn't it more highlighted? In the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, he's talking about how to do the abandoning, how the defilements come to be, how the abandoning happens. But the process, when we engage in it, is very happiness-making, very joyful. Here in this teaching, and in a couple of others I'll point to, it describes joy as being a very natural result of doing this work of understanding.

I'm going to read a sutta that Tara read very early on, perhaps even in the first couple of nights of the retreat, called "The Lawfulness of Progress." In this you'll see these five qualities appearing. This one starts from virtue:

"For one who is virtuous and endowed with virtue, there is no need for an act of will: 'May non-remorse arise in me.' It is a natural law that non-remorse will arise in one who is virtuous.

For one free of remorse, there is no need for an act of will: 'May gladness arise in me.' It is a natural law that gladness will arise in one who is free from remorse.

For one who is glad at heart, there is no need for an act of will: 'May joy arise in me.' It is a natural law that joy will arise in one who is glad at heart.

For one who is joyful, there is no need for an act of will: 'May my body be tranquil.' It is a natural law that the body will be tranquil for one who is joyful.

For one of serene body, there is no need for an act of will: 'May I feel happiness.' It is a natural law that one who is serene will feel happiness.

For one who is happy, there is no need for an act of will: 'May my mind be concentrated.' It is a natural law for one who is happy that the mind will be concentrated."

And it goes on: "No need for an act of will: 'May I know and see things as they really are.' No need for an act of will: 'May I experience disenchantment and dispassion.' No need for an act of will: 'May I experience freedom.' It is a natural law for one who experiences dispassion to experience freedom."

In another place this gladness pentad arises, in a sutta that refers to the teaching of transcendent dependent origination. In that teaching, it gives an analogy for the unfolding of practice. Actually, in this sutta it starts from the very beginning of the chain of de-

pendent origination—that based on ignorance there's volitional formation, and so forth, up through suffering. But then it says that with suffering as a condition, faith can come to be. Faith comes to be, and then rather than moving from virtue to non-remorse to gladness, it moves from faith, from confidence, to gladness. This whole teaching is described as a natural process:

"Just as when rain pours down in thick droplets on a mountain top, the water flows down along the slope and fills up the clefts, gullies, and creeks. These being full fill up the pools. These being full fill up the lakes. These being full fill up the streams. These being full fill up the rivers. These being full fill up the great ocean. So too, with faith as proximate cause, gladness comes to be."

With gladness as approximate cause, joy. With joy as approximate cause, tranquility. Again, this image of natural processes flowing downhill, water flowing downhill.

As I thought about this image, I realized that not all the water gets to the great ocean. Some of it gets absorbed in the ground, comes up in the plants. The plants transpire the water and oxygen into the air, which gets carried back and comes down as rain. Some of it simply evaporates into the air and returns as rain. So again, this kind of cyclic process is part of this natural unfolding. And I feel that the momentum of mindfulness and wisdom carries us in the direction of freedom.

The next piece of this teaching, after pointing to the concentration: one abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness. This chant that we've done is found in this sutta. One abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with compassion, with a mind imbued with altruistic joy, with a mind imbued with equanimity. One abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with equanimity, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. So above, below, around, and everywhere, and to all as to oneself, one abides pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with equanimity—abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.

Reflecting on this point in the sutta, on this image of natural unfolding, the natural causes and conditions that lead us toward freedom, I noted that it says: when one is glad, rapture is born. In one who is rapturous, the body becomes tranquil. In one whose body is tranquil, one feels pleasure. In one who feels pleasure, the mind becomes concentrated. One abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with kindness. It doesn't say one has to work really hard to do that. Again, it's simply the sense of abiding—that word we explored at the beginning. Abiding is this natural opening to these qualities.

To me, this speaks to how, as the heart becomes more present, as the defilements have been abandoned, as there are those places and times of purity—the feeling of purity in the heart—mettā, compassion, joy, and equanimity become available.

Now this is the place where perhaps we can think about that image of the cloth in the dye. It may be that for some of us, we need just a little dip into the vat of mettā, the vat of compassion. For myself, I definitely needed a little tip—just a bit of checking in. What's here? How is the heart and mind, given this place of the mind having let go and finding some mettā? It wasn't obvious to me, not until I began to explore: What's here? What's here?

In this image, when the mind is pure, when the cloth is pure, and it's lowered into that dye, it's going to take up that beautiful color. It will take up the beautiful qualities of mettā, of compassion, of joy, of equanimity. Again, a very natural process. And we may feel this at times—the beauty of that. Let yourself feel it in those moments. Appreciate it in those moments.

I've spent some time reflecting on why these qualities of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity might follow from understanding reactive states of mind. Some of it is the intention we bring to that understanding. The intention we bring is one of kindness, of allowing. Early on we talked about allowing. That first talk I gave: relax, receive, allow. And how allowing is a very loving thing to do. It's one of the kindest, most loving things we can do for ourselves—to open to and allow what's here to be here. So that is cultivating the quality of mettā.

Mettā is the base quality for compassion and joy. The open heart, when it meets suffering, responds with compassion. The open heart, when it meets delight and success, responds in kind with happiness and joy. So the open heart, with that quality of kindness, begins to open us to all of these.

And equanimity—the practice of allowing—is also cultivating equanimity by not resisting, by cultivating that non-reactivity, just opening to, being with. So we're cultivating all of these qualities by exploring and understanding these reactive states of mind.

I've also seen in my own practice how it's not just the practice cultivating metta and compassion, equanimity and joy. It's not just the intention that we bring to the mindfulness practice. We can actively cultivate these qualities through formal practice of the Brahma Viharas. But there's also a way in which, as the very reactivity we're looking at starts to be understood, it can feel as though the metta—the wish for our well-being and happiness—is uncovered right within the midst of these reactive patterns and habits.

Metta itself is this wish for well-being: for our own well-being, for the well-being of others, for the well-being of both. And that wish gets distorted out of fear, greed, anger, confusion. I think there's an intimate connection between our suffering and this deep human wish for happiness, safety, well-being. This movement—this almost biological human movement in the direction of happiness—our minds are pretty short-sighted about it. The habits of mind that have been well conditioned, not only in our lifetimes but in our evolutionary experience, are conditioned to take the shortest route to feeling a little bit better.

So there's a deep, fundamental misunderstanding about how to find happiness, safety, well-being. Our minds, through aversion and greed, go for the quickest, most immediate gratification. Get rid of this unpleasant thing right here. Get this pleasant thing and hold on to it. We don't see the greed and aversion in the moment and how they affect us. Our minds and bodies are willing to let go of happiness here and now for the idea of some possibility of happiness in the future.

But these patterns are trying to make us happy. They're trying to create well-being. They just really don't know how to do it. They're so confused—that's the delusion. And I think this is why some of our habits and patterns have such a grip on us: because they are entangled with this very deep wish for well-being. It's just entangled with confusion and ignorance and delusion.

As we start to untangle that tangle, as the delusion begins to fall away, as we see directly in the moment—this is not helpful, this way lies danger, this is not valuable—then the delusion about that falls away and the wish for well-being and happiness can remain.

The fundamental confusion around the direction toward happiness gets tangled up with our relationship to the truths: the truths of impermanence, unreliability, uncontrollability. That's where the mind gets confused. With this sense of wanting to be safe, happy, healthy, and at ease, we are fighting against these truths that things are impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. And so we want control, we want to hold on, we want to fix, we want to change—or we experience fear.

In the middle of all this dukkha that we experience, we have the threads of truth and the threads of wishing for our well-being. There's a sense of wanting to be safe, but things are unreliable. And there's the tangle.

So what the practice begins to do is untangle the tangle. When I first started looking at some of my deeper habits and patterns of mind—anger, self-hatred—it was such a knot. I believed, I thought, that I needed to get the scalpel out. Cut that tumor out.

Wholly bad. Got to get rid of it. But it was not so easy to do that. And I think part of the reason it's not so easy is that the tangle is the anger. The tangle is the defilement. The tangle is the confusion. But the tangle is a tangle of threads of love and truth. And so if we take the scalpel and cut out the tangle, we get a hole in the cloth. Our hearts and minds won't seem to let us do that.

So the practice of mindfulness is like putting that tangle into a lubricant that slowly allows it to untangle. And then we can see the possibility, we feel into this possibility, that what seems to be a conflict between the wish for well-being and the unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience is not a problem. It's more like a weave than a tangle—a strong weave of the mind that feels deeply the metta, the love, the compassion, and feels deeply the truths, the equanimity.

In many experiences when I've had this kind of opening around a particular deep habit or pattern of mind, as there's an opening there, there is a touching into those threads: the love, the wish for well-being, the wish for happiness, the wish for safety, right here.

And understanding these truths at the same time. Our practice can reveal that this love is not something to fear, and that the truths are also not something to fear.

The last part of this teaching: "Abiding with loving-kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, one understands thus." Now this language is a little unusual—I don't know if it's used elsewhere. "One understands thus: there is this"—and by that I take it to mean this experience in this moment—"there is this, there is the inferior, there is the superior, and beyond there is an escape from this whole field of perception."

The commentaries say this means the understanding of the Four Noble Truths in the moment. There are times in the texts where the Buddha points to the Four Noble Truths not as a teaching simply to be understood, but as insights. I talked about that a little when I discussed dependent origination. Any place you are in your experience, there's a teaching that says you can simply see it from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths. You can see: this is craving, this is the arising of craving, this is the ending of craving, and this is the path leading to the ending of craving.

That's my understanding of what this passage is pointing to—that seeing in the moment, these states too, these beautiful qualities of heart and mind all the way up: gladness, joy, tranquility, happiness, concentration, metta, compassion, joy, equanimity—these are unreliable arisings of mind that are not to be held to. There is an escape from the whole idea of clinging to anything, including the wholesome states.

Again, this is described as being just the natural unfolding. But I think there is a possible tendency at times to kind of land in those wholesome states and maybe get stuck there a little bit. And so again, we might need a gentle inclining towards freedom—inclining towards the recognition that this too is just an arising conditioned experience. This too, like the raft, is not to be clung to.

This sutta, to me, speaks of an overarching practice that resonates with practice here on retreat, but also practice in the world. Because it starts in the place of looking at all of those reactive habits and patterns that are relational—looking at how we are in relationship to our families, our friends, the news, whatever's out there. Angry, contemptuous, envious, deceitful. It's pointing to looking at our relational world, internally and externally.

And then the transformation also speaks to not only the transformation internally, but this connectedness. These qualities of the brahma-viharas are relational. It's not just about what happens here internally. It's not just about what happens here on retreat. This is carried into the world.

Whether you are staying or will be leaving next week, this is an amazing thing that you're doing—offering for yourselves and for the world. We can't really just practice for ourselves. Even if we're trying to do that, it will spill out.

Thank you for your practice.

CHAPTER 75

Travelling the Eightfold Path Towards Insight and Liberation

Andrea Fella · 37 min

In this comprehensive talk, Andrea Fella illuminates the Buddha's central teaching on liberation from mental suffering. She begins by clarifying that while physical pain is unavoidable, the Buddha discovered complete freedom from mental distress is possible. Through an exploration of the Pāli term dukkha—literally meaning a "bad axle hole" that creates a rough ride—she reveals how suffering ranges from subtle dissatisfaction to profound anguish, all rooted in our mental relationship to experience rather than external circumstances.

Fella methodically unpacks the Eightfold Path as the Buddha's practical response to this diagnosis. She explains how Right Understanding and Right Intention reorient us away from the futile pursuit of happiness through getting what we want, toward the recognition that wanting itself is the source of suffering. The ethical factors of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood harmonize our relationship with the world, while Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration provide the mental cultivation needed to observe and transform our habitual patterns.

The talk emphasizes that this path is not merely conceptual but experiential—a spiral journey where each round of practice deepens our verified understanding of the Four Noble Truths. Fella offers reassurance that transformation is genuinely possible: by turning toward our suffering with honest awareness rather than acting on reactive patterns, the mind naturally begins to release what causes its own distress. This counterintuitive approach of meeting difficulty directly becomes the very doorway to freedom.

The Buddha realized something profound—he had a deep understanding of the possibility for freedom from suffering, that it is possible to become free from suffering.

What he realized first is that it's not possible to become free from pain, from physical pain, but it is possible to become free from mental distress. And so that is his orientation for us: How can he help us become free of any kind of mental distress? One of the definitions of freedom is experiencing no mental pain or grief. For me, that's a pretty inspiring sounding state—just the idea of experiencing no mental pain or grief. And that is essentially what the Buddha says is possible. He says he found it himself and says it is possible for us.

But after he discovered this, after he realized this idea, after he had this recognition of the ending of mental pain and grief in his own mind, he looked out at the world and he saw that people were living their lives in such a way that actually reinforced their own mental pain and grief. They weren't just living in a kind of neutral way, but actually they were living in a way that they thought would make them happy, but actually bound them more tightly to this cycle of being locked into patterns in our minds of mental pain and grief.

So what is this mental pain and grief? The term that the Buddha used is dukkha. The derivation of that Pali term is quite interesting. The first part of the word, "du," means something like "bad." And the second part of the word, "kha," has as its basic definition the center part of a wheel—the empty space in the middle of a wheel. So the term dukkha means a bad empty space in the middle of the wheel.

What does that mean? If we think about what that actually means, it means if you have a wheel that's got a bad empty space in the middle, perhaps that place where the axle goes through is too small. So it's too tight. It rubs. It's not an easy ride. There's resistance in that turning of the wheel. Or perhaps it's off-center, so that as the wheel turns, it kind of goes ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk. Or maybe it's so loose altogether that as the wheel goes, the wheel falls off entirely.

These ideas give you a sense of the range of mental distress that's covered by this term. It can be a simple sense of something's not quite right—things are a little bit off here, just a feeling of not quite being satisfied with things the way they are. If it were just tweaked a little bit that way, it would be better. Could get rid of that, then things would be a little better. That's a kind of dukkha. The term is often translated as "suffering," but that seems a bit extreme for this definition of just a little bit of offness.

And this term dukkha goes all the way to what we do call extreme suffering—the times when the wheel is just falling off and we're not able to go anywhere, where we're experiencing massive suffering: loss of a partner, death of a family member, diagnosis of cancer in our own lives, a terminal diagnosis. These kinds of suffering—actually, from the Buddhist perspective, it's not the diagnosis of the cancer or the loss of the loved one that is the actual dukkha, but it's our mental response to it, our resistance to it, the sense that this is not the way it should be, and the fact that we suffer over that.

So the Buddha points to dukkha as being a problem in our own minds. It's not the things that are happening out in the world, but it's the way that we are riding with them. I think this is another reason why the wheel analogy is good, because it's the way that we're riding with the circumstances of life. Is there resistance? Is there a feeling of offness around it? That's where this problem of dukkha comes.

This is the problem that the Buddha was trying to solve. And he came to an understanding that it was possible to end this dukkha in his own mind. Fortunately for us, he also came to a recognition that there's actually a set of tools that we can use to help us free ourselves from this mental pain and grief.

The path that he offered us is the Eightfold Path. I'd like to speak a little bit about it—not in the kind of detail I might ordinarily do in a dharma talk, because I want to talk about how this path connects with this problem of suffering and how we can free ourselves, how this path supports freeing ourselves from this suffering. So I'll offer an overview of the Eightfold Path and then go back and talk about how it supports us to free our minds.

The Eightfold Path, as a kind of overview of the parts of the path: there's right understanding—I'll just name them first of all.

Right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

In offering these as a path, the Buddha is offering them as a set of practices that will lead us to the ending of dukkha. They're not something to simply read about—they're actually practices to engage with.

The path begins with right understanding and right intention. What this points to is basically that as the Buddha looked out and saw people engaging in actions, thinking it would make them happy, he noticed something. One of our main ways that we think we'll be happy is: "If I get what I want, I'll be happy." And engaging in things in that way, we do get a little bit of happiness from time to time. If we actually get what we want, there's a little bit of happiness. If we don't get what we want, there's immediate suffering—we recognize that as suffering. But if we get what we want, there's a little bit of happiness, and it's like, "Yes, that's the way it's supposed to be. That's how life is supposed to be. I'm supposed to get what I want, and that's how happiness comes."

So that's a kind of belief, a way that we operate in our lives, going from thing to thing, trying to get what we want. In a sense, we think that if we could line up a bunch of moments where we got what we want—because we know that having what we want doesn't make us happy forever—but we do think that if we can get what we want endlessly, that is what happiness would be. And if I'm not able to do that, then there must be something wrong with me, or I've got to work harder, or I've got to be able to fix it or control things. So we have this belief around getting what we want being how we'll be able to be happy.

The Buddha looked at that and realized that actually this action of endlessly getting what we want just conditions more wanting to have the next thing. If you actually look in your experience, it's not so much that when we're in a state where we don't have what we want, it's not so much the fact that we don't have it that is the feeling of offness. In that moment of wanting something that we don't have, the feeling of offness is the wanting itself. And this is what he pointed to: it's not the not having that causes our suffering. It's the having of the wanting that causes our suffering.

So he started to point us through a shift of our view. This view that we normally think of in terms of how I can be happy is not going to serve us very well for a deep kind of lasting happiness. But if we instead orient ourselves around letting go of wanting things—wanting to have things that we don't have, wanting to get rid of things that we have that we don't like—this endless manipulating of the world to make it just the way I want it for a few moments before it falls apart and changes and then we rearrange again... That's our life: endlessly rearranging the world and watching it fall apart, rearranging and watching it fall apart.

The Buddha proposes that if we let go of the wanting to do all that rearranging, that's where a deeper happiness will come. This is his directing us in this very first aspect of the Eightfold Path. He says: shift your orientation. And the definition of this shift of orientation is understanding the Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths are: there is suffering; there's a cause for suffering, and that cause is this wanting, this craving, this wanting things to be other than they are—wanting to have things we don't have, wanting to get rid of things that we do have. So there is suffering, and there's this cause of suffering. Then there's the possibility—which he promises us from his own direct experience—that this suffering, this dukkha, this very subtle kind of suffering, can end. And there is a path that leads to its end.

So this is the reorientation. The Buddha says we shouldn't live our lives so much trying to figure out how to get what we want, as much as we should figure out how to let go of the things that are causing us suffering. That's the orientation towards happiness.

It's no surprise that given his burning question was "How can I end dukkha?" his whole orientation around wisdom has to do with the framing of understanding this dukkha. The Four Noble Truths are set out not just as truths to be believed in, but as actions to be taken. With each of these truths, there's an action that the Buddha proposes.

We need to understand suffering. By "understand it," he doesn't mean to think about it—to think, "Well, why am I suffering? This pattern that's coming up right now, this anger that I'm experiencing, that's deep in my childhood. That comes from the time when

my parents did this to me, and I know this is kind of how it's all formed." That kind of thinking about it is not what the Buddha means by understanding. He means understanding in the moment. What is this experience of suffering? His proposal is to turn towards the experience of this offness, this rub, this resistance, this feeling of catastrophe if it's that big.

What is the experience of suffering? What is it to be a human being experiencing this dukkha? This is the Buddha's proposal to us as part of our path: understand suffering, and let go of the cause of suffering—let go of this wanting.

This letting go may have an active quality to it. It may be that we can actively let go of something that we see isn't useful. But more often what we end up doing is hanging out with this feeling of suffering, this feeling of wanting things to be different. And in the very hanging out with it—if we hang out with it instead of acting on it—something shifts. If we act on that wanting, it just conditions the belief that the way to happiness, the way to satisfy that wanting, is to get what we want. If we take that action and get what we want, it conditions the belief that this is the way to happiness.

So this is a radical shift the Buddha proposes: to turn towards this feeling. What does it feel like to want something and not act on it for a change? What does that just feel like, this pull to want to get something or have something? If you watch it for a little while, you'll see that it ends. You'll see that it does pass. And when you see that, when you see that wanting end, you'll see that there's actually a very deep kind of relaxation in the letting go that happens. Once the wanting goes, there's no problem anymore. There's no dissatisfaction around not having that thing. It's the wanting itself that is the issue. It's the source of our suffering.

The third noble truth is the truth of the cessation of suffering—the possibility that the Buddha puts forward, the possibility that suffering can end. He says we have to realize this for ourselves. Nobody can do it for you. It has to be realized yourself. And the path to that is this Eightfold Path.

So this is our reorientation. Initially, as we meet this Eightfold Path, this wisdom that the Buddha offers us—this reorientation around letting go of the things that lead us to suffering and cultivating the things that lead us to a deeper kind of happiness—we have to take this somewhat on faith. We've heard this and perhaps massaged it a little bit in our minds, thought about it. And if there's enough of a sense of trust in the teaching, there may be a sense of, "Okay, I'm going to try this."

Because the Buddha is not proposing just a belief here. He's proposing actions. He's proposing practices. In putting forth this teaching of the Four Noble Truths, it's not simply, "Here, believe this and you'll be free." It's that if you believe this enough, you'll start to act on these truths, and then you will see for yourself the benefits of acting on them. Slowly, over time, a gradual letting go of our suffering unfolds.

Initially, it's out of hearing the teachings and reflecting on them that we begin to have the intention, the desire, the wish to engage in the practices. This is the second aspect of the Eightfold Path: the intention to follow through on this teaching. Right intention is this intention to engage with these practices.

This intention leads us towards a movement to act in the world in ways that will, as much as possible, not cause suffering. Suffering is our guide here. It's the orientation we look toward. Is there suffering happening? If there's suffering happening, then we need to understand it, see if we can find what it is that we're holding on to, and let go of that cause. The orientation is around looking at where suffering is happening in our lives, in the lives of others.

With this intention to follow these practices the Buddha is suggesting, we start to engage in the world in ways that will not harm people—with ethical conduct. This is the second aspect of the Eightfold Path, the next three components: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. These lay out sets of practices that we work with in our relationships with others in the world.

They're all phrased in terms of abstaining—abstaining from certain things that would tend to cause harm. With wise action: abstaining from killing, abstaining from taking what's not given, abstaining from sexual misconduct. With wise speech: abstaining from false speech, from divisive speech, from harsh speech, from idle chatter.

Harsh, divisive, false, and idle. We look at where our speech and our actions are creating harm in the world. The Buddha points us to these areas. He says, if you find yourself getting ready to engage in harsh speech, it's a really high probability that it's going to cause suffering out there. So look at that.

These ethical practices aren't taught simply as "thou shalt not." They're really meant to be engaged with in a way of watching. When one of these things comes up—a wish to speak in a divisive way, perhaps saying "that person does this thing" to somebody else and kind of creating a division, us versus them—what's the motivation there? We begin to look at it when a desire for this kind of speech arises. The possibility of it causing

harm is great, so what's motivating it? We begin to look in our experience at what's motivating that, so that we can, as much as possible, let go of behaviors, speech, and actions in the world that cause additional harm.

This ethical component of the Eightfold Path is really about harmonizing our relationship with the world. It's not about putting ourselves into a straitjacket, but really creating harmony, creating a peaceful living situation. With that intention towards nonharming, through the exploration of not harming others, we also begin to see how we engage in our minds before we reach out to harm others.

For instance, if you have anger in your mind and that leads you to want to speak harshly, you get to the place where you don't necessarily follow through on that harsh speech. Then you start to see that the anger burns. It burns us. As we begin to let go of the behaviors that cause harm, we start to see the internal states of mind that cause us harm.

This is where the third aspect of the Eightfold Path comes in. We start to cultivate our minds through the factors of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. This is mental cultivation. And this really comes back to the crux of where dukkha comes from. We see that largely this unhappiness, this dissatisfaction, comes because of how we relate to the world—how we want to arrange the world, wanting to have things that we don't have, wanting to get rid of things that we do have. It's the way that we relate to the world. It's in our minds. Our relationship to the world is something that's coming up in our minds.

You can see how, given a situation, some people respond some ways and some people respond other ways. So it's not the situation that is the problem—it's our response to it. Since the whole crux of this dukkha is something that's in our minds, this mental cultivation begins to get at that problem. The vast majority of our struggles is created by some reactivity: liking something, not liking something, wanting to have something, wanting to get rid of something. So we need to cultivate a mind that can start to look at that.

Sometimes when we experience habitual patterns—and I think all of us have habitual tendencies, habitual patterns that we engage in over and over again—we see that this isn't helpful. Why do I keep doing this? Why do I keep getting so angry? Or why do I keep telling myself I'm such a bad person? We have these habits of mind, and we don't quite understand why we keep engaging in them. Sometimes we think, "Well, I must just be this way. It's hopeless. I can't possibly change this. I've been doing this for so long, there's no hope of changing it."

It's not true. It's possible to change our minds. It is absolutely possible to change our minds.

This mental cultivation that the Buddha teaches—wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—these are the tools you need to change your mind. Wise effort is about looking at those qualities of mind that lead us towards unhappiness, towards this dukkha, this suffering, this off feeling. The three main qualities that lead us in that direction are a wanting to have something, a kind of greed; a wanting to get rid of things that we don't like, an aversion; and a kind of confusion around

Or a misperception around where happiness can actually be found. A misperception about how the world actually works, how reality is structured. That misperception is delusion—something I hope to explore a little more later.

We look at our minds and begin to see how they work. We begin to see that greed, aversion, and delusion lead us into this feeling of offness over and over again. And we begin to see that when we act out of non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion, this leads us towards more happiness in our lives, more peacefulness, more serenity.

So wise effort is about noticing when we're engaging in things that lead us more toward suffering or more toward happiness—cultivating those things that lead us to happiness and letting go of those things that lead us toward suffering.

This is beginning to observe in our minds, and this is the wise mindfulness aspect of the Eightfold Path: turning toward our experience, observing our experience. With a very honest approach—mindfulness brings great honesty to our practice, to our hearts—we turn and look at our experience and recognize when we're behaving in ways that are not helpful. The mindfulness allows us to recognize what our minds are doing, and the teaching on wise effort guides us in the direction toward more and more skillfulness.

The combination of these two—effort and mindfulness—means making the effort to keep staying connected, keep exploring, keep observing. What is this dukkha? This very First Noble Truth, understanding dukkha, coming back to that—this actually is one of our big practices. We bring wise effort and wise mindfulness to bear on our experience. Much of the time that experience feels off, and that very exploration of that offness begins to re-educate the mind.

It's so interesting that when we actually pay attention with mindfulness to the way our mind is engaged in anger or frustration or whatever your favorite pattern is—depression or fear—when we turn to actually look at it... I remember when I first heard

this teaching of turning to look at your difficulties, I thought, "What good is that going to do? Isn't that just going to make it worse?" To my surprise, I found out that actually, no, it didn't make it worse. It educated the mind.

What we tend to do is act out of those habits. We reinforce them by somehow believing that if I act out of this anger, it's going to hurt that person over there, and that's what will satisfy me. If I see them feeling as miserable as I feel, that's what will make me happy. We act on that, but we're not really noticing the suffering that we're experiencing in our own hearts because we're focused outwardly.

So this reorientation—turn around and look at the experience inwardly—it's a radical shift. What happens is the mind begins to see: oh, it's suffering in here when I'm experiencing that. As the mind sees that, and sees that actually this is something happening in the mind—this anger is coming up in our own minds—and the mind sees that this thing coming up in itself is creating this feeling of suffering in itself, it starts to let it go. Because ultimately our minds don't want to suffer. They don't want to be in pain. But we radically misunderstand where that pain comes from. When we turn and actually look at this dukkha itself, the mind begins to understand how to let it go. It begins to understand how it's causing it itself.

This is something you may have to take on trust at first, but if you play with it—in my very first few months of practice, it became really clear that this was true. It did not take long before I realized how true this was: that this turning toward experience, understanding suffering, is the very way, the very path to the letting go of it.

Wise concentration is the last factor of the Eightfold Path, but concentration isn't the aim of the path. The promise of the Eightfold Path is that we will become free of our suffering, free of this mental reactivity, this mental not-liking things to be the way they are. The concentration and the mindfulness together lead us to what I've been describing—how turning toward experience is the pathway through the suffering. The mindfulness and the effort together bring the mind to a place of concentration, of stability, of being able to hang out with these feelings. That's the concentration: that ability to be stable with experience.

And that concentration and mindfulness together begin to show us the truth of those initial teachings from the very beginning of the path, where we started with wise understanding. I said we kind of had to take it as learning and reflection and then begin to engage. As we engage, as we actually connect with the practices, turn and look at our suffering and see that the way to end suffering is through meeting it, we get a verified understanding of these truths, of these Four Noble Truths.

The understanding of suffering is no longer some idea. It's a deep seeing of how suffering is created in our own minds. These practices come together to lead us back, in a kind of cycle, to an understanding of wise understanding and how the intention supports that understanding—at a deeper level. It's a verified understanding. And so we travel the path again in a kind of cycle: wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration lead us to a verified understanding of the wisdom the Buddha offers. It may not be the full verification of it, but it's a glimpse—yes, I understand how that works.

When I first saw how this all works, it was like, "Oh my gosh, this is incredible!" I could actually see how the mind was leading itself down the garden path to suffering. And seeing that, the mind started to just—poof—let it go. This is verification and direct experience of the first and second noble truths, and some of the third: the way the mind can let go of the things that are creating its suffering.

The deepening of wisdom—this path is traveled in a kind of spiral. I think of it as traveling in a spiral. The more that we understand through this engagement with our experience, turning toward our experience, willing to meet our suffering instead of reacting to it, acting on it all the time—the more we do that, the deeper our understanding of the Four Noble Truths goes. The deeper our understanding of suffering goes. The deeper our understanding of how our mind creates that suffering goes. The more we actually see that suffering let go, and the more we see the benefit of cultivating this path.

So we travel it in a kind of spiral, deepening with each turn.

CHAPTER 76

Wise and Balanced Effort

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of energy (viriya) and effort in Buddhist practice, beginning with the Buddha's teaching that "nothing is worth clinging to." She explains how clinging—our habitual attempt to arrange the world according to our preferences—both arises from and perpetuates dukkha (dissatisfaction), and how the practice of letting go offers a path to deeper happiness.*
>
> *Fella presents the four kinds of right effort (sammā vāyāma): avoiding unwholesome states before they arise, abandoning unwholesome states that have arisen, cultivating wholesome states not yet present, and maintaining wholesome states that have emerged. She offers practical strategies for each, including "guarding the sense doors," redirecting attention when patterns are overwhelming, and the transformative power of simply bringing mindfulness to difficult states. Notably, she describes how mindfulness functions like putting a car into neutral—not forcing patterns to stop, but withdrawing the fuel that sustains them.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes the art of balancing effort, using the Buddha's analogy of tuning a stringed instrument. Fella shares Joseph Goldstein's "secret teaching" of attending to just half a breath at a time, and offers her own scooter analogy for understanding how the frequency of mindful reminders should match our current energy level. She encourages practitioners to discover how little effort is actually needed in any single moment, while maintaining patience with the natural rhythms of energy throughout practice.*

At one point, someone asked the Buddha to describe his teaching in brief. And he said, "Nothing is worth clinging to."

So what does this mean? Why would that be a succinct summary of the Buddha's teachings?

When we think about what clinging is—holding on to something, trying to stop something—when we think about clinging in our experience, it usually means that there's something we want to try to keep the way it is. It's like, "This is good this way. I think I'll keep it like this." Or we're clinging to some view or vision or idea of how we'd like it to be, and so we're trying to arrange our world to fit that vision. Essentially, we are working against the natural flow of reality by clinging.

In a way, I think of clinging as both born out of a sense of dissatisfaction and resulting in dissatisfaction. We don't like things the way they are, so we want to arrange things to suit us. Or we want to hold on to something—"This, I'll take more of this, please." And that very holding on is acting against the natural tendency for things to fall away and fall apart in their ever-unceasing flow of change. So clinging is both born out of dissatisfaction with things as they are, and it results in dissatisfaction. Maybe not initially, maybe not obviously to us initially, but it does.

In fact, I think part of the reason why clinging is so tenacious for us—why we do this over and over again, why we have these habits and patterns of "I'm going to fix this, I'm going to get this, I'm going to have this, and then everything's going to be okay," and when it starts to fall apart, "Well, then I'll get this next thing and then I'll be okay again"—part of the reason we have this pattern is because when we do manage to control, to fix, to manipulate, to arrange things to be, even for just a moment, the way we'd like them to be, there is some sense of "Ah, I've figured it out." Even if just for a moment, I figured it out. So there's a little bit of what feels like satisfaction that comes when things come into an arrangement we particularly feel satisfied with.

But this kind of satisfaction is inherently not very long-lasting, not ultimately terribly satisfying, because however we've arranged things, however we've held on to things or fixed things, it will fall apart. And so we're in this cycle, and we think that we'll get satisfaction by getting what we want, getting rid of what we don't want, manipulating the world to be the way we'd like it to be. And then we know that will fall apart, and so then we try again. We think that happiness is to be able to arrange the world successively so that we get more and more moments of things we like and less and less moments of things we don't like. We think that's happiness. We think that's basically as good as it gets for us.

I think that's part of why this clinging, this pattern, is so pervasive for us—because we don't have the vision to see what an alternative would be. What would be another way to happiness?

The Buddha has a proposal for us: that it's actually the letting go of clinging that will lead to a deeper kind of happiness. A coming into alignment with the way things are. A coming into alignment with the fact that things change, that there is this inherent quality of unsatisfactoriness to all experience. There's no experience we can have that will ultimately satisfy us forever. There's that kind of inherent unsatisfactoriness to experience. So the Buddha suggests coming into alignment with these truths, letting go of the clinging. This is a deeper kind of happiness that is possible for us, but it takes a really fundamental shift of our worldview to understand what this really means.

The term "let go" does appeal to us at times. There can be a nice sense thinking about it—"Oh, let go. Yes, I'll let go." But sometimes it's not so easy to let go of habits and patterns that have built up. We've practiced these patterns of getting what we want, getting rid of what we don't want, for our whole lives, starting from the moment we're born. But they're not ingrained. They're not hardwired. It is possible to change these patterns. It's not easy, and it does take this fundamental shift of worldview. And it takes energy, effort, and courage to make this shift.

So this is what I'd like to talk about this evening: energy and effort. How we engage with this practice. These two qualities are very intimately connected, very closely related, but they are slightly different, and I hope to be able to clarify the distinction between energy and effort.

the Buddhist texts, the Pali term is *viriya*, usually translated as energy, sometimes as zeal—this kind of movement to engage. This is what this energy is.

In its barest form, it's understood to be a neutral quality. It's the same quality that underlies engagement with cultivating wholesome qualities like concentration or self-discipline or kindness, as it is a quality that would be associated with engaging in acts of aggression or violence. There's just this energetic movement of expression that comes when we act and engage. So from one side of things, this *viriya*, this quality of energy, is simply a neutral quality.

But in terms of our practice, there are specific associations with energy that help us direct that energy in a skillful direction. In one of the Buddha's many lists, the quality of energy is found in a particular place—between wisdom and patience. I think this is interesting, because it actually points to an important teaching: in this particular list, each quality preceding the next supports the development of the next quality. So in this case, wisdom supports the development of energy.

What is wisdom? If wisdom is the ground out of which this energy that will support our practice grows, what is this wisdom? There are several different ways wisdom is described in the Buddhist texts, the suttas, the words of the Buddha. I'll talk about just a couple of ways this evening to point to some particular aspects I want to clarify around energy and effort.

One of the ways wisdom is defined is as understanding what is helpful, skillful, wholesome with respect to moving towards happiness and away from suffering—understanding what's skillful in terms of letting go of suffering, and understanding what is unskillful. Being very clear about what helps us and what doesn't help us.

The term suffering is quite broad. There are quite a few of you who haven't sat many retreats, so I want to take a moment to describe this term usually translated as suffering—the term *dukkha*. It's often simply translated as suffering, and that's how we speak about it. But when we use that term in English, it's a little intense. We don't necessarily think, "Oh, I'm suffering," when we're a little bit frustrated. The food that was offered tonight may not have suited your digestion. It may not feel so much like suffering—maybe just a little bit of frustration. We don't normally think, "Oh, I'm suffering because I'm frustrated they didn't have rice, they had something else." We don't think of that as suffering. But it is this quality of *dukkha*.

Dukkha has a very broad range of meanings. It can mean just a subtle sense of dissatisfaction, a subtle sense that things aren't quite right. The roots of that word tell us something important: the first part, *du*, means something like "bad," and *kha* refers to the center of a wheel—the space in the middle where the axle would go through. So basically, if you have a bad empty space in the middle of a wheel, what is your ride going to be like? Maybe the hole for the axle is too small, so there's a lot of friction. Or maybe it's a little off-center, so there's a wobbly feeling. Or maybe it's too loose, so the wheel falls off altogether and you crash and burn. This term *dukkha* covers the entire range—from just feeling slightly off to major suffering.

This is the problem the Buddha was trying to solve: Is it possible to be free of this feeling that things are just off all the time? It's more pervasive than we really recognize, this feeling that if only we had a little more of that, if only we could get rid of a little more of this. Again, our pattern of manipulating our environment masks this sense of dissatisfaction.

The skillful and unskillful—this aspect of wisdom—are intimately connected with what supports us in finding a way out of this dissatisfaction, this off feeling, this suffering.

Another main definition of wisdom in the Buddhist texts is the Four Noble Truths. Understanding the Four Noble Truths isn't simply believing in didactic statements meant to be put out there and accepted. The Buddha suggested these Four Noble Truths—the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the end of suffering—as things we need to engage with. This is where energy comes in. He didn't put these out there saying, "Just believe these." He said, "Engage with these." He associated an action with each of these truths.

He said, we need to understand suffering. We need to let go of the cause of suffering. We need to realize for ourselves the ending of suffering, and we need to cultivate the path leading to the ending of suffering.

So this is how wisdom and energy are intimately connected. This wisdom of the Buddha is not just a wisdom meant to be believed—it's meant to be engaged with. The energy in our practice is energy directed towards a specific purpose. The spiritual faculty of energy has the purpose of awakening.

There's another definition of energy. Courage is sometimes used as another translation for this term, *viriya*. I looked up the definition of courage, the English definition. I normally think of courage as bravery or something like that, but the definition I found really describes what we do here: the inner strength of heart to persevere in the face of difficulty. That is a lot of what we do here.

Energy and effort are very connected. We need energy, in a sense, to make effort. This is our normal way of thinking about energy. If I have energy, I can do things. If I have energy, I can go for a run. Once I go for a run, then I need to rest, allow my energy to come back. So we think of consuming energy when we make effort. That's our normal model about energy and effort—we have energy and then we can make effort; making effort uses up the energy and then we need to do something to replenish it. Take a rest. Have some food. Something like that.

We carry this model into our practice of how energy and effort are related. We feel like to make effort in the practice, we use up energy, and when our energy is used up, we can't practice anymore. That is one way it is true—energy is needed to make effort. But there's also another teaching around this, which turns the whole thing on its head: making effort produces energy. When we make effort wisely, it produces a balanced kind of energy. A balanced effort will produce a balanced energy.

This turns things on its head. Is there a way that we can envision making effort such that energy isn't consumed but actually produced? One of the ways I understand how this works is that clinging—this process of holding on, manipulating, trying to arrange our world to be just the way we want it to be—takes a lot of energy. When in this practice we turn to attend to the clinging and the clinging begins to let go, energy gets freed up. I think this is one way that skillful, balanced effort produces energy.

I'd like to talk about effort, this wise effort, this balanced effort, from the perspective first of wise effort. There's a whole teaching that the Buddha offers about making effort in the practice, and this teaching about right effort, wise effort, takes as its foundation the same understanding of what's skillful and unskillful, what's wholesome and unwholesome.

The simplest way of describing wholesome mind states is that they are those states based in non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. Or to put it more positively: kindness, generosity, and wisdom. States based in kindness, generosity, and wisdom will tend to lead us towards happiness and away from suffering. Unwholesome, unskillful states are those based in greed, in aversion, in delusion—states like irritation, frustration, restlessness, boredom, laziness, smugness, wanting, pride. All of these states of mind lead us to this dukkha, this off feeling.

Right effort is said to be four kinds of effort that the Buddha put forth. He said there's the effort we need to make to avoid unwholesome states that have not yet come up in our minds—to avoid unwholesome states that have not yet arisen. Then there's the effort to abandon or let go of unwholesome states that have come up in our minds—to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen. On the other side, there's the effort to cultivate wholesome states that have not yet come up, and the effort to maintain wholesome states that have arisen.

You see that the whole understanding around wise effort requires that we understand what wholesome and unwholesome states of mind are.

This can sound somewhat obscure—the effort to avoid unwholesome states that have not arisen, the effort to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen. So I'm going to go through each of these so that we can get a sense of what it means to practice with each of these right efforts.

The first one is the effort to avoid unwholesome states that have not yet arisen. What does that mean? How do we avoid an unwholesome state that's not here yet? Basically, this is about looking at causes and conditions that land us in suffering, learning from our experience. We see over the course of looking at our experience that in certain conditions, certain situations, we end up struggling, we end up suffering a lot. So the practice around this kind of right effort is to notice those conditions and learn how to navigate around them—to avoid the conditions that lead us into suffering.

We have to be careful with this teaching because even just the term "avoiding" can have a flavor of aversion to us. We can think of it as meaning to push something away, to get averse and push something away so that we don't have to experience some kind of suffering. That is not what's being talked about here.

This term for avoiding can have some subtle meanings to it, though it can also be quite obvious. There's that teaching, a kind of autobiography in five chapters. Some of you may have heard this.

Chapter one: I walk down a street. There's a big hole in the street. I don't see it. I fall in. It takes me a long time to get out.

Chapter two: I walk down the street. There's a big hole in the street. I see it, and I fall in. It takes me a long time to get out.

Chapter three: I walk down the street. There's a big hole in the street. I see it. I think about avoiding it, but I fall in. I get out quickly.

Chapter four: I walk down the street. There's a big hole in the street. I walk around the hole.

Chapter five: I walk down another street.

This is learning from experience. We can learn to avoid the situations that land us in trouble. Sometimes it's that obvious. Other times there's a little bit more subtlety to it.

For instance, some of you may have noticed that when you're in line for lunch or dinner, there may be some comparing mind going on about what other people are doing—how much food they're taking, what they're putting on their plate, how they're putting it on their plate. At first glance, we might not even notice. We might not even see that this is suffering. It's like walking down the street and just falling in the hole. We just end up lost in comparing, and at some point, twenty minutes later, it's like, "Oh yeah, mindfulness—what's that?"

Other times we actually do begin to see this comparing mind and we sense, "This is not so helpful." As we begin to see that these kinds of states of mind are not so helpful, we might want to find ways to avoid the situations that create them.

At first glance we might think, "Okay, if standing in line watching people take food is causing this judgment, maybe what I do is wait. I sit in the hall for another fifteen minutes until there's nobody in the line, and then I miss out on the judgment." That's one way of working with it. But you might want to check in as to whether that particular way of exploring this has a little bit of aversion to the comparing mind itself.

Another way to explore this might be to really be mindful of what's happening for you in the line—noticing where this comparing comes out of. You see somebody taking a big scoop of something. What happens there?

Maybe it immediately goes to "they shouldn't do that," but see if you can see what's happening there. It might be something like a little bit of fear—there's not going to be enough for me. A little bit of fear that leads to some thinking, that leads to this judgment.

So if we can begin to see that it's not just the condition of standing in the line that's creating the suffering, it's kind of a more moment-to-moment process happening in our minds out of which this judgment is coming—then we can begin to use some tools of mindfulness to help ourselves not go down that path.

One way to explore this is something called guarding the sense doors. It's not putting blinders on, but using mindfulness to really recognize what's happening in this moment. Seeing is happening. Seeing is happening in this moment. Actually, this is one tool that Joseph Goldstein offers a lot on his retreats. He says when you go into the dining hall, if you see there's a lot of judgment happening, just as soon as you get in there, start to notice: seeing is happening, seeing is happening. That's a kind of way of guarding that sense door from ending up hooking into this chain of thinking that ends up proliferating into a pattern that leads to suffering.

I tried this for myself. I was finding myself judging in the dining room, and I went in and just started noting seeing—using that "seeing is happening, seeing is happening." And it was amazing. It stopped there. It didn't leap into subsequent unwholesome states of mind.

The second kind of right effort is the effort to abandon, to let go of unwholesome states that have arisen. This means when we find ourselves caught in some kind of struggle, dissatisfaction, frustration, some sense of offness—this dukkha—we make the effort to let go of it.

Now, this effort of letting go might have an active feeling to it. It might have a sense of, "Oh yes, I see this isn't so helpful to be engaging in this pattern. Maybe I can let go of it." We can kind of put it down a little bit.

The Buddha offers some tools for this active letting go. One thing he suggests is when we see ourselves caught in a pattern of unwholesome thought or mind state—if we find ourselves caught in anger or judging or comparing about a particular person—then see

if we can replace the thoughts. Just actively use different thoughts in the mind. He actually suggests for fear and anger that replacing those thoughts with thoughts of metta will be helpful. This is one way that we can practice letting go of unwholesome states.

Now, this can't be done with an idea or an attitude of aversion towards the unwholesome states. It really has to be very neutral: "Okay, that's not so helpful. Let me try this. Can I let go of engaging in that thought pattern and try something else?"

Another way to work with actively letting go is to redirect the attention. I call this the "not now" practice. If you're finding yourself caught in some pattern that has an overwhelming quality—this happens to us a lot in meditation—you know, we find patterns and habits are so strong that sometimes they have much more momentum and strength than our mindfulness. When we try to bring mindfulness to some of these very powerful patterns, whether it's fear or anger or depression or loneliness, sometimes when the pattern is so strong, it can swamp the mindfulness. It's like the mindfulness just gets sucked into this black hole. "Where was I?" We just get completely lost.

So if you know that about a particular pattern, it can be really helpful to recognize that pattern coming up and think, "Okay, here's anger. Maybe I shouldn't even try to be mindful of this. I should turn my attention to something else in my experience."

I did this for quite a while around one particular pattern of anger. Just noticing when this person—it was one person I was angry at, and this particular anger just had a real hook to it. Every time this person came up in my mind, the anger started and just took off. So I began recognizing the moments when I was just starting to get angry and thinking, "Okay, not a good idea to put any kind of attention or energy in this at all. Don't try to be mindful of it. Just put my attention someplace else—into my feet." I tended to be walking when this would come up, so just feet on the ground, noticing the sensation, the contact. Kind of a "not now" to that anger. Not an aversive pushing away, but just recognizing it's not helpful to try to turn toward it right now.

I see you. I see that you've got an energy, a strong energy, and wanting to be seen. So for me, there was a kind of need to acknowledge that strong pattern, that strong habit with some kindness, and then redirecting the attention. This is another way of letting go of unwholesome states.

But often what's happening in our practice is that something's coming up, we can see it with mindfulness, it's not that it's dragging us down, but it just doesn't really feel like much is happening. I remember at one retreat, this deep pattern of clinging was so

clear to me. It was like I knew I was holding on. I even kind of had a sense of what I was holding on to. But I had no clue how to let go. I could see that—I'd let go if I could. It just wasn't possible.

In that time, it wasn't as if that feeling of suffering, that feeling of holding, that feeling of clinging was drowning my mindfulness. It just really wasn't pleasant. It was a really unpleasant place to be. I really wanted to let go, but I couldn't let go.

So in that case, a lot of what our practice is, is just bringing mindfulness to the experience. One of the ways I think of mindfulness working, particularly in this kind of sense—this is the "let it be" approach with mindfulness—is that as these difficult patterns and habits are playing themselves out, sometimes what mindfulness does, or the way mindfulness works, is kind of like this: we're driving a car a hundred miles an hour down the freeway. That's the momentum of whatever that pattern is—the anger, the frustration, the loneliness, the depression. It's the mind in that pattern, traveling really fast.

Often the way mindfulness functions is not by slamming on the brakes on this pattern, but by putting the car into neutral. You're going a hundred miles an hour down the freeway, you put the car into neutral, and the car doesn't come to a stop immediately, but it will come to a stop because you're no longer feeding it. You're no longer giving it gas.

It's very similar with the mindfulness practice. With this kind of balanced, kind attention, it's like disengaging the gears. It's taking the fuel out of the pattern so that it can come to a stop in its own time. And what seems to happen, at least in my experience, is that we disengage for a while, and then we see it and engage again. We're winding it up again. Oh—remember—and we disengage, and then engage, and disengage. This is our practice. This is a lot of our practice: to notice when we're engaged and when we're disengaged. And when we're disengaged, it does tend to shift. We begin to sense a shift in our practice when there's that disengagement. We get the feeling—there's a kind of insight shift, in a way—that when I'm paying attention in this way, it's not increasing the suffering. In fact, it is allowing that pattern to wind down. And we begin to appreciate that this is the kind of direction that leads us away from suffering, even though it's not immediate.

The third kind of right effort is the effort to arouse wholesome mind states that have not yet arisen. This is basically cultivating the wholesome, actively working at cultivating wholesome qualities. Now, a lot of our practice seems to be in this territory of letting go of difficulty. But as that's happening, as we're working to let go of difficulty, we are also cultivating a lot of beautiful qualities—mindfulness being one of them. One of

my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, said mindfulness is the most wholesome mind state. So engaging with paying attention to anger or frustration or depression or loneliness or whatever your pattern is, with mindfulness, strengthens that capacity of mindfulness. It strengthens the capacity for interest and investigation. It strengthens the capacity for concentration. As we are engaging, we are arousing and cultivating these wholesome states that have not yet arisen.

The other piece of cultivating wholesome states that have not yet arisen has to do with what we talked about on the first evening: working with the precepts. Essentially, we can cultivate, we help to cultivate wholesome states by avoiding unwholesome actions, situations that oppose those qualities of mind. Refraining from lying cultivates honesty and truthfulness. Refraining from stealing cultivates contentment. Refraining from killing cultivates compassion.

So these wholesome qualities go hand in hand—these two aspects come together. We can also cultivate these positive qualities through positive practices. The quality of metta, for instance: each evening at the nine o'clock sitting, we are practicing active cultivation of that quality of the open heart, the kind heart. We can also cultivate generosity through simple acts of kindness, simple acts of giving. So we can find our way to practice, find practices and ways to cultivate these wholesome qualities.

The fourth kind of right effort is the effort to sustain wholesome states that have arisen. This one was confusing to me at first. I thought, why would you need to try to do that? Wouldn't it just happen naturally? If there's something beautiful happening, wouldn't it be natural for it to sustain itself?

Well, when I started looking at my own mind, I found that actually, no. In my mind, at least, I would notice particular beautiful states of mind coming up—calm, for example. I was on a three-month course, and finally the mind really settled down. I'd been working with a lot of difficulty and pain in the body, and one sitting, the mind just calmed down. I noticed it: calm, it's calm. The very next thing the mind wanted to do was, "Oh, this is a really good time to pay attention to that pain in my back." I wanted to do something with the calm, not just notice it. And what did I choose to do? I chose to do something that would agitate the mind.

Another time I was really noticing a lot of joy come up, and the joy was very strong, almost overwhelming. There was a little bit of me that felt, "I can't handle this—it's way too much joy." There was a feeling of pushing it down or trying to suppress it. But some little wisdom thought went through and said, "It's okay, it will pass." With that, I kind of let go, and it got really intense—almost like a big geyser of joy. Then very quickly, it settled into a much more calm kind of happiness.

Just noticing these states, being willing to turn mindfulness to them—that has been my experience as one of the best ways to sustain these wholesome states that have come up. Turn to them with mindfulness.

So these four kinds of right effort may seem like four different things. But we can also look at them as four sides of a single process. Consider what happens, what's being cultivated, what's being let go of, as we turn with mindfulness to a difficult mind state like anger. As we turn with mindfulness to that anger, it supports the letting go of that anger. Turning to pay attention to that anger, we're letting go a little bit around that engagement I talked about. So it's releasing that unwholesome state that has already arisen.

Also, bringing mindfulness to that state avoids an escalation of that anger. I've seen this in my own mind: if I don't bring mindfulness to anger, it quickly gets worse and worse. When I bring mindfulness to it, it keeps it at a certain level. Bringing that mindfulness to it avoids the arising of more intense forms of that anger—that first kind of wise effort.

So bringing our mindfulness to experience automatically brings along these first two kinds of wise effort. And then it's also bringing along the cultivation of wholesome states. We're cultivating concentration. We're cultivating mindfulness. We're cultivating interest in exploring what's happening. We're cultivating and maintaining those states.

Really, with mindfulness, when we're working with mindfulness, we can trust these processes of the right efforts to be unfolding. But it helps to recognize when these wholesome states are being cultivated and when these unwholesome states are being released. It's a simple thing to actually acknowledge that. And it's very powerful—particularly acknowledging the wholesome, acknowledging the beautiful states that are coming along as we practice.

Another aspect of this teaching on energy and effort that the Buddha offers is around balancing the energy, balancing the effort. There's a fine line in our meditation practice—energy that lands between being too relaxed and too tense.

We're navigating this very narrow place. Energy that's too relaxed can tend to land us into dullness, sleepiness. Energy that's too tight can land us into restlessness, agitation.

The Buddha offered an analogy for this. He said it's kind of like tuning a stringed instrument. When the string on the instrument is too loose, it's not going to make beautiful music—it's going to go kind of thud. When it's too tight, when you pluck the string, it may break. So the tension on that string needs to be just right.

He points to this tuning of energy as being akin to an art form, because he's comparing it to the art of playing a musical instrument. And so really, this tuning of our energy is the art of meditation. The level of our energy changes continually—how much energy we have, how much energy is available. There's this continual flow of changing situations, and so we need to keep track of it, tuning our effort to the level of energy. We can balance our energy by making effort in a wise way, because balanced effort results in balanced energy. The way that we engage makes a big difference.

So this really is the art of meditation. There's an exploration that we make around how much effort to put into being mindful. And actually, in a moment, in a split second, it's not very hard to be mindful. Will was saying this last night—pay attention to your sensation of your butt on the chair or cushion or bench. Notice the sensations of your hands. Notice the sensations of your lips touching. How hard is it? In a moment, usually it's not very hard. What is challenging for us is to sustain it over time.

This, I think, is where our energy often gets out of balance. When we think, "Oh, I need to be mindful for the entire sitting," it's kind of like in that moment when we sit down, we're picking up the whole forty-five minutes in this first moment and thinking, "I need to bring in the energy, the effort to be mindful for this entire forty-five minutes right in this split second." And that is overwhelming. We can't do it that way.

But what we can do is be mindful just in this moment, and in this moment, and in this moment, over and over and over again. Just the light effort that it took for you to notice each of those areas I pointed out—that's the level of effort that needs to be made. It just needs to be made moment after moment after moment, without projecting into the future thinking, "Oh, it's so many moments, I'm never going to be able to do it." Just the next moment and the next moment.

There are a couple of tricks we can use to help us with this. Joseph Goldstein points to what he calls the secret teaching of breath meditation, which is that the only amount of effort you need to make to pay attention to your breath is just enough effort to pay attention to half a breath. Can you pay attention to the in-breath? It takes about a second, second and a half. Usually we can sustain the attention for that long. And then at the end of that in-breath, you do it again for the out-breath. Make the amount of effort you need to sustain the attention for the out-breath. It's kind of like pulling yourself along half breath at a time. And the mind will wander, and we recognize that, we relax, we come back, and we just do it again. Just this gentle reminding, over and over again.

We can do the same thing in walking meditation. I found at times when my mind is really scattered in walking, it's helpful to pick something on the path, like three feet out—that little change in the grain of wood, or that little spot on the carpet, or that leaf on

the pavement. Pick that spot and then ask, "Can I be mindful until I get to that leaf?" Two steps. I made it. And then pick another spot, and another one. In this way, we can pull ourselves along and begin to sustain this quality of light touch to the effort.

Really, this art of effort has to do with learning how to make the appropriate amount of effort for the situation. And it's often much less than we think.

particularly when I feel like I'm struggling, trying so hard to be present, I ask myself, how little effort do I need to make right now in order to be mindful? It's actually quite a bit less than I've been making. Many times I find that I can let go of a lot of the effort, that just for this moment, it doesn't take that much.

When the mind is dull and sleepy and drifting a lot, it's not that we need to force ourselves to be more mindful in a moment. It's that we need to remind ourselves more frequently to have that light touch of mindfulness.

There's an analogy I'd like to offer. It's riding a scooter—you know, those scooters that kids have, those narrow ones with two wheels, a little flatbed. You put one foot on the flatbed and tap your other foot on the ground to get the momentum going. When you're at a standstill, you have to tap the ground pretty frequently to get going. But after a little while, the momentum builds and you don't have to tap so frequently anymore. You can ride for a while. And then you start to notice, you get familiar with what it feels like as the scooter starts to wobble, and you know you need to put your foot down and tap again.

This is kind of the way effort works in our practice. Initially, and at various times of the day when the energy is low, we need to remind ourselves frequently—just a gentle reminder more often, like that tapping to get us going. Then we begin to get a sense of what it feels like for the momentum of mindfulness to have some energy, some flow. When we sense that mindfulness has some momentum, we can back off the level of effort and just ride that wave of mindfulness until we start to get familiar with the wobbly feeling and recognize: okay, I need to remind myself again, just this moment, just this moment.

This is one way to tune the effort—looking at this frequency. It takes patience, a lot of patience. We need to learn to attune ourselves to the level of energy that's present, get familiar with what that feels like, and be patient with ourselves when the energy is low. Just making the best effort you can given the circumstances.

That was a relief for me at one point. I went into my teacher and said, "I'm so exhausted. How do I practice when I'm so exhausted like this?" And he said, "Just make the best effort that you can given the circumstances." Oh, okay. I can do that. Just try the best I can.

There are always going to be rhythms and change, cycles of our energy level. When our energy is strong, we don't have to work so hard—we can just notice what's going on. When the energy is low, we just make the best effort we can. It's not that forceful kind of effort. It's just: okay, mindful for this moment. Can I be mindful in this moment? And this moment? That really light touch, as much as you remember. And then you'll forget and you'll wake up again. Just making the effort moment to moment. Conditions will change, and if you're making this balanced kind of effort, then balanced energy will be the result.

One important piece I have to say here is that when we're making effort and directing our energy, we often have something in mind that we want to do with it. I want insight. I want freedom. I want to let go of this clinging. And the way it works in this practice is that we do need to head in a direction, but we can't demand particular results at particular times. That will just lead us into suffering—that expectation, that bargain we make with our practice: if I work this hard for this sitting, then I'll get this, and then I'll be satisfied. That's a recipe for suffering.

So we have to head ourselves in a direction without having an agenda about when or how the results come. This balanced effort creates a container, a skillful container from which insights can unfold. It's kind of like a fruit tree—we can't make the fruit ripen.

But we can support the conditions that will allow the tree's natural process to result in ripe fruit. We can support the conditions of the tree having water, having nourishment. We can take care of the weeds, making sure that there are good conditions for the tree to flourish in. And then we just have to settle back and allow the natural process of the tree to produce the ripe fruit. When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree. We cannot make that happen, but we can create the conditions. And this balanced effort is a key part of the conditions—creating the ground out of which insight will come.

I'll close with a quote from a Sri Lankan monk who is both a scholar and a practitioner. His name is Piyadasi Thera. He wrote:

"We must, by our own resolute efforts, rise and make our way to the portals of liberty, and it is always in every moment in our power to do so. Neither are those portals locked and the key in the possession of someone else from whom it must be obtained by prayer or entreaty. That door is free of all bolts and bars, save those that we ourselves have made."

CHAPTER 77

Opening Talk

Andrea Fella · 1h16

> *In this opening talk from a small intimate retreat, Andrea Fella and Greg Scharf welcome practitioners to the desert setting and establish the foundational elements of retreat practice. Andrea speaks eloquently about the multiple containers that support meditation practice: the physical environment of the expansive desert landscape, the noble silence, the simplicity of the schedule, and the sangha support of practicing together. She introduces the central theme of examining our relationship to wanting and happiness, exploring how our deeply conditioned belief that happiness comes from getting what we want actually perpetuates suffering through the feeling of lack and insufficiency.*
>
> *The talk distinguishes between taṇhā (craving with stickiness to outcomes) and chanda (neutral desire that can be wholesome when paired with kindness and compassion). Andrea emphasizes that mindfulness practice allows us to observe how our minds respond to the world, revealing habitual patterns of reactivity and fundamental misunderstandings about where true happiness lies.*
>
> *Greg Scharf then offers a comprehensive explanation of the Triple Gem and the taking of refuges and precepts. He explores Buddha as wakefulness and our own potential for awakening, Dhamma as both the teachings and the truth of each moment, and Saṅgha as community and shared aspiration. He explains the five precepts (pañca sīla) as training rules rather than commandments, emphasizing their role in creating non-remorse, which naturally leads to gladness, joy, serenity, and deeper understanding. The evening concludes with the formal chanting of refuges and precepts in Pāli and English, marking the official beginning of the retreat container.*

Welcome to our retreat here at this beautiful space. It's such a lovely space. We're actually really fortunate to have such an intimate setting with the twelve of you here. One of the early retreats I sat was about this size, and it remains one of my fond memories—having the container of the retreat be so intimate. So it's really lovely to have you all here with us.

I'm Andrea Fella. I've been teaching for a number of years now and teach at the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts, at Spirit Rock in California, and at various places around the country like this one who invite me to come. My dear friend and colleague Greg and I pretty much met when we were helping create a retreat together in Burma. We've got a lot of history together and time spent together, both teaching re-

treats and managing retreats. Greg also teaches at the Insight Meditation Society and in Burma. He's an international meditation teacher now, teaching all over the world. So we're very happy to be here with you for this retreat.

I'd like to say a few words about the schedule. There are a few of you here who have never been on a meditation retreat before. The schedules are posted around various places on the bulletin board. It's a regular schedule. We have a system of bells, and for those of you who aren't familiar with our retreats and the bell system, it's pretty simple. If you hear a bell in here when we ring it at the end of the sitting, it means it's time to go walking. If you hear a bell out there, it means it's time to come back in here. Around the meal times, you'll probably know it's around the meal times—your body will tell you. So it's pretty simple, and you can actually see if you can renounce your watch, renounce looking at your watch, and just settle into the container and the support that's provided here to structure our time together.

We're pretty much sitting and walking, practicing sitting and walking meditation all day, punctuated by our meals. There are three particular events each day. At the 8:30 sitting in the morning, we'll have instructions and some time for questions after that. At the 3 o'clock sitting in the afternoon, we'll have a metta practice, which is a guided loving-kindness, heart-opening practice. Then in the evening at 7:40 we'll have a talk. That's the structure of the day.

During the week, we will offer practice discussions, meetings with you individually. We'll both have opportunities for regularly scheduled meetings with you as well as a few spaces for sign-up interviews if you'd like some extra time to speak with us. We'll start those on Sunday. Tomorrow will just be a day to settle into the rhythm of the place and the schedule, and then we'll talk more about the individual practice discussions on Sunday.

I wanted to say a few words about basically what we're doing here. I'd like to start by recalling how I felt as I came up here today. I was on the Twin Hearts shuttle driving up through the gorge. It's beautiful in the gorge—the landscape is beautiful, and it's just so lovely. The raw beauty of the desert touches me so much. There's something about the desert that very deeply resonates with me. And then coming out of the gorge onto the plateau, it's just such an opening. Moving into that space, the vastness of the desert becomes so apparent. The vastness of the sky, the expansiveness of the sky. I felt like my heart just expanded with the land.

So there's this container of the environment, the desert that we're in, the raw beauty of the land, the expansiveness of the view, the space. We can look out quite a long way, especially if you walk a little bit up the hill. And then there's the sky and the purity of

the air. It's just amazing. This kind of container that we're held in can support us. The beauty of the place, the expansiveness, the spaciousness can support us. If we feel like we get contracted in our minds or struggle and feel tight and held in our mind, we can go out into the space and just recognize that there's more to life and the world than our own internal struggles.

And then there's the container of the retreat itself—the silence, the simplicity. We'll be in silence here.

Just hold our days in silence. We'll talk—we'll be talking—but largely, you will be in silence.

Now, when you come into the interviews, the practice discussions, the meetings with us, it's fine to speak. You don't have to write out a description of your experience and hand it to us. If you're in your yogi jobs, it's fine to speak to Surya and to communicate functional speech. So it doesn't have to be a strict kind of silence in that way; we're not clamping down on our mouths for a week. But we are moving into a place of noble silence where we are looking at our minds, with the support of the silence to encourage us to move inward as opposed to outward. Letting go of this talking actually encourages us to move inwards. So the silence is one of the aspects of this container.

The simplicity—the schedule is pretty simple. We sit, then we walk, then we sit, then we walk, then we sit, then we eat, then we sit, then we walk. It goes like that. And so the simplicity here... I mean, our lives are not simple. Our lives are full of busyness. They're full of computers and gadgets and meetings and partners and excitement and the whole show of our lives. And here we have an opportunity to really let go of that, to let go of the busyness of our lives and settle into something really, really simple. Simplicity is a huge support for our practice.

The schedule is also an aspect of the container. It supports a kind of sustaining of this awareness, a sustaining of the attention. We practice. We learn that we can practice more continuously. We learn how to practice more continuously. This also greatly supports our settling.

And then there's the support of each other, the sangha support—another aspect of this container of the retreat. I think you'll find, and those of you who are experienced with retreats know this, that it's so beautiful. The silence is wonderful, and the fact that we're together in silence is really wonderful. The support that we offer each other in the silence is quite profound. We don't have to make eye contact. We don't have to gesture or communicate in any way. I've spent whole retreats where all I've looked at is people's socks and shoes and not looked up and looked at their faces.

While it may seem a bit awkward—for those of you who are new on retreat, it may seem a little awkward not to be making eye contact—it will also support this settling into the container of the retreat. We mention this partly because for some people new on retreat especially, it seems odd that people aren't looking at you, and you feel like this is really strange. I remember on my very first retreat, I felt like I didn't know if I was okay unless I could make eye contact with people. But by the end of that retreat, I really appreciated the fact that you're left alone, that you're with a community but left alone to just meet yourself. There's no need to be anything for anyone. It's a huge gift that we offer each other.

And the practice that we do is a support for each other. There have been times I remember—when I'd look across at somebody who was moving very mindfully. I remember getting up and walking out of the meditation hall one day and seeing somebody move their hands to shift their posture, and it was so clear to me the person was completely present. It just took me into a whole new realm of possibility for being mindful. So just seeing how we practice—and sometimes we can struggle, we feel like we're struggling, and we can see somebody just doing walking meditation, and there can be a sense of, if they can do it, I can do it. We support each other in this way. It's a very beautiful thing.

So allow yourself to be held by these containers: the container of the desert, the spaciousness, the beauty, the silence of the desert; the container of the retreat, the silence, the simplicity, the stillness, the support that we offer each other, and the schedule. Allow yourself to be held by these containers. If we just came here and allowed ourselves to be held by the container of the desert and were in silence and simplicity—that's all we did for the week—I think you'd probably find there was actually quite a bit of settling that happened.

So just the container itself can provide a place where the mind settles down. But we can actually go much further than this. The mind settles through simplicity, but we can also train our minds to settle more deeply—through letting go of our habitual tendency to think about the past and the future, and even about the present moment. We sit here thinking about the present moment as well. We find our mind running in commentary about what's happening right now.

Just letting go of these habits of mind to think. Not that thinking is bad—it's not so much that thinking is bad, but thinking does tend to take us out of the present moment. It is possible to be aware while we are thinking, to be mindful while we are thinking. But it tends to be that our thoughts send us shooting into other worlds and times and

places. Whole worlds get created in our minds, and then we lose track of where we actually are. We lose track of our lives actually, of what's actually happening—the direct lived experience of the moment.

And so over and over again we let go of this tendency to think and come back to the lived experience of the moment. Over and over again we come back to this lived experience with a quality of kindness and friendliness to our attention. These two pieces—the coming back, the letting go of thoughts, and this friendliness, this kindness, this sense of open-hearted willingness to meet what's happening—these two pieces really allow a settling of the mind. They support an opening of the heart and a quieting of the mind.

That process then opens us to an even deeper possibility, a more profound opening to begin to learn and understand about our own minds. And this is really where this practice is so powerful. The settling is wonderful, actually. You'll find it can move to places of peacefulness and ease through the settling down of the mind. But this practice of mindfulness, the vipassanā practice that we do, is profound in that it allows us to explore how our minds respond to the world. And we find that our minds actually respond to the world in some not so helpful ways a lot of the time—very reactive. We have habitual ways that we get caught in reactivity.

So we learn through observing—and we'll talk about this during the week—learn through observing how our minds do what they do. And gradually through this observing, this watching, the mind starts to release and let go around these patterns, lets go of these habits. We also begin to understand, as we watch what's happening in our minds, that the usual perspective we have on the world is limited. It really kind of boxes us into a very narrow view. And not only is it limited, but many of the ways we view the world are actually completely mistaken. There's a fundamental misunderstanding that we have around how the world works, how our minds work, how things work.

One of the key ways that we misunderstand is around where happiness is to be found. Our usual notion is that happiness comes from getting what we want. This is one of our main notions. And as we move into more and more letting go of the things that we want, the more we practice, the more we see that a lot of the things we used to want have begun to fall away. But then we start to want particular meditative states. So the pattern actually keeps replicating itself. It's a deep pattern, deeply conditioned—that having what I want is the way towards happiness. Very deeply conditioned.

Another way that we think happiness comes is from being in control of our experience. Whether or not things are pleasant, if I feel like I'm in control, there's a sense of, "Okay, this is good. This is okay when I'm in control."

These are beliefs. "Happiness comes from getting what I want." These beliefs are deeply conditioned by our culture, by our upbringing, and also, I think, encouraged by evolution. Some of the ways evolution has unfolded have actually encouraged this notion: get what I want, that's where happiness lies.

Very deeply, we do know at some level that having a particular thing—while it feels good to have something that we want—we know that that is not the be-all and end-all. But we do seem to believe, deeply believe, that what happiness means is over and over getting the next thing that I want. That constructing a life strung together with getting things I want—that's happiness. And it's so deeply conditioned, so much a part of our lives, that we can't even envision happiness coming in any other way. It's just so profoundly conditioned.

So there is a happiness in getting what we want—I want to acknowledge that. There's a sense of pleasure in the having. There is a kind of happiness that comes from that. And the Buddha acknowledged that. He actually acknowledged that there are many levels and layers of happiness.

He talked about wealth that was righteously gained. Righteous wealth righteously gained is a happiness of a householder, of a person who has to be in the world. Money acquired by wholesome means, by skillful means, by right livelihood, is a happiness because we can then support our families, support the things that we love, support causes that we find important. We can use our resources as a kind of sustaining thing to support what we think is important, what our priorities are. So this is a happiness. The Buddha did talk about this as being a happiness.

But the flaw really comes in the strategy around having what we want, and over and over again having what we want. There are a couple of flaws to this strategy. One is that some measure of the time we don't succeed in getting what we want. And we think, because happiness comes from getting what we want, that somehow when we don't succeed, we're a failure. That something's wrong with us. That it's a problem. Rather than it simply being a natural part of the condition of the world—that sometimes conditions come together so that we get what we want, and sometimes they come together so that we don't. So we take it personally often when we don't get what we want.

There are various levels of this in your life. It may be that you don't get a chocolate bar that you like because somebody else took the last one. That's a small one. But you don't get the job that you really want—there's a little more investment in that, a little bit more suffering around that.

If we do succeed in getting what we want, there can be an anxiety at times, a fear that it will go away. So there's a kind of having to shore that thing up. Oh, I've got what I want. How do I keep it? And so there's a continual process around keeping it. Those are two aspects of this strategy that are mistaken in our minds in a way.

But the really fundamental mistake in this strategy is that while there is a happiness that comes from getting what we want, a lot of that happiness comes not from the fact that we have this thing, but from the fact that the feeling of wanting has gone away. For a few moments we have a release from that feeling of wanting something. That's actually quite significant. When we start to recognize it, it's quite a strong part of the happiness of getting what we want—the happiness of letting go of the wanting.

Wanting itself is not pleasant. We don't actually, until we start to pay attention to this experience, even think to look at the experience of wanting, because we're so focused on the idea of having the thing. We're projecting into the future, thinking about how great it's going to be to get that thing. And that idea, that fantasy, is pleasant. It obscures for us the actual unpleasantness of the state of wanting.

As soon as wanting comes up in our experience, there's a feeling of lack, a feeling of insufficiency. And we mistake this because we're focused on the idea of the having. We don't see this feeling of lack. We don't see that this is a fundamental state that we're actually encouraging by being on this cycle of wanting something and getting it—the wanting and then the getting and the having. By being on that cycle, we actually encourage more of this wanting. It actually encourages us to be in this state of lack, of insufficiency. It's quite amazing that our minds do this.

So when the feeling of wanting goes away, the feeling of lack goes away, the feeling of insufficiency goes away. This is one of the explorations that we make in this practice. We start to see that a lot of our struggle, our unease, our unhappiness comes because we are not satisfied with things as they are. We're always wanting things to be just slightly some other way. Things are just not quite the way we want them to be.

In that state of wanting things to be other than they are, we're kind of out of line, out of alignment with reality, out of alignment with the actuality of experience. So the practice begins to put us in alignment with truth, with alignment with reality.

Now sometimes, often actually, when I talk about wanting like this, people ask about desire. Is all desire bad? What about the desire to take care of my family? That doesn't seem like a bad thing.

In the Buddhist teaching there are two different ideas that are both often translated in similar ways. One is often translated as wanting or craving, and the other is often translated as desire. Wanting or craving is this term—the Pali term is *taṇhā*. And it has a real stickiness to it. It has a sense of needing to have things be a certain way. So it's often got a sense of stickiness to a particular result.

So that's this craving, this wanting that is not helpful for us. It's kind of like we're setting ourselves up to project into the future and say, "This is the way it has to be in order for me to be happy." And if it doesn't happen that way, what happens? We don't have that scenario come up. We struggle, we suffer, we feel dissatisfied, we feel like we have to fix things, we feel like we're a failure.

Then there's another side—the Pali term is *chanda*, which is often translated as desire. This is a neutral kind of desire. It can be flavored by whatever else is happening in the mind. So there can be an unwholesome kind of *chanda*, unwholesome desire that maybe is focused towards pleasure. It's not going to be something deeply wrong, but it's skewed towards pleasure. That's the first of the hindrances: *kama chanda*, the desire for sense pleasure.

But this *chanda*, this kind of desire, can also be associated with wholesome, beautiful qualities of mind like kindness and compassion, and letting go. This is actually an exploration we make during the week—to see when we're choosing to act. Are we choosing to act out of kindness and compassion, or are we choosing to act out of greed and aversion? The desire, the wish that comes along with kindness and compassion and letting go—that's a wholesome wish. We want to encourage those explorations.

So there's really a theme here that we're cultivating this week. There's a two-sided thread of awareness and wisdom, understanding, that comes from the practice of mindfulness. And then there's the kindness and compassion. Actually, the practice of mindfulness can be completely interwoven with this kindness and compassion. When we really start to resonate with the practice, we see that it is one of the most compassionate things we can do for ourselves—one of the kindest actions we can take by being present for ourselves.

I'd like to welcome you for my part as well. It's great to be here. It's a beautiful place, this lodge, and it's so quiet here. I just came back a week ago from spending a month in Burma—or Myanmar as it's called these days—which is a place that's dear to my heart.

I've done a lot of time practicing there. I lived there as a monk for a time some years ago. I've gone there almost every winter since 1997 to help with the retreat that Andrea mentioned.

It's not quiet there. A lot of the meditation centers, if this were Burma, there would be music playing and a lot of action going on outside—dogs barking. So we're really lucky. We have great conditions here to have this kind of real quiet.

Before I begin talking about the Refuges and Precepts, which is the next phase of this evening, I just want to acknowledge that it's great to have this small, intimate group. And it's an interesting group because we have people who have never been on a retreat before, who've maybe almost never meditated before. And some people have been practicing for nearly twenty-five years or more. So it's a real range, and that's great.

It made me think of my first retreat. My introduction to meditation practice was a ten-day retreat, and I had not meditated for even a second before I went to it. It was all really new, and it might be kind of how some of you are feeling. I'd never heard any of these words in this Pali language.

I remember hearing the word *metta*. There were these helpful little notes all around the place that said things like, "Don't bring any food into the meditation hall," signed "Metta." Or "Please be on time for the sitting," signed "Metta." And I thought there was some helpful busybody on the retreat whose name was Metta who couldn't help but leave these nice little notes around.

I survived that ten-day retreat. So if some of you are wondering if you might make it through the week, I think you probably will.

There will be a lot of words in this Pali language—spelled P-A-L-I. It's a variation on Sanskrit, an ancient language that exists because of the teachings of the Buddha. It's not used for anything else these days. The teachings were preserved in that language, and we'll be using some of the words. Try not to assume that you know them all.

And so I did pass out these chanting sheets. This is really the formal entrance into the retreat—taking the refuges and precepts, it's called. It involves doing some chanting in this language. We'll do it call and response, so you can get through it without any trouble. For some of you, this may be something really familiar, and for others, no doubt it's brand new.

This really is the beginning of the retreat. Andrea spoke about containers—the container of this place, the container of the silence here. You could say there's a container of our shared aspiration, whatever it might be that would inspire us to come on a re-

treat like this. This is not something that everybody does. You could have all gone on vacation, or you could have headed up to the mountains and gone skiing—I think there's a pretty good base up there. But instead, something got you to come and sign up for this retreat. So there's that shared inspiration. You could say it's the inspiration to explore what it is to be human, to undertake this cultivation of kindness, of love, of wisdom for this time. And then there's this container that we create through undertaking the refuges and precepts.

I want to say a little bit about these things. We don't think of the word refuge too much in our daily lives. Maybe some of us do, but we don't talk about needing a place of refuge that often. We might ask ourselves or look in our lives and think about what that word means. It's a place of safety. You could say a safe harbor. Sometimes it's said that refuge is likened to a safe place where we could rest our hearts, a safe place to put our hearts.

We might ask ourselves: What would be a place of safety, a place of real refuge in the world? In an uncertain, changing, unpredictable world, what's safe? What would be a true refuge? What do we turn to for refuge? It's really important to think about this and to make it real for each of us, for ourselves.

I'm not going to offer something that is then a system of belief to put on, a mantle of belief to adopt. That's not what this practice, what the teachings are about. There's this word, *ehipassiko*. It's one of the descriptions of the Buddha's teachings, of the Dharma. The word translates as "come and see for yourself." It's a really important aspect of what we offer here—this invitation. Try it on, put it into practice in a sincere way, and see: Does this lead to things that are helpful and useful? Does it lead to good things, to freedom, to peace, to ease in our lives? Or not? There's that invitation.

When we think about refuge, I was thinking tonight when I came into the hall and bowed to this statue here. You'll see me do that—when I come to the hall, I'm going to bow. And what would that be about? You might start asking, "What's up with that?" And you might be worried that you're going to be expected to start bowing to this statue back here. Don't worry about it—you're not expected to do that.

You'll see us put our hands in this posture called *anjali*, in this prayer posture at the heart. It's said to represent the bud of a lotus flower. It's a gesture of respect. You may see us gesture at the Buddha statue with that hand posture. And some of you might be concerned that by doing this chanting, you're becoming a Buddhist. I'd just like to let you know that neither one of us has any agenda about turning anyone here into a Buddhist if you don't want to be one. It's not about that. That's not something that's im-

portant. The Buddha wasn't a Buddhist—it's good to remember that. He was a human who lived and had a certain experience and then taught about it in the best way he was able to.

It's interesting to think that for hundreds of years after the Buddha's life and death, there weren't these statues. These came about when the Greeks came into northwest India and said, "You have no statues of your gods"—and they were used to having a lot of statues. So the early Buddha images were modeled after the god Apollo.

They look very Greek. And prior to that, there was either an empty seat or sometimes a pair of footprints. The Buddha called himself the Tathagata—the one thus gone. It wasn't about an image of a being. That wasn't important, and it came along much later.

So when I bow to this statue, what's that about? There's nothing holy or intrinsically wonderful about this casting in terracotta back here. We may find it beautiful, but we bow obviously to what it symbolizes. Maybe that's stating the obvious, but it's important to really think about what that might symbolize.

Traditionally, we could say it symbolizes what's called the Triple Gem—Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. These three things are what we take refuge in. So then, what would be refuge in Buddha?

It's interesting—the word Buddha, *budd* in this language, means wakefulness, awake. After his awakening, his enlightenment, the historical Buddha was walking down the road and he looked pretty good. He was glowing, and he had a striking appearance by all descriptions. He was cruising down the road and someone saw him—a wanderer, an ascetic wanderer—and said, "Are you a god? What are you?" The Buddha said, "I am awake." This was his description of his state: awakened. The awakened one. Buddha.

So we can take refuge in wakefulness. We might think of the historical Buddha as a human who had this experience, who left this body of teachings for us, who said, "If this were not possible, I wouldn't ask you to do it." We can look at that and say, "Oh, okay—if he could do it, maybe I can do it too." This was the teaching: that it's possible for beings to have this understanding, to wake up in this way. We can take refuge in this possibility, in each of our own possibility for wakefulness, for wisdom to arise. That's real. That's the refuge in Buddha. And we can have this refuge—this is a place of safety no matter what's going on, no matter where we are. We can find a place of safety and wakefulness in the moment.

Then there's the refuge in Dhamma, or Dharma. This word has a few different meanings. It's used for the teachings—Buddha Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha. It means law, natural law. You could say the law of nature, because of natural conditions, the way things are, because of this and this. It also means the truth of things in any moment.

We can take refuge in that, because no matter what's going on, no matter how wild and crazy things are, in any moment we can know: right now, it's like this. The way it is now. We can know the truth of the moment. We can wake up into the truth of the moment. This is the refuge in Dharma—another place of safety for us. Another thing that is safe no matter what. We can always know it's like this right now. We can place our hearts on that.

And then there's the refuge in Sangha, the third aspect of the Triple Gem. In the most traditional sense, Sangha refers to the ordained community of nuns and monks. The reason we have these teachings at all is because of the nuns and monks who were alive at the time of the Buddha and memorized them. They weren't written down for several hundred years—they were memorized and passed down orally. And so they've been carried through time in this way, and then eventually written down.

Then we have those who practiced what the Buddha taught and realized what he was pointing at and show us the way. So there's that aspect of Sangha.

There's also the community of those who practice together—this is called the Sangha. We're creating Sangha here. It's like a shared aspiration, a shared vision. A teacher of mine once said that we create Sangha like windows looking into a common room. We each look from our own place, our own window. We look through our own conditioning, our own upbringing, our own backgrounds, our own understandings, whatever they may be at any moment. But we're looking into the commonality, the same room of this possibility of understanding. We're looking into what's universal and true for all of us.

So we create Sangha here—we're creating this as we come together for these days. And I also see Sangha as being, for each of us, our highest aspiration. Whatever that might be in any moment, and that might change over time. But we have an aspiration to understand, to cultivate love and wisdom. Some way that we relate to that, that would get us to come to retreat. And that's no small thing in the world—to hold even the possibility of any intention around cultivating love and wisdom. This is rare and beautiful in the world. And this is an aspiration that we can touch at any time. So that's another place of safety, a refuge.

We have the refuges, and then we have these precepts. The word here is *pañca sīla*. The word *sīla* is usually translated as ethical conduct, or moral conduct—some people don't like the word moral. This is stressed throughout the Buddha's teachings as the very foundation that the practice rests on. If we don't have some relationship to an ethical way of living, our practice will never unfold.

There's a simple way we can think of this. There's a beautiful teaching in one of the suttas that speaks directly to it, in a collection called the Aṅguttara Nikāya. The Buddha's attendant, Ānanda, was his cousin. He served as his attendant and also had this great memory—he memorized most of the suttas. Anything he heard, he had a kind of photographic memory.

Ānanda asked the Buddha a question once. He said, "What, Lord, is the benefit of virtuous ways of conduct? What is their reward?"

And then the Buddha went through this list. He said, "Virtuous ways of conduct have non-remorse as their benefit and their reward. And non-remorse has gladness as its benefit and reward. And gladness has joy as its benefit and reward." And so on—joy has serenity, serenity has happiness. He went through all these stages that led eventually to the highest understanding: joy and serenity lead to concentration, to dispassion, to letting go, to disenchantment, and to the greatest peace. And so he said, "In this way, Ānanda, virtuous ways of conduct lead step by step to the very highest."

When we undertake living in a way that's as harmless as possible, this leaves us in a state of mind, of heart, that is free of remorse. We're not worried that we're harming others. We're free of remorse and worry. This leads to greater tranquility and ease in our lives and allows for our meditation practice to unfold and progress.

It's important when we undertake these precepts that we have a sense of what's meant by the word precept. They're not commandments or laws. They're not "thou shalt nots." They're training rules, you could say. They're an exploration. They're something that we undertake as an exploration for ourselves, in the same way of this *ehipassiko*—come and see for ourselves. We see for ourselves what happens in our minds and hearts when we live a life of care, a life based on kindness and non-harming.

So we undertake these as an exploration, realizing that it's really hard, if not impossible, to live without harming some living beings. There are a lot of really tiny ones that probably get worked over every time we take a breath or every time we step, even if we're totally careful.

So it's intention that is the key here—to not intentionally harm, to not intentionally cause harm.

And this commitment to living as harmlessly as possible, to sincerely undertaking an ethical way of living, leads to one of the greatest of all possible gifts that we could offer to the world. That's the gift of fearlessness. If we can offer this gift—that other beings don't have to fear us because they know that we will not intentionally harm them—this is a huge gift. To be fearless in the world is a wonderful thing we can offer to one another.

So I'll just quickly go through the list of the precepts. The first one is *panatipata* in Pali—undertaking the training to abstain from harming living beings. This includes all kinds of living beings, including little ones that might like to bite you. This time of year we don't have mosquitoes, but there are ones that we just tend to disregard or see as getting in our way. We respect the right of all beings to live, and we try not to intentionally harm any beings.

The second one, *adinadana*, is undertaking the training to abstain from taking that which is not given, that which has not been offered. As part of the safety here at this place, we respect one another's property and we don't take things that haven't been offered to us. We could say we don't steal, but we also use care with the things that are offered. We look at how we use things. We respect what belongs to someone else, even if it seems harmless, even if it doesn't really seem to matter. But it lets us look and see—what's our motivation before we take something?

The third one is *abramacharya*. For us here on retreat, in lay life outside of retreat, the words are *kamesu michachara*. This precept has to do with sexual energy and our conduct around sexuality. For the time of the retreat, we undertake celibacy—that's our commitment for this time. It gives us a chance to really look at this energy that's so powerful in our lives in the world, that can lead to such connection and good things, and also causes so much harm when it's not dealt with mindfully. We get a chance to really look at this energy and how it manifests, how it operates in our lives and in our hearts and minds.

Outside of retreat time, *kamesu michachara* is the precept to refrain from causing harm with our sexual energy, to really be mindful of how this energy manifests. It can be in so many ways—just simple flirtatious energy and where that comes from. But here on retreat, we undertake the training to abstain. It's not a judgment about it, nothing like that. It's just part of how we create this container of safety here, and a chance for us to really look and explore what this energy is like and how it manifests in our lives.

The fourth one is *musawadah*—the training to abstain from false speech. The very simplest way you can think about it is to not lie. It's not a huge issue here because we'll be in noble silence and we're not going to be talking a whole lot. But it's really an interesting one to look at, the way we use speech in our lives. We can look at it here in terms of other ways that we might communicate, really refraining from anything that's not necessary to support one another in the way of noble silence. Putting away our cell phones and computers and things like that if we don't need them.

And finally, *sura meraya majapamadatana*—refraining from the use of intoxicants. Here it says intoxicating substances. Often it's phrased as substances that cloud the mind and lead to heedlessness. We're cultivating heedfulness here, mindfulness. This, of course, doesn't refer to prescription medications, anything that you might be taking for your health. You don't let go of those. But we let go of intoxicants and substances that lead to lack of clarity, to heedless behavior.

So these are the precepts. We've gone on a little longer than we planned, and it's late, and some of you have traveled a long way to get here, so we'll do the chanting now. At the end, I'll just mention there's a final dedication that really points to the fundamental and foundational aspect of these practices—of the refuges and the precepts as being the basis that our practice rests on. This dedication to undertake this, may it lead us to the highest and greatest understanding, to the knowledge of the path and its fruit, which is one way that the realization of the fullness of the Buddha's teaching is expressed.

Things are done in threes a lot in the Theravada tradition, so you'll notice we do things in threes. When we come to the refuges, I'd like to do them in both Pali and in English. We'll do the Pali, and then we'll speak the English together so that we really bring to mind in the language that we're used to what it is we're doing with these practices.

[The traditional chanting of the refuges and precepts follows]

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dutiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Dutiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Dutiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Tatiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Tatiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Tatiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi. Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi. Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi. Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi. Surāmeraya majjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

Idaṃ me sīlaṃ maggaphalañāṇassa paccayo hotu.

And we usually end this by saying *sādhu, sādhu, sādhu* three times.

Now let us speak the precepts in English, so that we bring them fully into our hearts and minds:

I undertake the training to abstain from harming living beings. I undertake the training to abstain from taking what has not been given. I undertake the training to abstain from sexual activity. I undertake the training to abstain from false speech. I undertake the training to abstain from the use of intoxicating substances.

It's late, and I know some of you are ready to call it a day, but let's take a few minutes in silence for a short guided meditation. First, let's stand up for a minute and stretch our legs, or at least shift posture, because we've been sitting for an hour already.

I'll mention that because it's a small group, there are enough places on the floor and chairs that you may have access to both, which is a rare and wonderful thing, especially for those of us who are aging. There is no stigma of any kind attached to the decision to sit in a chair. Avail yourself of them as needed. It's good to sit in more than one posture during these long days.

So we'll have a short and sweet session here to begin the retreat. Find a position that feels comfortable, where you feel the body at ease, the posture upright and alert but relaxed, with the natural curves of the spine present. Settle into the simplicity of the posture.

The simplest instruction I could give you would be to sit and know that you're sitting. Just feeling this whole body, knowing it's sitting. The feeling of the posture, the contact with the earth, the touching and pressure there. Earth sitting on earth.

Take a moment to run the attention quickly through the body. Notice the top of the head. Notice if there are places of tension or holding that you don't really need, especially perhaps the forehead and eyes. Sometimes we can find we're holding tension there. Let the eyes relax, soft in the sockets. We can find we're looking around even with our eyes closed. Let the eyes relax, the area of the cheeks, the jaw, the mouth, the back and the sides of the head.

Notice the neck and the throat. Let the neck be long. Feeling the shoulders—often we hold tension in our shoulders—just letting them be heavy and dropped. Let the intention go to the upper back, middle back, and lower back. Feeling this upright, alert, relaxed posture there in the spine.

And back to the shoulders and the upper arms. Down through the elbows to the forearms. And into the hands. Just let the attention rest in the hands for a moment. Whatever you notice there. Maybe the hands are touching or resting on the knees. Feeling of touching, warmth or coolness. Pressure, tingling, whatever you notice.

And coming back to the torso, the upper part of the torso, the chest, down through the ribs and the belly. Let the belly be soft and relaxed. You might notice the movement of the breath there, the diaphragm, the breath moving in and out of the body, this rising and falling movement. In and out, expanding, contracting as the breath comes in and out of the body. Down to the pelvis and the hips. Notice if there's any holding in the hips, the buttocks, through the hip joints, into the upper legs, thighs, and knees. Down to the calves and lower part of the leg, the shin, into the ankles and the feet.

This whole experience of body sitting. The simplicity of that.

Notice the mood of the mind. Notice if there's any mood there—feeling of anticipation or worry, or just dullness or tiredness that might be there. And coming back to the body and that simplicity of sitting posture.

Notice the breath moving in and out of the body. You might notice the sensations at the nostrils, the touching sensation as the breath comes in and out at the nostrils or the upper lip area. You might notice it in the back of the throat, or in the chest as the lungs expand and contract. You might notice the movement of the abdomen, the rising and falling or expanding, contracting movement there. Whatever way you can easily connect with the breath moving in and out of the body.

Receiving the breath. Letting it be natural, not looking for any particular special kind of breath, just however it's showing up.

Take a moment here, before I ring the bell, just to bring to mind some of your good qualities. Reflect maybe on some good deeds, some acts of generosity or kindness that you can think of. Or just bringing to mind your aspiration to come on retreat and to cultivate understanding and kindness. It's such a beautiful, good thing. Or the goodness of undertaking the training of the refuges and precepts.

The precepts—this is no small thing. If everyone in the world made even a half-hearted attempt to keep the precepts, we would have a golden age. There is a beautiful, great goodness in this. We can bring this to mind. We all have this goodness. We can bring it to mind and delight in it. The Buddha said one should frequently reflect on one's good deeds, one's good qualities.

We can dedicate this great goodness, the power of that, for our own awakening, for the happiness and liberation of all beings. May our practice be for the benefit of all beings.

I wish you a good night and deep, restful sleep and sweet dreams. The first sitting is at 6:15, and someone's ringing a wake-up bell—thank you to whoever's doing that. We're not going to take a roll for that first sitting. Please come if you're awake. It's been a long day for some of you traveling, so I'm giving you permission to sleep in a little bit. Tomorrow only. But don't miss breakfast.

That's one of the high points of the morning.

And if you happen to be awake, this room is always open. You can avail yourself of this place to sit any time.

So have a good night.

CHAPTER 78

Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · 53 min

In this foundational talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of mindfulness (sati) and its essential role in Buddhist practice. She examines multiple definitions of mindfulness—from simple presence and witnessing to the working definition of "knowing what is happening while it is happening." Drawing on the Pāli etymology connecting sati to memory and remembering, she references Bhikkhu Anālayo's scholarship on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), describing mindfulness as the factor of mind that allows memory to function.

Fella emphasizes that ordinary mindfulness alone is insufficient for liberation—it must be paired with wisdom (paññā) to become "right mindfulness" (sammā sati) of the Noble Eightfold Path. This wisdom includes understanding the Four Noble Truths in direct experience: recognizing dukkha, its causes in greed, aversion, and delusion, and the path leading away from suffering. She introduces the crucial practice of noticing not just what we're aware of, but how we're paying attention—whether through filters of reactivity or with balanced, non-judgmental awareness.

The talk offers practical guidance for cultivating mindfulness, particularly the value of noticing when mindfulness spontaneously returns after periods of distraction. Rather than judging wandering minds, practitioners can use each return of awareness as an opportunity to recognize mindfulness itself. Fella uses the analogy of a scooter to illustrate how light, frequent touches of remembering build momentum, eventually allowing mindfulness and concentration to carry the practice forward toward deeper insight into impermanence and the selfless nature of experience.

When the Buddha taught, he emphasized certain qualities repeatedly, particular qualities that he really indicated were important if you want to practice and understand his teachings. Energy and mindfulness were two qualities he highlighted as very helpful to cultivate. Tonight I'd like to talk about mindfulness.

First, I'd like to explore definitions of mindfulness—what we think of as mindfulness. I think the simplest way we often think about it is just this sense of being present, this quality of presence. Another way we often think about mindfulness is as a witnessing of our experience, where somehow there's a distance between what we're experiencing and this witness. That's often how we conceive of mindfulness, that this witness is an aspect of it.

One definition I like to use as a working definition is that mindfulness can be thought of as knowing what is happening while it is happening. There are two pieces to this: the knowing quality, knowing what's happening, and then the awareness that you know it while it's happening.

I'm sure many of you have had the experience of sitting in a room reading a book or doing something, and you're focused on what you're doing—that's mostly what you're aware of, the reading of the book. But somebody comes in the room and walks out, and there's a vague awareness of that. If somebody comes up to you later and asks, "Have you seen so-and-so?" you might think, "Oh, yes, I think they came in while I was reading the book." But there wasn't that clear knowing of that experience while it was happening. That's not the kind of awareness we're talking about. We're talking about a clear knowing of what's happening at the moment it is happening.

The Pali word for mindfulness is sati, spelled S-A-T-I, and the root of that word is related to the sense of memory, of remembering. One of my teachers says mindfulness is about remembering—just remembering what's happening, remembering yourself. That's actually a way we can explore it. My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya says if you're struggling to be mindful, just remember yourself. Think about yourself. What am I doing right now? That can be a way into the exploration of mindfulness.

One of the preeminent Buddhist scholars of today, Bhikkhu Anālayo, has written a lovely book on mindfulness and the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which is the Buddha's discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness—the Buddha's description of how to practice mindfulness meditation. It's a central discourse in the Buddha's teaching. In that book, Anālayo looks at this definition of remembering and offers the explanation that the quality or factor of mindfulness is a factor of mind that allows memory to function.

I played with that one day. After I read the definition, I spent the next day exploring it. What is the state of mind, what is the quality of mind that can remember? It's a state in which you are present and alert and aware while things are happening. That's another way to explore this quality of mindfulness: the factor that allows memory to function.

Now, this doesn't necessarily mean—I think there's a difference between a factor of mind that allows memory to function and memories actually being recorded and kept in our mind. Sayadaw U Tejaniya says that initially, when we start to practice mindfulness, if we think of mindfulness as being connected with having a good memory, what seems to happen is that as we move into the present moment, paying attention to the present moment, we seem to forget things a lot. It's like we don't remember what's happened to us.

His explanation is that typically the way our memory works is that we repeat things to ourselves over and over again. I think there's some truth to this—that when we want to remember something, we make an effort to remember it. What happens when we're paying attention right in the present moment is that we're not making that effort to repeat things to ourselves, and so that way of getting things into memory goes away. But then he said that when the quality of mindfulness is very high, when the mindfulness is extremely clear and very strong, then you will remember things.

And I have had that experience. There have been times where the mindfulness was just so clear. It was during times when I was particularly paying attention to my experience and something very clear unfolded. It's just seared in my mind—that experience is just seared in my mind because the mindfulness was so strong. So we can think of there being a connection between mindfulness and memory.

Another way I like to contemplate or explore this quality of mindfulness is to think about it as a reflective capacity of mind, a capacity that reflects what's happening in the moment. We have this capacity of mind that can know itself, essentially. This is part of the quality of mindfulness—it can reflect what's happening not only in the world but in our experience itself, in our mind itself. We can be mindful of being mindful. We can be aware of how our mind is working.

In this way, I like to think about mindfulness as being like a mirror. It just reflects what's happening in our experience. There are always things going on in our experience. There's always a kind of awareness happening, always a quality of knowing happening in our experience, but mindfulness is not always happening. When mindfulness is happening, it is simply reflecting everything else that's happening in our mind and body. It's a very simple kind of self-reflective process in the mind. In a sense, it's what makes us human—although they do say that some other animals have this self-reflective quality or capacity. But it is a capacity that we have as human beings, this ability to know ourselves, essentially.

This quality of mindfulness is an ordinary quality in our minds. It's something that we come with, something that we're born with. We all have this capacity, and moments of mindfulness come up for us whether or not we even know what it is. At times through the day it just spontaneously comes into appearance. But what we typically do with that moment—we don't usually notice the fact that mindfulness has appeared for us.

The way we've been trained, the way our minds usually work, is that when we become aware of something in the moment, we usually kind of leap onto it, start thinking about it, and doing things with it. For instance, we might notice something and then

start relating it to who am I and what do I need to do about that? We don't actually notice so much the fact that we have been aware of something. It immediately moves into: How does it relate to me? What do I need to do about it? So we'll often take some action out of this. We notice something and then we take some action.

For instance, you're walking through San Geronimo Lodge and you notice a big spider on the wall. You might be aware of that, but often what happens with something like that is: Oh, spider, I need to do something about that. Maybe I'll get a cup and capture it and take it outside. We move from knowing to action without recognizing the fact that we have known something, without recognizing that there's been a little tiny moment of mindfulness there.

So this quality of mindfulness actually happens to us a lot, spontaneously through the day. It comes up frequently, but we don't actually notice it because of our habitual pattern of doing something with what we have noticed. We don't really stop or recognize, "Oh, there's been some mindfulness, there's been a moment of recognizing this thing." We may not even recognize the thing clearly; we may not even really be that clear that we've recognized something because we're moving into the action of what to do about it immediately. So not only are we not really registering the initial experience clearly in our minds, but we are not recognizing that there has been a split second of mindfulness.

We need mindfulness. This quality of mind—I don't think we could live without it. If we continually lived in a state of fantasy, we'd be bumping into things all day. We need this quality of mindfulness to help us get through our day, but we just don't recognize it as something that comes for us. We don't experience the mindfulness consciously. It's kind of under the radar for us.

I think it is part of the brilliance of the Buddha to have recognized this quality, this ordinary quality of mind that just happens for all of us, and for him to say, "Wow, this is actually a really interesting quality. I think it would be helpful to pay attention to this." I think this was brilliant—for him to highlight this as a very skillful quality worth cultivating, worth paying attention to.

And that kind of mindfulness may not really be enough. Even if we start to notice it, it may not really be enough to lead us to the kind of wisdom and understanding that the Buddha had, to the freedom from the way that we suffer, the way that we struggle.

He pointed to this quality of mindfulness as being essential in the movement to freedom from our reactivity, our struggles, our suffering. But this simple ordinary quality of mindfulness may not be quite enough. Sayadaw U Tejaniya says—one of the names of

one of his books is called *Awareness Alone is Not Enough*. And he often uses the word awareness to be synonymous with mindfulness. So when he says awareness alone is not enough, or mindfulness alone is not enough, what he's pointing to is that the Buddha also brought mindfulness together with wisdom.

So what is wisdom? We often have this term, and wisdom has a kind of grandiose sound to it. We think, "Well, if I have to have wisdom to be mindful, there's little hope because I don't know how much wisdom I have." But the Buddha pointed to some very specific kinds of wisdom, and some of them are pretty straightforward. He's just pointing to what's helpful. Orienting our attention in this direction is helpful.

So bringing mindfulness—and in a sense this is another way that the remembering comes into play—he says it's helpful to remember to be aware of certain things. In particular, he pointed to, in a kind of simple way, that there are certain things in our mind that will lead us to suffering: the quality of greed, the quality of aversion, the quality of delusion. If we're engaged in acting out of those intentions, those motivations, we're going to head toward suffering. If we connect to non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—kindness, compassion, and wisdom—if we connect to those qualities instead, then we head away from suffering.

And so he pointed to this: part of the wisdom is understanding what is skillful and what is unskillful in our experience. What is unskillful is what leads us to suffering, leads us to struggle, leads us to distress. And he pointed to these qualities of greed, aversion, and delusion as being the root causes for that struggling. What leads us away from that? Non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion.

So this wisdom that supports mindfulness, he called wise attention. And it's related to the Four Noble Truths, really. It's related to seeing in our experience what is suffering, beginning to recognize in our experience where we struggle, how this suffering comes to be. That's the First and Second Noble Truths: understanding suffering and recognizing and letting go of the cause of suffering.

So we explore our experience through this kind of framework, essentially. "Oh, there's suffering. Can I understand this suffering? What's the cause of that suffering? And what leads me away from suffering?" This is the Third Noble Truth: the possibility of freedom from suffering. And what supports that? What supports moving away from suffering? The Fourth Noble Truth: the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

So there are really two key elements if we think about how wise attention is framed in terms of the Four Noble Truths. That's one of the main ways he talked about it—that one who attends wisely understands, "This is suffering." One who attends wisely under-

stands, "This is the cause of suffering." So he's pointing us into the present moment here. He's pointing us to attending wisely in the moment to our experience through this framework of the Four Noble Truths.

And when I look at that, I see kind of two key elements to this wise attention. One has to do with understanding suffering, beginning to see in our own experience what suffering is, recognizing it. And the other has to do with beginning to understand and explore the cause and effect relationship in experience. How does suffering come to be? How does it end? How does happiness come to be? What supports that?

So it's not just understanding suffering, but the understanding of suffering leads us to seeing the causes and conditions, the things that create suffering. And as the mind sees that, as mindfulness witnesses the causes of suffering—one of the key pieces is that, as I said last night, one of the deepest causes of suffering is this wanting things to be other than they are. It is the wanting, it's in our own minds, that this suffering is produced.

This is actually good news.

It might not sound like good news that suffering is created by our own minds. But if suffering were created out there, and we had no input into it, it would be hopeless. As it is, the ways that we struggle, the reasons that we struggle, have to do with things that are happening in our own minds. And we can change the course of our minds by bringing this wise attention.

So that's one of the aspects of wisdom that supports mindfulness—or that makes mindfulness actually a liberating quality of mind, one that really supports us to move towards freedom from suffering, freedom from distress, freedom from struggle, freedom from dissatisfaction. *Dukkha*, the Pali term, freedom from *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is often translated as suffering, but it's a subtler term than that. It really has a very broad range of meanings.

I like to think about the etymology of that word as well. My understanding is that there are two parts to the word: the *du* part and the *kha* part. The *du* part means bad. And the *kha* part, my understanding is that it refers to the empty space in the middle of a wheel. So if you think about what it means to have an empty space in the middle of a wheel that's bad—there are many ways that could be. It might be off-center, so the ride you'd have would be just a little rough and uneven. Or perhaps that space is a little too tight, so the axle grips and it's not a smooth ride, it's a tight ride. Or maybe it's too loose, so it's kind of wobbly. Or maybe it's really loose, so that the wheel falls off and you crash altogether.

This term *dukkha* really covers a broad range of suffering, from the subtlest kind of unease to the grossest kind of suffering. And this path that the Buddha is offering, this tool of mindfulness paired with wisdom, leads us to freedom from this *dukkha*—the *dukkha* that is created through our mind not being willing to meet things as they are, but always wanting to adjust and fix and change.

So that's one aspect of the wisdom that supports mindfulness being a factor that really helps us to free ourselves from *dukkha*. Another aspect, perhaps a different way of framing it, is noticing how we're paying attention. I mentioned this morning in the guided meditation that how we pay attention is as important, if not more important, than what we are actually paying attention to.

We begin to recognize—and this is another one of the amazing capacities of our mind—that as we're paying attention to something, we can see the thing we're paying attention to, and we can also notice that we're paying attention. For instance, a pain in the knee, or an itch on the nose, or the sound of a dog barking in the distance. We can notice the qualities and texture of those experiences. That's part of what mindfulness does—it notices the qualities of experience. We'll talk more about this in the days to come, these different textures of experience.

So mindfulness can notice the qualities of the experience itself, but it can also turn and notice how it is noticing. The pain in the knee—you're noticing the pain, you're noticing burning, stabbing, aching, pulling, twisting, pressure. You may or may not be noticing an aversion in the mind with which you are paying attention. It may not be aversion; I'm just bringing that up because often when we're experiencing pain, there is a sense of not liking, of pushing away, that is also present in our experience.

If we are not noticing that, if we are observing that pain in the knee with this attitude of aversion, this hatred, this "I want to get rid of this, I want to fix this, I want to change it"—what we're doing is cultivating that aversion. So it's really important to begin to turn towards and recognize how we're paying attention to experience.

It's as if almost all the time we're seeing our experience through some kind of filter, some kind of lens. We've got the red lenses on or the blue lenses on. We've got the "I hate this" lens on, or we've got the "I want more of this" lens on. And if we don't notice that, then we're essentially reinforcing that filter. We're practicing that filter.

If you've got these red lenses on, one way to explore this is: can we begin to recognize, "Oh, I'm looking through red lenses"? If you wear them for a long time, you stop noticing the redness of things. So if you can begin to recognize that there is a tinge here,

a tinge of something in this experience, you can start to recognize that you're looking through this filter. You can start to recognize that there's this quality of aversion in the mind that is part of this experience.

That is the first step towards moving to a more balanced attitude in the mind, a more balanced way of paying attention. From there, we may actually be able to take that lens or filter off and look at it, so that we're not looking through it anymore, but recognizing, "Oh, that's what aversion is like." We'll talk more in the coming days about how to turn and pay attention to the qualities in our mind—how to pay attention to aversion, how to pay attention to greed, how to pay attention to frustration and irritation.

For now, we can simply recognize: okay, I'm paying attention to that pain in my knee, and I don't like it.

Recognize that. The very recognition of it helps to create a little bit of balance in the mind. If we can recognize, "Oh yeah, not liking—that's what's happening," we can be aware of not liking with a more balanced attention, a balanced kind of mind.

Now, these things can have many layers to them. This is something that we begin to unravel through this exploration—the layers of our holding. We see, "Oh yeah, I don't like that. Okay, there's that aversion." Or "I hate that," and we start to recognize, "Okay, there's that hating. That's what's happening." And then we begin to see, "Oh, there's actually fear here. I see. There's some fear going on." Through this exploration we begin to uncover layer after layer of ways that we're holding and reacting.

So we're beginning to have a recognition of how we're paying attention. This morning I was encouraging bringing as much of a sense of friendliness and kindness to your attention as you can. That will support a letting go of any pushing away or resisting of experience. But if you can't bring a sense of friendliness and kindness, see if you can at least recognize, "Yeah, I don't like this." Just see if you can frame it in your mind with even that kind of relaxed quality to the recognition. "Yeah, I don't like this. That's what's happening."

In my own experience and exploration, the wisdom of the Buddhist teaching is really, really rich. It's really dense—the littlest tiny piece of it goes a long way. You don't have to understand the entirety of the Buddhist teachings to begin to practice and begin to experience benefits from the teaching. A little bit of this wisdom paired with a willingness to explore experience can be very freeing.

In my own experience, in the first few months of my practice, my friend Chris sent me a book that encouraged me—well, I read this book and I didn't understand much of it. One thing I got out of it, though, was: when you're experiencing a strong emotion, see if you can just notice that emotion as opposed to acting on it. This is a little bit of the Buddha's wisdom—instead of acting on your emotions, see if you can observe them.

I began practicing with that. I thought, "I don't know how this is going to help." But through the exploration of just that one little bit, I could connect with that teaching and bring mindfulness to my emotions. Some very deep unraveling happened in the first few months of my experience around some of my more difficult emotions. That was a very small bit of the wisdom, yet it led to very powerful openings, very deep seeing of how the mind was creating experience and recognizing, "Oh, I don't have to go there." Very, very powerful.

So as we explore our experience, we could call this pairing of mindfulness and wisdom *right mindfulness*—the mindfulness of the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is this fourth noble truth, a set of practices that support our understanding of our minds, leading us towards happiness. Right mindfulness is one of the components of the Eightfold Path, and really this pairing of the quality of mindfulness with wisdom is what makes it *right* mindfulness.

This moves us in the direction of recognizing just what's happening in the moment without judgment, without reactivity, without an agenda that things have to be different—just the noticing of experience moment to moment. That's what right mindfulness moves us towards. It's a kind of attention that doesn't interfere with experience. It just recognizes what's happening. It's that mirror. A mirror simply reflects experience. A mirror doesn't care what the experience is; it just reflects it. It might be reflecting a beautiful landscape or it might be reflecting a decaying corpse. The mirror is unchanged by what it reflects.

In a similar way, mindfulness is unchanged by what it is experiencing. It is just knowing it, recognizing it.

So why is right mindfulness helpful? Why is it helpful to have this quality that can just meet experience without judgment, without reactivity, just knowing what's happening in the moment without a personal agenda?

The non-reactive mind can look at reactivity. It sounds like a paradox. How can it be possible that if our minds are reacting, we can be mindful of that and not be increasing or encouraging that reactivity?

This is what I didn't understand about that instruction when I first read it. Pay attention to your emotions instead of acting on them? I thought, well, if I pay attention to my anger, isn't it just going to make the anger worse? That's what I assumed. But I decided I would try it and see what happens.

There's something about the way that mindfulness functions. The neurological studies around this show that when the mind begins to recognize or acknowledge—even using this mental labeling that we talked about—when you use mental labeling around difficulty or reactivity, something shifts. Reactivity is often happening in the core part of the brain, what they call the limbic system, the old part of the brain, the one that has to react to experience immediately. And the mindfulness is happening in the newer part of the brain. So what's occurring is that we're engaging a different part of the brain with mindfulness. The looping quality of reactivity that reinforces itself is happening at that lower level. When we bring in this newer part of the brain, it breaks the cycle a little bit.

That's what I found in my own experience. I remember the first time I woke up to a difficult emotion. I had vowed to myself that I was going to pay attention when I got really angry. And I woke up in the midst of a rage, just like, "Oh, yeah, I said I was going to pay attention to this. How do I do that?" I had no idea. I'd had very little training—I had read this book, that was it. I thought, "Well, I see I'm angry. Okay, I guess I go back to work."

In retrospect, what I see is that in that first time when I woke up in that rage, I was frozen, unable to do anything but loop in that reactivity. And the very recognition—"Oh yeah, I'm angry, I said I was going to pay attention to that"—broke into that cycle enough that I could let it go enough to even go back to work. Because I hadn't been functional. That's actually one of the reasons why I brought mindfulness into my life—my emotions were making me non-functional.

So mindfulness can observe our reactivity, and bringing in a different aspect of our mind can begin to support an unwinding of that reactivity through not reacting further. When we break in with mindfulness to our reactivity, it can stop it at whatever level it has reached. Then slowly, over time—and it took months for me to unwind these difficult emotions I was having when I started my practice—they did unwind through this practice. Very powerful.

This is one of the main reasons that right mindfulness is helpful. It really helps us see our reactivity, and it helps to unwind it so that we're not at the mercy of our reactivity. We can respond rather than react.

We also can begin to notice with mindfulness when we're starting to go down a direction that's going to lead us into unfortunate consequences. Speech is a good example of this. We can begin to recognize, "Oh, I'm about ready to say something that maybe I don't want to say." So right mindfulness can begin to reveal when we're getting ready to take an action. This is a very powerful exploration—we can actually begin to see that we are intending to do something before it happens. We're about to do something, and mindfulness can see that.

In seeing that we're about to do something, we usually can see why we're going to do it. And in seeing why, we can have a sense—sometimes just at a gut level—"Hmm, don't know if I want to go there." Or, "No, this feels okay. I can do this." This mindfulness of intention can help us choose skillfully, to act out of wholesome intentions instead of reacting out of greed, aversion, and delusion, as we do when we are not mindful.

Right mindfulness also helps to create the conditions for deeper insight. What I've been talking about so far is more at the level of living life more skillfully, being more wholesome in our activities and letting go of the ways that we react to things. But it also begins to create the conditions for us to see deeply into the truth of reality.

Without filters, if we come to a place in mindfulness where we have seen through some of those filters and we're actually seeing clearly—without a filter of greed, a filter of aversion, or a filter of delusion—that mind, that kind of mindfulness, deeply understands and recognizes that everything happening is impermanent. It's just an unceasing, unending, impermanent flow of experience. And it recognizes, in seeing how unceasingly impermanent everything is, that it doesn't make any sense to try to hold on to anything in that flow, because it's all just like sand slipping through your fingers. There's no way to hold water. If somebody pours water into your hand, there's no way to hold on to it. And the mind recognizes very deeply that there's no way to hold on to experience—and that there's really no one here to hold on to it.

So these insights are the insights that really liberate us. These are the insights that deeply undercut our habit of holding on to things, of wanting things to be other than they are.

One of the things I'd like to explore in the last few minutes of this talk is a particular way of cultivating mindfulness. When we practice mindfulness in the early days of retreat, we're often encouraging you to cultivate it by paying attention to the objects of experience. You pay attention to the breathing. You notice the thinking. Over the days, we'll encourage you to explore more in the body and emotions. We cultivate mindfulness by being aware of these experiences as they're happening.

At the same time, we're also encouraging you to recognize the mindfulness itself. The main way we're encouraging this at this point is by inviting you to really notice when your mindfulness comes back. The moment when you remember that you have not been mindful—as I said this morning—that moment, you're already mindful as soon as you know that. Mindfulness has already returned. If you're not mindful, you're not mindful. There's nothing you can do about it. There's no way you can make mindfulness happen. It has to come back in that spontaneous way. And then, because mindfulness has returned, we have an avenue toward making choices. What do I do with this mindfulness?

But one of the things that's really helpful in that moment is simply to begin recognizing: what's the difference between being lost and being aware? Now, we can't really know the lost feeling in the moment of being lost. But in the moment of coming back into mindfulness, there's a lingering memory of what it was like to be lost. So we can, in that moment, get a sense of contrast in the mind. What's it like now to have that awareness back? What was it like a moment ago to be kind of lost in that fog?

This exploration was actually really productive for me, partly because it helped me let go of judging myself when mindfulness came back. If my mind wandered a hundred times in a forty-minute sitting, it gave me a hundred opportunities to explore this question: What is the difference between the mind being lost and the mind being present? It gave me a hundred opportunities to recognize mindfulness returning, that moment of spontaneous mindfulness returning. It's a really amazing moment. It happens effortlessly. You didn't do it. There it is. You're back.

This gives you a pointer to a possibility—initially, a kind of ease with mindfulness. Because the mindfulness that comes back spontaneously, if we can connect with that as it returns, is a pure, easy mindfulness. It takes no effort whatsoever. Just here we are. Connecting with that gives you a feeling, a flavor for what this mindfulness feels like.

One of the benefits of this exploration was that it really helped cut the judging—for me at least—around my mind wandering, because it became simply another opportunity to see: What is mindfulness? What does it feel like to be mindful?

As the mind gets more familiar with what it feels like to be mindful, those little moments I talked about at the beginning—the little moments of mindfulness that come back spontaneously throughout your whole day, which we don't usually notice—because we have now become familiar with this feeling of mindfulness, those little moments begin to point themselves out to us. We see them happening all the time: little blips of awareness through our day.

This feeling of mindfulness is actually a familiar feeling to us. Once we start recognizing it, paying attention to it, we see it's actually quite familiar. It's just that we haven't bothered to notice it before. It's kind of like the air we breathe. We don't really notice the air we're breathing very much. It's just so obvious.

It's so present all the time. And in some similar way, those moments, those little blips of mindfulness, happen to us so frequently, yet we simply don't pay attention to them. We don't recognize them. But when we start to attend to that feeling, we see—oh yes, I know what this is. I know what this is about.

So in that moment when you remember about mindfulness, just see if you can incline towards recognizing: mindfulness has returned. And then simply—especially in informal times, as I mentioned just before lunch—just notice what's obvious. See if you can connect with what is already happening. Wake up to what's already going on in your experience.

Continuity is a crucial piece of this. For mindfulness, for this right mindfulness to become a factor that really supports freedom, liberation, awakening, enlightenment—continuity of the mindfulness brings a deepening of the concentration. Continuity of the mindfulness itself will bring the quality of concentration along with it. We don't actually have to pay attention to one thing for the mind to settle down. While that's supportive, definitely supportive, it's actually the continuity of the mindfulness that brings the concentration.

This practice around continuity does not have to involve a heavy hand. In fact, just the opposite. I think it's really helpful to have a light touch around this mindfulness, around this trying to maintain moment after moment of noticing. There's no need to try to be more mindful in a moment. That's kind of what we attempt to do—oh, mindful! Oh yes, mindful! Let me try to be really mindful right now. That is just over-efforting, actually.

What's important, rather, is to just see if we can touch that lightly, moment after moment. Just moment after moment, meeting experience. That will create a momentum, and then mindfulness and concentration will carry together.

There's a little analogy I like to use about this. Initially, when we're cultivating this kind of continuity of mindfulness, this frequency of mindfulness, we have to encourage our mind to remember it a lot. It's kind of like those scooters that kids ride—little wheels, a little flatbed, and you stand with one foot on the rail and then tap the ground to get yourself going. When you first start on the scooter, you have to tap the ground a

lot. Now, tapping down hard doesn't do much good. You could, but it's not that beneficial. It's just the light tap, tap, tap. It's the frequency that gets you going. And then once you're moving, you can tap less frequently.

It's similar with mindfulness. Initially, we have to remind ourselves frequently—oh, just this moment, just this moment. And it is just that light. How much effort does it take for you to be mindful right now of the sensation of your hands? The sensations of your buttocks on the chair or cushion or bench? The sensations of your lips touching? How much? It doesn't take much effort.

What is hard is to keep remembering—and this is again another aspect of this remembering—it's hard to keep remembering to do it. So this is where some of the effort has to come in. Just moment after moment: this moment, and this moment, and this moment.

And that continuity—this moment, this moment, this moment—will be like the momentum of that scooter. It will carry us, develop the concentration, and allow the mind to deeply see into the patterns of reactivity, see where the choices are, help us to make skillful choices, and to see deeply into the nature of experience. This leads us to the insights into impermanence, into dukkha, this dissatisfactoriness, this unsatisfactoriness, and this ephemerality—that there isn't anyone here experiencing or doing. It's just a process. It's really a flow, a process.

So let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 79

Guided Mettā (2)

Andrea Fella · 45 min

> *In this guided mettā practice, Andrea Fella expands on the mechanics of loving-kindness meditation, emphasizing that mettā is fundamentally a practice of intention rather than immediately generating warm feelings. She shares from her own experience during a month-long mettā retreat, describing how connecting the phrases to bodily sensations in the heart center transformed the practice for her—revealing that even a small ember of goodwill can be kindled into genuine warmth through patient repetition.*
>
> *Fella explains that mettā is a practice of purification, often bringing up its opposites—anger, frustration, and ill will—which she describes using the traditional framework of "far enemies" (qualities clearly opposite to mettā) and "near enemies" (attachment or conditional love that masquerades as genuine caring). She offers practical strategies for working with these difficulties: allowing mild hindrances to remain in the background while continuing the practice, switching to an easier being when challenges arise with a particular person, or temporarily dropping into mindfulness practice when difficult energies become strong.*
>
> *The guided meditation includes working with both self and benefactor, emphasizing the practice of checking in with the heart after each phrase and eventually expanding mettā to all beings everywhere. Fella acknowledges that Westerners often find self-directed mettā surprisingly difficult—a cultural phenomenon that puzzled Asian teachers—and offers Gil Fronsdal's suggestion of occasionally "slipping yourself in" while generating goodwill for an easier being. She concludes by noting how mindfulness and mettā practices work together, as the nonjudgmental, nonreactive quality cultivated in mindfulness is itself a form of mettā.*

So we'll continue the metta practice today at this sitting. I'd like to speak for just a few minutes to elaborate and expand on what Greg talked about yesterday.

Just to refresh or remind you about the mechanics of the metta practice: the practice is one of intention, actually. The phrases that we use—may I be happy, may I be healthy, may you be safe, may you live with ease—these phrases are expressing the wish for happiness for ourselves and for other beings. We're also trying to connect with a feeling of warmth, of kindness, of caring as we express that wish. But that feeling may or may not come naturally right away.

You may be sitting here doing the metta practice and not have a sense of that feeling of warmth or caring, and that's fine actually. What this practice is doing is through that expression of that wish—may you be happy, may you be healthy—as we express that wish, as we connect to that phrase and understand what it means, we're inclining our minds towards the feelings that are connected with that wish. We may not be feeling them right away, but we're beginning to incline our minds in that direction.

So be patient with yourselves if you're not finding that feeling of warmth or kindness or caring. There were times I did a period of extended metta practice of one whole month, and during that month, there were definitely times where I just couldn't find the feeling at all, but I could say the phrase in my mind and understand what it meant—just saying the phrase and understanding the meaning. And through that practice, the feeling began to kind of be kindled.

This actually brings me to another aspect I want to include today, which is making the practice connected to our bodily experience, in particular in the area of the heart. This was the instruction that actually made the metta practice finally come alive for me, because it's so much words—we're saying the phrase, we're connecting with an image or with a feeling of being with the person. There's a lot of wordiness going on.

But for me, when one of my teachers finally gave me the instruction: every time you say a phrase, take a moment to just come back and check in in the area of the heart and see what has been the impact of making that wish. So you express the phrase, you understand the meaning, and then check back into the body in the area of the heart and see what's happened. There's no right or wrong to what happens there, but just give yourself an opportunity to check in and see what has come, what has happened.

For myself at that particular period of time when it felt so dry, what I discovered was I could say the phrase and understand the meaning. I could bring up an image, a brief moment of an image of the person, and then it would disappear. And then I would say the phrase and understand the meaning, and then check in with the area of the heart. After some time, what I began to see was there's just a little subtle feeling of opening and just a subtle feeling of wishing well, of caring for this person. It's very small, almost like a little ember.

And then as I continued saying the phrases, understanding the meaning of what I was saying, and checking back in, it was as if every phrase was like—as Greg said last night with the chanting—the phrases were like a bellows that fueled that little ember of goodwill into a more broad and open feeling of what I understood to be metta, really the open connected feeling of kindness, caring, and well-wishing.

It doesn't have to be—one of my friends says it doesn't have to be like a Hallmark greeting card kind of feeling that we're going for. It can be just a really simple feeling of well-wishing.

As we do this kind of practice, the practice of metta is what's called a practice of purification. So it tends to bring up in our hearts the opposite of the direction we're kind of going for. You may notice sometimes when you're doing the metta practices that feelings of anger, of frustration, of ill will come up. And contrary to what you might think—you might think, well, this practice isn't working—actually it is working. This is how the purification works.

One of my metta teachers, Guy Armstrong, compared this practice to running a magnet, a metta magnet, over your heart. So the metta practice is like you have a big metta magnet and you're running this metta magnet over your heart. What do magnets do? They pull out their opposite. So what happens as we run this metta magnet over our heart is that the opposites kind of get pulled to the surface so they come into consciousness and we're aware of them.

So it's not a mistake if you find while you're doing the practice that feelings of frustration, of annoyance, of irritation, of anger are coming up. There are a few different things I'd like to say about that, because sometimes they can be mild and sometimes they can be strong. It's helpful to have a sense of how to work with those energies as they appear in the metta practice.

The first instruction around working with difficulties as they come up—and these kinds of difficulties, just to put it in the metta language, are what is called the far enemy of metta. They're experiences that come up that are not going to be mistaken for metta; they are kind of the opposite quality to metta. In working with these qualities, the first instruction that we try is just simply to keep going. Allow that feeling of ill will, of anger, of frustration to be there, but in the background. You don't have to get rid of it. You don't have to do anything with it. Just stay connected to saying the phrase, understanding the meaning of the phrase, and connecting with the being that you are wishing the metta for. It's very simple, just letting it be in the background.

When I did this month of metta practice, this actually was kind of a relief for me when I first understood how this worked. It was kind of like, oh, you mean I don't have to actually dive in and figure it out? I can just let it be and then just keep going with the metta?

And what happened often, when you can keep going with the metta and just let that feeling be in the background, is that the feeling runs its course. It passes away, and then you're just left with the practice of the metta—and perhaps a little bit of an opening of the heart as that feeling of ill will dies away.

So it was really quite a revelation to me to recognize the power of just letting something be in the background. We don't always have to turn and look at everything that comes up. It's not that we're repressing it. It's not that we're trying to fight it or push it down. It's simply that right now, we're going to keep going with this metta.

Now, sometimes these difficult energies are strong—much stronger—and they aren't going to stay in the background. They're going to come much more front and center. And if these energies seem to be connected in particular with the being that you're wishing well to—like, for instance, wishing metta for myself, saying "may I be happy, may I be healthy," and what comes up is all the reasons why it's not possible, or why I'm not worthy of it—those kinds of thoughts can arise in the mind. If they get really strong, then it can be helpful to move or shift the metta practice to an easier being. So if you find it easier to wish metta towards a benefactor or a very easy being, you can switch the practice and see if that allows those difficult energies to be held or to release.

And if they're even stronger than that—if they seem to have taken root, these difficult energies—then you can drop the metta practice for a short time and bring mindfulness to your experience. Just allow yourself to turn towards that feeling and explore: How does it feel in my body? How does it impact my mind? If the difficult feeling dies away with the mindfulness practice, then you can simply return back to the metta practice.

So that's working with the far enemy. And then there's also what's called the near enemy of metta, which is a kind of energy that is similar to metta—so it might be confused with this quality of connection and love—but it's got a little bit of clinging, a little bit of attachment to it. It's a quality of caring with an agenda, a quality of caring with an expectation of something in return. It's got this selfish attachment; it's just slightly not unconditional. The pure quality of metta has no conditions on it. It's an unconditional well-wishing. No need for anything in return.

So if there's a sense of "I'll love you if..." or "I hope you're happy, but I hope you make me happy"—that kind of hoping for some reciprocity—just notice that. Again, just notice that there is some attachment there. There's no need to try to push that away either. Just recognize that that energy is present for you.

So let's begin the practice.

It's helpful for metta in particular to find as comfortable a posture as you can, allowing your body to be relaxed—as relaxed and comfortable as you can. You might want to start by just allowing your attention to rest in your heart center. And just notice what's there. What's the experience there? No right or wrong—just getting a sense of how the heart feels right now.

Sometimes I find it helpful to have the sense of breathing through my heart. You can play with that. If it doesn't resonate, just let it go.

And then, allowing yourself to call to mind—choose for yourself whether you'd like to begin this afternoon with yourself or with an easy being, a benefactor, a being for whom it's very easy, an uncomplicated relationship, for whom it's easy to feel that sense of connection and well-wishing. Choose for yourself whether you'd like to start with the benefactor or yourself.

Calling to mind for yourself a sense of either being with that person, if it's the benefactor, or an image of that person—or for yourself, perhaps the felt sense of yourself sitting here right now, or perhaps an image of yourself at a time in your life when you were particularly happy, a time when you felt good.

And for this being—either yourself or the benefactor—call to mind things that you like about that being. Qualities that you appreciate, or actions that you've appreciated. It's said that seeing the beautiful, seeing these kinds of qualities, is the near cause or the proximate cause for metta to arise. So it can help to reflect for a few moments about these qualities.

And begin connecting to this being, either yourself or the benefactor, with the image or sense of the being. And begin expressing the wishes of kindness, of caring, of goodwill.

May you be happy, or may I be happy. With each phrase, take a moment after you've expressed it to come back and check in, in the area of the heart. Just check in again—what's happening there? And then the next phrase: May you be healthy. May you be safe. May you live with ease.

Continue the mental practice with your own phrases. I know that Greg suggested some alternatives and encouraged you to think of your own. Whatever phrases feel most congruent or resonant for you, continue with them and practice for this being. After some time, switch to the other—to self if you're doing benefactor, and to benefactor if you're doing self.

Now call to mind the other being. If you've been doing benefactor, switch to self. If you've been doing self, switch to the easy being. Again, start by connecting with qualities that you appreciate, kind actions, allowing your attention to rest in the heart as you recall this being. Begin to express the wishes of goodwill, refreshing and reconnecting with the feeling in the heart center with each phrase.

Now open out the metta to express the wish of happiness and goodwill towards all beings everywhere. For me, this initially felt kind of conceptual, but just say the phrase—may all beings be happy, or whichever phrases you have found that resonate for yourself. Then kind of relax and open your mind to perhaps senses or images of beings that may be around the planet, whether they're animal or insect or persons, whether they're struggling beings or happy beings, whether they're children or adults or teenagers. May all beings be happy.

Again, refresh the sense in the area of the heart, connecting with how it impacts the heart to make this wish. May all beings be healthy. Sometimes it's helpful to imagine waves of metta spreading out over the land and just meeting whoever's in its path. May all beings be safe. May all beings be at ease. Continue expressing the wishes of goodwill towards all beings everywhere.

I've left a few minutes in case there are any questions about this practice. Does anybody have any questions about the metta practice?

Someone shares: "I found that at times it was a little hard to breathe, and even my heart felt as if it was pounding."

All kinds of things will happen to us. Just see if you can accept that. Were you wishing metta for yourself or for the other? When was it happening? Did you start with yourself and then switch? And when you switched to benefactor, did it make it easier?

So that could be in the terrain of difficulties that come up—there's sometimes for ourselves a little constriction around this wish. This was a surprise to me. It seems to be a surprise to Asian teachers. The Buddha, in teaching this, treated it as the most natural thing in the world—that of course we all wish ourselves happiness and love. It's not even a question that this is easy to do. Our Western culture seems to have a different way of raising beings, because we seem to have this widespread sense of it being more difficult to wish ourselves well.

There can be a kind of contraction or tightness. I used to feel like there was a band of steel around my chest, this tightness whenever I tried to do the metta practice—not only for myself but for others. It was very, very painful, almost physically painful. So just notice that, breathe with it, breathe through it. If it helps, in practicing on your own, see if switching to the easier being allows it to release, to relax a little bit.

One thing you can play with—and this comes from my colleague Gil Fronsdal—he suggests that when you find a being that's pretty easy to wish metta for, if you have difficulty wishing metta for yourself, just from time to time while you're wishing metta for that being, slip yourself in there. Just once. Let yourself ride in that wave of goodwill that's generated for that being, and then go back to the benefactor again. Get the sense of the possibility of having that feeling of connection with yourself.

Greg offered yesterday some different ways to include this practice during the day. I'd just like to echo that: if you find this practice helpful, you can pick another sitting during the day in which to work with it, or perhaps begin each sitting with a little bit of metta.

And we'll end the day, every day, with the metta chanting that we do.

If you find this practice really challenging, if it's hard and you don't connect with it very much at all, you don't have to force yourself. I would encourage you to just come to this sitting and sit in the field of working with this practice for this period, but you can let it go for the rest of the time.

It was a number of years before this practice really resonated for me. It took a long time for my heart to really soften. And for me, the softening came through the mindfulness practice. These two—the mindfulness practice and the metta practice—really can work together. The mindfulness practice can be a heart-opening practice as well. And for me, that's how my heart began to open: through meeting experience, just being willing to meet experience in this nonjudgmental, nonreactive way.

A nonjudgmental, nonreactive quality of mind is a quality of metta. And so the mindfulness practice will be cultivating this quality of metta.

But if this practice does resonate for you, use it. Use it as much as feels appropriate and helpful for you.

CHAPTER 80

Questions

Andrea Fella · 11 min

> *In this intimate Q&A session, Andrea Fella offers gentle guidance on working with common meditation experiences. She begins by encouraging practitioners to hold instructions lightly, sharing wisdom from her Burmese teacher: 'Nothing I tell you is anything for you to do—it is information that perhaps wouldn't have occurred to you.' This approach allows the mind to naturally explore experience without forcing or striving.*
>
> *Fella clarifies the relationship between the four foundations of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) and the sense doors, explaining that mindfulness of the body (kāyānupassanā) as taught by the Buddha primarily concerns the touch sense—including breathing, posture, and elements—while the other senses are addressed in the fourth foundation. She emphasizes simplicity: just notice what is obvious in this moment.*
>
> *The discussion addresses practical challenges including working with dreaminess during meditation. Rather than viewing such states as problems to eliminate, Fella suggests acknowledging them with mindfulness and making gentle adjustments like opening the eyes slightly. She also explores how the mind creates visual recognition of experience, such as when feeling wetness triggers an image of a dripping spring. This perceptual process, related to saññā (perception), can be noted as 'seeing' without needing to suppress it. The key is recognizing these moments before they lead to extended mind-wandering.*

Sometimes the instructions seem kind of complicated, and I want to just give you permission to not think about them or worry about them or try to do them too much.

One of my teachers, my Burmese teacher, says nothing he tells us is anything for us to do. But it is information that perhaps wouldn't have occurred to us. And having that information in your exploration of your experience, just as you are practicing, being aware—having that information can offer different ways that your mind will start to explore experience without you really having to do it.

So be really relaxed around the instructions. As we're offering them over these days, it can sound like a lot, but really it can be very simple. Just notice what is obvious in this moment of experience. As the mindfulness starts to get more continuous, it strengthens the power of our ability to see more and more. We don't have to try to find all of these things. Just do your practice. Just keep tapping on that scooter. Keep noticing moment

after moment: Am I aware, and what am I aware of? Anchoring your attention to support this in your breathing, or in the body sensations, or in hearing—whichever is most congenial for you.

We have a few minutes for questions this morning.

Question about mindfulness of the body and the sense doors.

Mindfulness of the body is about being as aware as you can be in the moment of what's happening at all the different sense doors. The mindfulness of the body is actually primarily at the touch sense, the way the Buddha described it. He described many instructions around mindfulness of the body, but mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of posture, mindfulness of elements are more about the touch sense. The other senses are included in the fourth foundation of mindfulness.

But don't worry about that too much. If you're noticing hearing, if you're noticing taste and touch—all those six things are going on, and the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral qualities associated with all of those. But this elemental piece I was describing, I wasn't describing the elemental nature of sight or of sound or of taste. There are different kinds of explorations in that realm. So primarily the instructions are around the touch sense of the body.

Question about drifting into dream states while using the breath as an anchor.

That's what's happening. So what we try to do is to wake up to what is happening. We don't try to change it so much, but we try to bring mindfulness to it.

What you're noticing is that there's a breath and then you may get lost into that dream state a little bit. There's probably some images coming, and there's maybe a little bit of getting lost. At some point you wake up into that dream state, and there's a recognition: "Oh, images or a dreamy quality is happening." At that moment, you can just acknowledge that—"Oh, dreaminess is happening"—and then you can choose to come back to the breath, because you're now aware again.

It's also possible to watch the mind kind of move in and out of that dreaminess and be completely aware in that dreamy space. So check in and see how aware you are. My guess is that probably what's happening is that you're waking up into that dreaminess.

That kind of state happens partly because the mind is settling down. The dreamy quality comes—it's kind of a subtler kind of thinking that arises when the mind settles a little bit, but there's not a lot of energy. One way you can play with that, one of the best ways I find when I get into that kind of state, is just open your eyes and pay attention to

the breath with your eyes just open and down-focused. That gives just a little bit of energy into the system that will help keep you alert. You'll find that your eyes will close and you'll drift back into dreaminess.

None of it is a problem. We just wake up, we're aware when we're aware, and we make adjustments as we know is skillful. But to try to say "dreaming is bad, I need to be with my breath"—that's adding a kind of pressure and aversion to your meditation that's not necessary. So you notice, "Oh, dreaminess," and that's okay.

And then you may notice that two or three times, and if it feels like the dreaminess is taking over, open your eyes.

A question arose: "I was feeling the wetness you were talking about, the fluidity in my mouth, and I got an image of a dripping spring. Is that commentary? Should I note it as commentary?"

My guess is that this is your mind recognizing the experience in a visual way. It's probably in that realm of perception—like when you're hearing a sound and your mind registers "car." It's an identification of experience. Your mind is trying to create a recognition of what this is.

You don't need to stop it. You've just noticed that it happened. You can note it if you wish. Sometimes I find it really helpful to acknowledge that even though the eyes are closed, the mind is exploring experience through the visual field. Images arise. I find it helpful to use "seeing" as an acknowledgment when that happens—just recognizing the process of what's going on.

I wouldn't try to stop that kind of experience, but noticing that it happens is helpful, because that's a prime place where we recognize something. You said there was the image of a dripping spring. If you hadn't noticed that, what might have happened next is that you'd be off someplace looking at a spring in Hawaii, and then suddenly you'd be on the beach, and then you're gone.

So the fact that you see it gives you the opportunity to recognize: this is just the mind doing its recognizing process. Then you simply come back to the feeling of the wetness. And often when you recognize these images, they disappear. Did it disappear when you recognized it?

Yes.

This is how awareness works. We notice, we acknowledge, and the mind naturally settles back into direct experience.

So enjoy your day of mindfulness on this snowy day.

CHAPTER 81

The Hindrances

Andrea Fella · 56 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella offers detailed guidance on working skillfully with the five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇa): sense desire (kāmacchanda), ill will (byāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), restlessness and anxiety (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā). Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), she reframes these challenging mental states not as enemies to be conquered, but as legitimate objects of mindfulness practice found in the fourth foundation.

Fella presents the Buddha's systematic approach to each hindrance: recognizing when it is present or absent, understanding the conditions that give rise to it, and discovering what supports its cessation. She shares the traditional analogies—water colored with dye for sense desire, wind-rippled water for restlessness—while offering practical contemporary guidance. A key teaching throughout is the importance of turning attention 180 degrees: rather than focusing on what we want or dislike, we observe the feeling of wanting or disliking itself in the body.

Particularly valuable is her guidance on discerning when mindfulness can meet these energies and when they overwhelm us like a tsunami. She offers skillful alternatives for overwhelming states, such as grounding attention in the feet or hands rather than trying to directly confront difficult emotions. The talk concludes with Rumi's "Guest House" poem, reinforcing the invitation to welcome all mental states as guides on the path to understanding dukkha and finding freedom.

Tonight I'd like to explore some energies that come up in our practice, some mental energies, some mind states that we can get caught in and that we can struggle with.

The Buddha identified five particular energies that are challenging for us. And in his usual way of creating lists, he gave this list a name: the hindrances. These are five mental energies, and they are sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt.

The Buddha called them hindrances because they tend to hinder our ability to settle into meditation, to become concentrated. This name, hindrance, is a translation of the Pali term *nivarana*. But this translation often makes us think or feel that if it's a hindrance, it means we can't meditate when it's there. There's a sense that if we're ex-

periencing one of these energies, it's a real problem that has to be gotten rid of, and that we can't meditate. So we tend to have an antagonistic relationship with these mental energies.

Yet the Buddha, while saying that they hinder our ability to get concentrated, at the same time said that they are perfectly valid, legitimate experiences with which to cultivate mindfulness. In his discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness, the *Satipatthana Sutta*, which we've been talking about, he mentioned these hindrances as experiences that we can be mindful of. They're found in the fourth foundation of mindfulness, where he described ways to be mindful of these difficult energies.

So not only is it possible to be mindful of sense desire, of ill will, of sloth and torpor—or sleepiness and dullness, as another way to put that one—of restlessness and anxiety, and of doubt. Not only is it possible, it's extremely helpful. It's very valuable for us to learn how to be mindful of these states of mind.

These states of mind are usually experienced as unpleasant, or when we begin to become aware of them, we usually experience them as problematic. We experience them as *dukkha*, as suffering. I talked about this word *dukkha* recently—that sense of unease, of our lives being off-center or out of kilter, an out-of-balance kind of feeling. The word suffering tends to make us think of large suffering, but the term *dukkha* is much broader than that. These mental energies, these hindrances, are usually experienced as *dukkha*. They are a form of suffering for us.

But the Buddha's whole exploration, his whole path, was around exploring this suffering. He said he found a way to freedom from suffering, but it wasn't through somehow magically transcending that suffering. It was through meeting it, going through it, understanding it. And so this is the recommendation with these hindrances. As a form of suffering, we meet them. We understand them. We explore them with mindfulness in order to understand them.

This is the key that the Buddha offered around *dukkha*: understand *dukkha*. This will lead you to freedom from *dukkha*.

Being mindful of difficult experience, being mindful of *dukkha*, means meeting it, being with it, but not indulging in it. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita in Burma, described this kind of meeting experience as being a rubbing—that we rub our experience as if we were polishing a bowl with a soft cloth. This image has been really helpful for me as a way to think about exploring and being with our experience. It's not trying to forcefully pick it apart. It's opening our hearts to and meeting our experience.

This understanding of *dukkha* that the Buddha suggested is observing experience directly—observing this unease, this dissatisfaction, all of the struggles that we have—not thinking about it, not analyzing it, but being willing to be with it. Almost as if you'd be willing to be with a small child who was in pain. That kind of being with.

This understanding that comes with mindfulness, with this willingness to be with, begins to allow these difficult energies to dissipate. It's kind of a magic thing in a way. It's the understanding that frees us. This is what the third noble truth is about: the possibility for freedom from suffering comes from the letting go of holding on to wanting things to be other than they are, this being the source of all of our *dukkha*.

The understanding that comes from being with allows us to begin—it's not that we let go of these difficulties; it's that they begin to let go of themselves as they are met with this mindfulness.

So I'd like to just offer you, briefly, the paraphrased version of the instructions the Buddha offers for the hindrances in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness. And just hearing these, I think, can be helpful. I'm not going to try to cover all of these in this talk—that would take several evenings—but I'd like to put them out there.

So he says, first of all, for all of these states—I'll just use sense desire as an example and then restate the pattern for the others so that you can get a sense of the structure. For sense desire, we recognize when sense desire is present, and we recognize when sense desire is absent. That's an interesting one to think about. Noticing when these difficult energies are not present actually supports us.

We begin to get familiar with the causes and conditions that lead to these hindrances, that lead to sense desire coming into being. What are the situations that you get into that make sense desire come up? And then we can learn the conditions that help sense desire to not appear. So essentially, in part by seeing the conditions that make it appear, we learn conditions that support sense desire not appearing. This also involves understanding and exploring what skillful qualities of mind, wholesome qualities of mind, serve to counter sense desire.

These same instructions are offered for ill will—noticing presence and absence of ill will, noticing what conditions allow it to arise, noticing what conditions support it not arising. Likewise for sloth and torpor, likewise for restlessness and anxiety, and likewise for doubt.

So he offered some very specific things for us to play with, to observe, to explore around these hindrances. Given that I can't cover all of these this evening, what I'd like to primarily talk about is what it means to be present for, what it means to explore and investigate these states when they are present. So that's that first instruction: recognize when the hindrance is present. We'll begin to explore that side of it.

The other piece that I'd like to bring in a little bit is what to do, how to work, some suggestions for how to work with these energies when they're kind of overwhelming—because we can't always bring mindfulness to these difficult energies. We can think about these energies as having a certain level of momentum or a certain level of energy. And our mindfulness, in meeting that—if our mindfulness doesn't have the same level of energy or cultivation or development as that hindrance does, it's like the hindrance is a tsunami and our mindfulness is just this little trickling stream. We can get swamped by these energies. So we need to become aware, cognizant of times when mindfulness is not necessarily the right approach for us and we need to do something else, to take some action to bring ourselves into some kind of balance around these energies.

So the first: sense desire. This is the desire to have pleasant sense experience at our five physical sense doors—seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching. This is that wish to be surrounded by pleasant experience. Generally this desire is fueled by a belief—I think I talked about this a few days ago—it's fueled by a belief that having this sense pleasure is how we can be happy. That being able to surround ourselves by pleasant sense experience is the road to happiness.

For each of these hindrances, the Buddha offers an analogy. I'll give you the analogy with each one that I talk about. And the analogy involves a bowl of water. They used to use bowls of water to reflect, so that they could see themselves—it was a form of mirror that they used. The analogy about sense desire is that the water has been laced with dye, colorful swirling colors in the water. Because of the swirling colors, we become entranced by them and can't see our reflection. We can't see clearly because we're entranced by the colors.

This is the way sense desire functions for us. We become entranced with this notion that pleasant experiences are what is going to make us happy, and we can't really see clearly. We can't see how that entrancement is actually keeping us on a cycle of just wanting to get something, wanting to get the next thing, wanting, wanting, wanting.

Sense desire keeps us from being present, keeps us from being in the present moment, because we are pulled out of the here and now in order to figure out how we're going to get that next moment of sense pleasure, even if it's only a few seconds away.

We feel like life is going to be better if we get that thing. But what's happening is that we're actually giving up peacefulness here and now for the possibility of a few moments of sense pleasure sometime in the future.

It's not really the sense pleasure itself that's the issue here. It's the desire that is the problem.

It's the desire that's fueling us out of the present moment to get the next thing.

Living our lives, we are going to have a stream of experiences. Some of them are going to be pleasant, some of them are going to be unpleasant, and some of them are going to be neutral. That flow is just going to happen. But we don't just let that flow happen. We try to stop it at the pleasant ones, try to get rid of the unpleasant ones. So it's not the pleasant experiences that are an issue here. It's this desire to create a world in which there is only pleasant experience. Or the belief, actually—it's the belief that that is the way to happiness.

So what does it mean to explore sense desire? Well, with sense desire our mind is turned outwards to the world. We are focused on things out there, trying to figure out how to maneuver the world to have the pleasant experience we'd like. The helpful instruction around sense desire is to see if you can let go of the attention outwards to the things that we want. Instead, it's like turning the attention 180 degrees around and looking at the experience of what it feels like to want something. This is bringing mindfulness to the experience of sense desire itself. We don't resist it, we don't try to stop it, and we don't indulge in it. This movement of turning towards the experience of sense desire is a way of not indulging it, because in the turning towards we're not acting on it. We're not trying to fulfill that desire. We're simply trying to watch: What is this desire?

This is the understanding that the Buddha talks about. Sense desire is an energy that pulls us into dukkha. It doesn't inherently seem like it would pull us into dukkha, but I mentioned some of the ways it does the other day. If we desire something and we're trying to get it and we don't get it, there's the dukkha right there. If we desire something and we get it, it doesn't seem like there should be dukkha there—but then we may be feeling like we have to protect it and defend it, and we get anxious and afraid that it's going to go. We've gotten something we like finally, and how can I keep it? How can I hold on to it? So there can be a feeling of anxiety around it. Or it could get lost. It could get broken. It could get stolen. No longer ours.

So we're not indulging in that sense desire, we're not trying to fulfill it—we're just simply trying to observe it, turning towards that feeling.

Now, sense desire, and actually most of these hindrances, come with some kinds of thinking. "This is what I need. This is how I have to do this. This is very important. This is what's going to make me happy." Those kinds of thoughts are going, and scheming—our thoughts are scheming how to make this sense pleasure come to us.

So there are two pieces to this exploration. One is seeing if you can let go of the thoughts and not engage in the thinking process around sense desire, and instead turn towards the feeling in the body. There's probably some kind of feeling in the body, especially when sense desire is strong. For me, it feels like I'm being pulled like a magnet towards something. That's one way it feels. Or if I'm really moving towards something, it can kind of feel like—I'll give you an image. When swimmers come to the end of a lap and they coil themselves up into a ball in order to shoot themselves out into the pool, that energy of coiling up and shooting out in a direction—sometimes that's the way sense desire feels. Eagerness. That's the feeling of eagerness: "Oh, yeah, that—that's going to make me happy." It has that feeling of propelling in a direction.

So getting a sense of what it feels like—what does this energy of desire feel like? We can play with simple desires, simple sense desires, as a way to explore this. The energies are the same whether it's a small desire or a large desire, and there's a lot of learning that we can come to by exploring even very simple sense desires.

One day I was driving to the meditation center to teach a class, and I got stopped at a red light. I was sitting there at the red light, and there was a Starbucks just across the intersection.

Seeing the Starbucks, the mind went, "Oh, latte—that would be nice." I felt the desire spring up at that moment. Having done a lot of this practice, I thought, "Okay, I'm just going to pay attention. Just going to pay attention to this feeling. Not going to act on it, just going to watch it."

What I saw was that once the light turned green and I managed to drive past the Starbucks without turning into the driveway, as soon as Starbucks was out of my field of vision, that desire was gone. This is a learning. While it was in my field of vision, my mind thought it was the thing that would make me feel really good. Then it was just forgotten when I drove past.

So explore in your own experience these little wantings. See if you can not act on them necessarily, and play with what you can learn about sense desire. What can you learn about your own mind? In that case, there was a learning that some sense desires—not all of them, but some—are fueled simply by having something in proximity. Once it's out of proximity, it's out of sight, out of mind.

Sometimes we do have some challenge with sense desire. It can get strong, and we need discernment to recognize whether we are actually able to be mindful of sense desire or whether we're indulging it. Sense desire can appear as a fantasy in our minds, and we can think, "Oh yeah, I'll just be mindful of this fantasy." We let the fantasy run. But what we're really doing is indulging the fantasy as opposed to being mindful of what's going on.

We need discernment to know when we're allowing and observing and when we're indulging. A key for this would be: if you're indulging the fantasy, you're probably getting lost in it and not terribly mindful. When we try to bring our attention to sense desire and find we keep getting lost in it, then it may be time to take some other kind of action—to learn a skillful ignoring. Just let that be to the side. Don't put your attention there. Actively put your attention somewhere else for a while—in your feet, perhaps. It's learning how to ignore something without aversion, without hatred. Just, "Nope, I'm going to put that aside and pay attention to something else."

The second of these difficult energies, ill will, is the sense of disliking things. It is rooted in a belief that our happiness depends on getting rid of unpleasant experience or getting ourselves away from it. It can have the impact of actively pushing something away, or we say, "I can't be here, I need to get out of here." It pulls us away from the present by making us feel we have to get rid of things in this moment. Again, it's that unwillingness to be with what's actually here because we think our happiness depends on changing it. "If only I could get rid of this state of mind, this knee pain, this pain in the back—then I could meditate."

As we begin to explore the energy of ill will, what we actually start to see is that it's the wanting to get rid that is creating the difficulty, creating the agitation. Being able to settle down to meditate doesn't depend on getting rid of that energy. It's just a reorientation.

This is very similar to sense desire in a way. With ill will, we're often focused outward on the thing we don't like, trying to fix it, change it, get rid of it, control it, or figure out how to remove ourselves. The movement is to turn toward the feeling of ill will itself. We take our attention out of the thing triggering the dislike and turn toward the feeling of ill will.

See if you can let go of the thoughts fueling the ill will—thoughts like "I can't stand this," "This has got to go," "This is a problem." All those thoughts reinforce the ill will. Turn attention away from them. See if you can let go of the thoughts and turn attention to the body. What does it feel like in the body?

Ill will does not feel pleasant at all. It's a difficult experience to learn how to be present for. But as we start to explore it, we actually see that it's easier to be with the feeling of ill will than to be caught in this state of being trapped by it, trapped by the belief that acting on it is the only way to happiness.

Now, I do want to say that what I'm talking about here—not acting on ill will and just turning to the experience—this we can always do in meditation. It's always helpful to refrain from acting on ill will in meditation. In our daily lives, we need to be careful about what we mean by that. Sometimes we can have the sense that if we don't like something, we should just sit there passively and not do anything about it.

That's not really the teaching. The teaching isn't about just being passively a lump on a log while unpleasant things are coming at you. We can take action to get ourselves out of the way of difficult situations or to take care of situations that are creating danger.

For instance, you see a child running out into the road. You're not going to just sit there observing, "Oh, fear is happening in the body." You're going to run out and try to stop that child. It demands some action. Now there may be some aversion happening, some ill will arising around the feeling of fear. But we can actually act out of compassion there. So the teaching on not acting out of ill will doesn't mean that we don't act when we see something difficult or wrong in the world. What we try to do is act out of compassion rather than out of that ill will. It's possible to change something and to want to change something without hating that thing. I just wanted to make that clear.

It's also important to recognize that with ill will, at least in my own experience, sometimes the experience can feel like a tsunami. We can get overwhelmed by ill will, and it feels very difficult to be mindful of it. A skillful way to deal with this is very similar to the overwhelm I talked about with sense desire, when we can't really meet it with mindfulness. Can you allow that ill will to be there, but not directly meet it?

Sometimes what seems to happen is that when we directly try to meet a difficult energy of ill will—and there are many flavors of this: anger, frustration, irritation, annoyance, rage—those emotions can get very strong, stronger than our ability to meet them with mindfulness. When that happens, we try to bring mindfulness to those emotions and we just feel like we get sucked into the black hole of them. That's a clue that it's not so helpful to try to bring mindfulness to those emotions directly.

So again, that kind of setting aside, "not now," is how I work with this. It's like, "Okay, I see you. I see you, anger, but you stay over there, do your thing. I'm going to put my attention in my feet. I'm going to do some walking, and I'm just going to pay attention to my feet." Learning when you're in a state of overwhelm and beginning to learn skillful ways to redirect the attention is key.

For ill will, I really recommend that people find or learn to cultivate some kind of experience that is outside of the main core of the body. Because if you try to use the breathing, a lot of people say, "Well, I just try to come back to the breathing when I'm noticing the anger, and I just get caught back in the anger." A lot of the feelings associated with ill will happen in the area of the torso. So if you're feeling a lot of anger and you're trying to pay attention to breathing in this part of the body, you're likely to get mixed up with the feelings of the ill will.

I like to suggest that people cultivate something else. Hearing is a good one for ill will—it takes you out of the physical body, and you can simply attend to sounds. Unless, of course, the sound is what's creating the ill will, which can happen. So hearing is good, or putting your attention in your hands or your feet. Something grounding—your buttocks touching the chair or cushion. Something to allow you to stabilize while you let that experience be in the background. Again, it's not repression. It's not pushing away. It's kind of a gentle "not now."

The third of these hindrances is sloth and torpor, or sleepiness and dullness. This often comes with low energy. The mind and body are in a low energy state—that's the sleepiness side of things, when the body has low energy. When the mind is low energy, it can just feel dull and foggy, or thick, kind of like pea soup. The mind feels unclear.

We typically get agitated around this state because we think, especially if we're trying to meditate—if we're going to sleep, it's not a problem. But if we're sitting in the meditation hall trying to meditate and we feel sleepy or dull, it feels like a problem. How many of you have had the thought, "I can't meditate because I'm too sleepy"?

What I'd like to propose is this: if you can have that thought—"I'm too sleepy to meditate"—then you have enough mindfulness to at least explore what it means to be mindful of sleepiness.

Let me offer an analogy I've found really helpful. I've talked about mindfulness being like a mirror that reflects what it experiences. It doesn't care what it's reflecting—it can reflect beautiful things or ugly things, and the quality of the mirror is not changed by what it reflects. Now think about that mirror after you've been in the shower, when it's all steamed up with fog. If you're trying to use that mirror to see your reflection, it's

not going to work very well because it's covered with steam. But you know, just knowing how mirrors work, that mirror is doing its job perfectly. It is reflecting every drop of water perfectly. It's not doing what you want it to do, but it's doing its job.

What I'd like to propose is that when the mind is dull or foggy or sleepy, there can actually be enough energy to simply recognize: sleepiness is happening, dullness is happening. If you're trying to use that dull or sleepy mind to pay attention to the breath with all its different sensations, or you have some agenda about what you need to be paying attention to, it's going to be frustrating. But mindfulness can perfectly reflect that dullness, that sleepiness, that fogginess.

One thing I've discovered in exploring this is that when I play with it this way, not resisting the sleepiness, it's not actually a problem if you're sleepy or dull when meditating. It's only a problem because you think it's a problem. It's your idea that makes it a problem. When I turn my attention to the feeling of sleepiness without resistance, the experience transforms. But when I do resist it, trying to do something else, the feeling of sleepiness becomes really unpleasant. I think most of you have experienced that—sleepiness feels terrible when you're trying to meditate and pay attention to something. But if you don't resist the sleepiness and simply allow yourself to observe it, it's actually quite pleasant. It feels really good.

This is a little carrot for you, a way to hopefully get you interested in exploring sleepiness, because it can feel remarkably pleasant—just observing the feeling of sleepiness come over you. The body gets deeply relaxed. The brain goes into this lovely vibratory state. I explored this on one retreat where it became clear to me this was possible. I watched all these feelings descend through the body, this mind going into this state. And I got to the place where I could see right before the body dropped. I could know right before I was going to fall over. And in seeing that, I could just straighten up my body a little, open my eyes, let a bit of energy come in, then close my eyes and let the whole thing happen over again. It was like the best Disneyland ride. It was so much fun to play with sleepiness.

Now, there are times when the mind is too sleepy, when there's more sleepiness than mindfulness. It takes some kind of balance between the two. But it's possible more often than you think to be mindful of sleepiness. If you explore this and find that you just end up nodding off for ten minutes, well then, when you come back into awareness, stand up, open your eyes. Perhaps at the next walking period, do some faster walking, bring some energy into the body. These are ways to work with that energy when it's a little too much for our mindfulness.

There's another side to this difficult energy, and that's the thick mind—the torpor, the dullness, the pea-soup mind. It's possible to just know that pea soup. And again, without resistance, it's possible to see that state. One of the antidotes to that state is counterintuitive. If you find that state so thick that you just continually disappear into that fog, one remedy is to bring a little more precision to how you're paying attention. Try to notice the sensations at the very beginning of the in-breath. See if you can know the first sensations as the breath begins. See what happens. It's counterintuitive, but it works because making effort like that generates some energy. Just doing that can begin to clear up the pea-soupy mind.

The next of these energies is restlessness and anxiety. This too has both a physical and mental component, much like sloth and torpor has the physical sleepiness and the mental pea-soup quality. Restlessness in the body has a quality that's deeply unpleasant—it feels like jumping beans under your skin, like your nerves feel itchy. It's really uncomfortable. The agitated mind has the quality of feeling like it can't land anywhere. It touches something and then goes someplace else, and someplace else, and someplace else. It just feels scattered.

It doesn't feel like it can collect and attend to anything.

Oh, I've been forgetting to tell you the analogies! Let me share the one for this hindrance. You have a bowl of water, and you're trying to see your reflection, but the wind is blowing and the surface is rippled with agitation. So there's that constant disturbance on the surface.

With physical restlessness—that jumping bean quality—the thing I've found most helpful is to see if you can let the attention get really big. Allow that feeling of the jumpy bean body to expand as big as the room. Sometimes when we try to be mindful of something like restlessness, it's like we attempt to contain awareness within the body. This becomes almost like a pressure cooker, tightening down on the experience and making it even more agitated. But if you just explore with curiosity—what would happen if I allow this feeling of restlessness to get as big as it wants?—it's like giving it more space, so it doesn't have quite that agitated quality. Let your mind get really big and allow that feeling to expand as much as it needs to.

With restlessness in the mind—the mental kind—it's often helpful to check in and see if there's some emotion happening underneath. Because when the mind gets restless, when it's spinning in thought, there's often an emotion beneath those spinning thoughts. If you can just check in—what else is going on here? Is there some emotion present?—you may find worry, anxiety, regret, remorse, something stirring beneath the surface.

In that kind of situation, the movement is again about letting go of thoughts. See if you can release the thoughts associated with the spinning mind and ground your attention in the body—in how that emotion manifests physically. We'll talk more about this tomorrow morning: how to pay attention to emotions through our bodily experience.

So you feel remorse—how does that remorse impact your body? You feel fear—how does that fear impact your body? Tightness, constriction in the throat, a feeling of jumpiness in the stomach. Ground your attention in the body. When we ground our attention there, we're closer to the actual experience. We're not allowing attention to remain in the thoughts, which tend to fuel the whole cycle around the experience.

Again, there are times when restlessness can get too strong. If you're trying to bring mindfulness to this difficult state and you get swamped—you just feel lost in the restlessness—then it's probably helpful to take some other action. Open your eyes. Go for a walk. Go out in nature. These kinds of things are really helpful when mind and body are deeply restless.

The last of the five hindrances is doubt. The doubt referred to here is doubt around the practice, doubt around our ability to practice, doubt in the teachings, doubt in the teachers. It's not doubt like, "Can I go skydiving? Do I have enough courage?" That's not what we're talking about here. This is doubt specifically around the practice.

The description of doubt is that it creates a wavering—the mind wavers back and forth. There's an analogy: someone in doubt is like someone lost in a desert. You take a few steps this way, think, "Oh, that can't be right," go back and take a few steps that way, "Oh, that can't be right." It's that wavering, that vacillation—the quality of doubt. The mind can't decide what to do. Or it flip-flops: I should do that. No, no, I should do that. No, I should do *that*.

Or you find the mind spinning in logical arguments about the practice: "I should be doing this kind of practice. I shouldn't be doing this mindfulness practice. I should be doing some kind of dancing practice instead." Sometimes these thoughts can sound very wise. They have a rationality to them.

So the key with doubt is really learning to recognize when it's happening—because doubt is a great deceiver.

Doubt can completely trick us into thinking we are entirely rational and wise in our reflections. For me, one of the big clues that doubt is happening is that I'm having a lot of thoughts about the practice, about my ability to practice, about what kind of practice I should be doing at this moment. "Oh, metta right now. No, no, mindfulness of breath-

ing. Oh, no, open awareness." If I'm thinking about what I should be doing, that's a form of doubt. And just as a small piece of guidance right there—if that's the kind of doubt you're having, just pick one. It doesn't really matter. Just pick one.

Then there are doubts about the teachings themselves. "The Buddha lived 2,500 years ago. How can what he learned possibly apply to the twenty-first century?" If you're having thoughts like that, if you can just recognize, "Oh, this is doubt," that is two-thirds of the difficulty. Two-thirds of the battle around doubt is recognizing that doubt is happening.

Often there are emotions underneath doubt as well—feelings of vulnerability, feelings of insecurity, a fear of failure. That was a big one for me. Fear that if I don't do it right, I'm going to be a failure. And so my mind kept asking, "How can I do it right?" There was a lot of doubt in my mind about doing it right, motivated by this fear of failure. Fear of the unknown can also lead to doubt.

So just recognizing that doubt is happening is huge. And then we can begin to see what's underneath. What else is happening here? What emotion is going on? What's fueling this doubt?

In one practice period at Spirit Rock, I noticed that one afternoon I was caught in doubt for several hours. Finally, after all that time, I came to the surface and thought, "Oh, doubt—doubt is happening. What do I do with this?" I was really caught by it. I thought I had to get rid of the doubt in order to practice. That was my mind state. Finally, it was like, "Oh, doubt's what's happening. Maybe I should practice with doubt."

Immediately I recognized that there was a feeling underneath it. In this case, it was a feeling of grief, because I felt like I had lost my way, lost my faith in the practice, my confidence in the practice, and there was this feeling of grief. Having recognized, first, that doubt was happening, that I could be aware of it, and then the emotion underneath it—it passed within fifteen minutes. Just the willingness to meet it. I had been stuck in it for hours, and when I finally came up to be able to watch it, it dissipated very quickly. So that is the biggest key with doubt—just learning to recognize it.

We do have this feeling that these hindrances are somehow in the way of our practice. As I said, in that case of doubt, it felt like I had to get rid of this doubt in order to continue. We'll have that feeling at times. But the wanting to get rid of is just another hindrance. It's simply the hindrance of ill will.

The Buddha has told us we can be mindful of these hindrances. He's given us instructions on how to be aware of them. He didn't say push them away. He didn't use that "bear down, grit your teeth, get rid of" kind of instruction. He said notice it, ob-

serve it. When these energies, these hindrances, are seen with mindfulness, when we can bring that quality of mindful attention to our hindrances, they are not in the way of our practice. They are our practice. They become the path. They become the unfolding of our path.

They become the learning that is arising in this moment. We can use suffering as a guide. When we're suffering, there's something that needs to be understood. When these hindrances are present, there's something to understand. The understanding of that is what leads to freedom.

Really, truly, these hindrances are not in the way. I have had deep recognition of impermanence, of not-self, through the exploration of hindrances. Just a real recognition: this thought that's arising in my mind, this self-hatred that's arising in my mind, is a construct. It's empty. It's quite amazing to be able to witness our deep patterns, our deep difficult patterns, with mindfulness and begin to see how they can release and fall apart.

So these hindrances are going to be with us for a long time. The Buddha talked about the path of awakening unfolding in stages. He talked about there being four stages to awakening. At each stage of awakening, there's more freedom, more releasing, more letting go. And some of the teachings map these hindrances onto these stages.

At the first stage of awakening, it is said that doubt goes away. It's not until the third stage of awakening that sense desire and ill will go away. And it's not until the fourth, the final stage of awakening, that restlessness and anxiety and sloth and torpor go away.

So get used to them. Make friends with them. And get interested in them. Really, the interest—if you can bring some interest to this exploration, you will have much to learn and much benefit.

So that's my wish for you: that you can bring an interest to this exploration of these difficult states.

Let's sit for a moment. I'm going to drop a poem into your sitting. It's a poem some of you may have heard several times, by Rumi:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival—a joy, a depression, a meanness.
Some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all.
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture,

still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice—
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes
because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

CHAPTER 82

Guided Mettā (4)

Andrea Fella · 47 min

> *In this guided mettā meditation, Andrea Fella introduces the practice of extending loving-kindness to the neutral person—someone we neither like nor dislike, such as a bank teller, postal worker, or grocery clerk. This represents a significant turning point in mettā practice because the vast majority of beings in the world fall into this category of people unknown to us.*
>
> *Fella explains that working with neutral beings helps us discover our shared humanity and breaks through the subtle barriers we may hold around wishing others well. She offers the transitional phrase "Just as I wish to be happy, so too may you be happy" as a skillful way to bridge the connection. The talk addresses common challenges practitioners face, including boredom or disconnection with neutral beings, while noting that some practitioners actually find this easier than working with intimates, where complicated histories can arise.*
>
> *Using the beautiful analogy of Hawaiian mountain pools that overflow into one another, Fella describes how mettā naturally wants to expand outward when cultivated. She emphasizes that happiness is not a zero-sum game—the open heart's capacity for well-wishing is unlimited and grows through sharing. The guided practice moves from self to benefactor or friend, then to the neutral person, before opening to all beings everywhere.*

So today I'd like to continue exploring the metta practice, and in our progress or movement through this practice, we learn about offering metta to different categories of beings.

We begin by offering metta to ourselves and to an easy person, a benefactor, and then move towards friends and dear ones. Then we move into the realm of people that we don't know at all—what we call a neutral person—and then we'll move on to people that are challenging.

In the practice of offering metta to specific beings, we are picking representatives of the range of categories of relationships that we have. We have relationships with ourselves, relationships with people who are dear to us, relationships with people we admire and respect and love greatly, relationships with people we don't know very well, and relationships with people who are difficult.

In this expanding practice of moving to offer metta to all beings, essentially what we're doing is trying on or playing with offering these wishes of kindness and goodwill to specific beings. Because sometimes when we offer metta to all beings, it's easy to overlook the fact that we can kind of delude ourselves—we overlook that we're in our minds wishing metta to all beings except this person or except that person. The practice of offering metta to people that we don't know very well and people that we have difficulty with begins to break through some of the barriers around wishing people well, some of the ways in which we may hold back from wishing people well. This begins to highlight for us some of the ways that we may resist sending metta.

Today I'd like to explore the neutral person, and this is kind of a turning point in the metta practice in terms of exploring offering the wishes of goodwill, for a couple of reasons.

One is that the practice is moving towards offering well-wishing to all beings everywhere, and the vast majority of all beings are really unknown to us. They fall into this category of what we might call a neutral being—we don't know much about them, so we don't really have an opinion one way or the other. When beings are in that category, when they're neutral to us, there's almost a sense of not caring too much. They're out of our realm, out of our line of sight, and we don't think too much about offering them good wishes. So this practice is highlighting this kind of person that we don't know very well and beginning to offer the wishes of goodwill. That's one reason why it's a turning point: it's moving us in the direction of really being able to connect with what it means to offer this heartfelt wish of well-being to somebody we don't know.

The other part of it is that in this exploration, we're moving from beings that we actually have some connection with—where there may already be a sense of that movement of kindness and good wishing—to beings that we don't know, and beginning to see that we can connect with a kind of shared humanity.

When we bring up somebody in our mind that we don't know well, it might be a good idea to start thinking about somebody you could choose for this category—a person that you can create an image of or know who they are. A bank teller, a grocery store clerk, a postal carrier. Maybe one of the other people on retreat, although by this point in the retreat there may not be true neutrality between you; there may already be a sense of connection or a little bit of struggle. Just pick somebody that feels relatively neutral to you.

One of the ways we try to connect is this: with people we know, one way to explore the metta practice is, in each phrase, to envision the person a little bit. If you have a visual sense, you could call up that person—"May you be happy"—and envision them

doing something they really love. If you know that person really loves cross-country skiing, you might envision them doing something they're genuinely happy doing. Or with "May you be healthy," if you know some ways that person works to make themselves healthy, you can call that image up in your mind, and it makes for an easier connection to that phrase.

When we move to neutral people, we don't have any idea what would make them happy in the specific. But we do know some general things that would make people happy, just from knowing ourselves. A human being is happy when they're surrounded by people that care for them, when they have nourishing food and can take care of themselves. So we move into a place where we're exploring our shared humanity with people. This is another really powerful aspect of this exploration of the neutral person.

As we do this practice with the neutral person, there can be some difficulties. One kind of difficulty that people often run into is a sense of not having a connection with that being. Think of your postal carrier—we kind of lose interest because there's not that connection. Sometimes there can be a struggle: we get a little bored or lost because we can't really connect to the feeling.

On the other hand, sometimes it can actually be easier for people to work with the neutral person. For myself, I found that in working with a dear friend or people that I know, the way my mind works—some of you may have noticed something like this—is that I'd be saying, "May you be happy," and then immediately the mind would pick up and remember, "But then you did this and this. You did these things, and that wasn't so nice." My mind would pick up on almost the opposite. I talked about that metta-magnet: it was picking up on the opposite of metta with people I knew well because of the intimacy of the relationship. No intimate relationship is all perfectly wonderful.

With the neutral person, you have the advantage of not having that complication. For me, it was actually kind of nice moving to the neutral person because I could just have the sense of, "Well, this is a human being that wants to be happy."

And I wish that for them, whoever they are, whatever they like to do.

Another piece to clarify is that in wishing happiness for people, if somebody gets happiness out of being cruel, that is not a true kind of happiness. So we're not wishing for them to be happy in a way that is unwholesome. I just want to make sure you're aware of that. In wishing happiness for somebody, you're wishing for them to have the most beautiful kind of happiness, the most wholesome kinds of happiness and health and well-being.

The way this practice can unfold is that we begin by cultivating this quality of an open heart—this heart that can wish well for ourselves and for beings we're friendly with, the places where it's hopefully easiest to have that sense of openness. There's an analogy sometimes used in exploring how this practice works. If you envision a mountain stream where there are different pools—I think of a place in Hawaii, on Maui, called the Seven Pools, where there's a waterfall with these pools—the water flows down from the top and fills that first pool. When that pool is full, it overflows and goes down to the next pool. Then that pool fills and flows into the next one. There's a kind of refreshing of the flow because it's always welling up and then overflowing.

It's a similar image for mettā. We connect with this quality of the open heart, this well-wishing. And when we can resonate with that, there's a natural way, as the practice deepens, in which that well-wishing wants to flow over. One of the first times I really got this sense, I was in Burma, practicing mettā for about twenty minutes at the beginning of every sitting. At one point there was a real sense of mettā and happiness in my own being, and there was just this immediate sense of, "Oh yes, this is such a lovely experience, this kind of happiness and well-being. Of course I want others to feel this." So it very naturally moved outward.

I think sometimes we have a mistaken notion—at least I certainly had a mistaken notion—about happiness before I really connected with this practice. I thought happiness was a zero-sum game: if somebody else had some happiness, I wouldn't have access to happiness, or if I had some, it meant somebody else didn't have it. But it doesn't work that way, actually, this deeper kind of happiness. Perhaps the happiness of having material goods works that way, because there's a limited amount of material goods in the world. But the happiness of the open heart grows and can be unbounded. The more you connect with that possibility in your own heart, the more you wish it for others. And the more you see that quality in others, the more you feel it in yourself. It really grows. It nourishes itself. I don't think it has a limit to its possibility.

So in moving to the neutral person, the way we'll do the guided meditation today is to start with self for a few minutes. What I found as I actually started to connect with the mettā practice and was able to do it for myself—which took a while—was that very naturally, as I began to connect with that feeling of well-wishing for myself, it wanted to move outward. If I spent too much time doing mettā for myself, it began feeling a little stagnant, because it wants to flow outward.

So we'll begin today by offering mettā to ourselves for a few minutes, then move to either your friend or benefactor, whichever feels most congenial to you, and then on to the neutral person. We won't do everybody today because I want you to have some time to spend exploring the practice with the neutral person.

And again, if you find difficulty at any point in this practice, I'll remind you of the ways to work with that. You can start by seeing if you can let the difficulty be and keep going with the mettā for whoever you're offering it to. If it's too difficult, you can shift the person you're offering mettā to, moving to someplace or someone that's easier. And if you find that the whole thing is too difficult, shift back to the mindfulness practice and do mindfulness on the difficulties that have come up. If that eventually allows that wave of struggle to pass through, then you can come back to the mettā practice.

So we'll start by finding a comfortable posture, allowing your body to relax and settle. Bringing your attention into the area around your heart, just noticing what you feel there. No right or wrong—just whatever you're experiencing in that area. I like to sometimes have the sense of breathing through the heart area, the heart center, as if each breath can soften and relax, releasing holding in the heart.

Calling to mind some qualities that you like about yourself. And if this is a difficult process for you, I'll offer you some qualities that we all share here: this interest and willingness to meet our experience, to meet our struggles, our suffering, opening our heart to our own difficulties, opening our heart to this practice of wisdom, of compassion. This is an amazing thing we are engaged in here. So that's something you can appreciate about yourself.

However it makes the most sense for you to connect with yourself as a being—you could envision yourself doing something that makes you happy, or perhaps just connect with the feeling of yourself sitting here, the bodily sense of being here.

In offering the wishes of kindness to yourself, there is both the sending and the receiving of that wish. You could almost think of it as sending out this wave of metta, perhaps a mist or fog of metta that simply envelops you, and you are being drenched and soaked by this mist of metta.

May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be safe. May I live with ease.

Continue for a few minutes offering yourself these wishes of goodwill, in whatever phrases work for you.

Now call to mind either your easy being, your benefactor, or your dear friend—whoever seems most present for you. Take a moment or two to recognize and recall the good qualities, the things you appreciate about this being. Then begin offering the wishes of goodwill, of kindness, of friendliness to this being. Say the phrase, understand its meaning, connect with the being, and with each phrase, refresh or reconnect with the area of the heart, just noticing what's happening.

Now bring to mind a neutral person, someone you don't know well. It can be helpful to offer a kind of transition phrase with the neutral person: "Just as I wish to be happy, so too may you be happy. Just as I wish to be healthy, so too may you be healthy. Just as I wish to live with ease, so too may you live with ease. Just as I wish to be safe, so too may you be safe." Continue offering these wishes of goodwill to your neutral person.

For the ending of the sitting, open up to offer metta to all beings, all beings everywhere. I often find it helpful to recall in this part of the practice that each one of us is one of all beings. So we are receiving this wish as well as sending it.

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

Continue for a couple of minutes wishing metta to all beings.

After this sitting, a question arose about staying with one neutral person. When others kept popping into mind during the practice, this meditator wondered if that was problematic. I asked whether there was an energy of kindness as these people appeared, whether there was a sense of connection to the metta. When they confirmed there was, I encouraged them to let that happen.

There are two sides to metta practice. One side is the cultivation of this quality of metta—that's primarily how we're offering it this week. The other side is that it functions as a concentration practice. You can use metta to allow the mind to get very concentrated, very still, very settled. If you're using metta as a concentration practice, we usually recommend picking one being for each category. Then when we move to all beings, we allow various beings to pop into mind. But for concentration, we let ourselves settle and stabilize on one being because it supports the quietness of the mind.

In this retreat, however, we're not primarily trying to develop concentration through metta. We're really interested in allowing the metta to flourish. So if people naturally arise and this supports the metta, go for it. That would also be a wonderful way to practice in daily life if metta resonates for you.

Sometimes what I do is simply let my mind pick up on somebody. I don't do it in categories—I just allow myself to remember this dear friend, and then by association there's another one, and another one, and another one. It's as if they're almost knocking at the door: "Me too! Me too!" And I just let them come. There is that sense of metta being a kind of spontaneous opening towards these beings that come knocking on the door. I would encourage that.

Another question came about whether a neutral can be a group of people. When we move to all beings, we do tend to work with groups—all men, all women, or even categories like all those who are in a state of suffering, or all those who are in prison.

We do kind of move into that. But when we're doing the first part, we tend to try to move to the specific, because we don't want to—I mean, even in a group there can be a way that we're deluding ourselves. "Oh yes, I wish well to all this group," but if you actually pick that one person out of the group, there might be a sense of some contraction. And so the practice is to look at the specific initially.

"So, you know, I'm finding once I'm in this state, it's nice to offer this out. And so maybe I'm not going deep enough in finding resistance into the images that I'm bringing to mind. Is that possible? Because you..."

So are you asking that you find yourself in this state of this well-wishing state and that it just is very natural for it to move outward? I would not worry about that. If it feels like that sense of—like I described for myself earlier—it's like, "Oh, of course I want other people to feel this way." I mean, why wouldn't I want everybody in the world to have this sense of happiness and well-being? If everybody in the world had this sense of happiness and well-being, what a different world it would be.

And so there's that natural movement out. Just keep going, but I would encourage you to be specific with the beings you're sending it to. And I wouldn't worry about trying to find the places of conflict, trying to bring up the conflict, because the metta is there in spite of the conflict. That conflict can be there and the metta can be there.

So we should move on to the walking practice. Enjoy your walk.

CHAPTER 83

The Eightfold Path and Freedom

Andrea Fella · 53 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella examines the Noble Eightfold Path as the Buddha's practical guide to ending suffering. She begins by contextualizing the path within the Four Noble Truths, explaining how the Buddha's awakening revealed that suffering arises from processes within our own minds rather than from external circumstances. The teaching unfolds the three sections of the path—wisdom (paññā), ethical conduct (sīla), and mental cultivation (samādhi)—showing how each addresses different layers of the mental defilements (kilesa) that cause our struggles.

Fella offers a particularly illuminating framework for understanding how defilements operate at three levels: transgression (acting out), manifestation (arising in consciousness), and latent tendency (underlying patterns). She explains how ethical conduct counters harmful actions, while meditation practice addresses arising mental states. However, she emphasizes that only deep insight wisdom can uproot the most subtle level—the latent tendencies rooted in fundamental misperceptions about reality.

The talk explores the three core misperceptions that constitute ignorance (avijjā): taking what is impermanent to be permanent, taking what is unsatisfactory to be satisfying, and taking what is not-self to be self. Through readings from the Pāli texts describing Nibbāna as "immediate, visible in this life," Fella offers an accessible vision of awakening—not as some otherworldly merging, but as the practical possibility of living without greed, aversion, and delusion. She concludes by describing how small moments of insight gradually shift our perspective, offering tastes of freedom that, while impermanent themselves, fundamentally transform our relationship to suffering.

When the Buddha left home at twenty-nine years old, he was in search of an answer to a problem. He felt the problem of our human condition. He framed it in terms of suffering—he saw that there was a great deal of this suffering in the world and wanted to understand it, wanted to understand if it was possible to be free from this suffering.

In his exploration over the next six years, he came to a very deep understanding. The night of his awakening, he found that it is possible to become free of this suffering. But he also saw that the understanding he had come to was very subtle. It was hard to see, hard to penetrate this understanding.

And yet out of compassion for human beings, he decided to go ahead and teach. Because when he looked out at the world after having this recognition, having this realization about suffering and happiness, he saw that people were engaging in activities trying to be happy. Most of our activities are in some way trying to make us happy and free from suffering. And yet they were doing the very things that led them into suffering over and over again. And so out of compassion he began to teach what he had understood.

The basic framework for his teaching is the Four Noble Truths, and it is framed in terms of this problem. The first noble truth is yes, there is suffering—the acknowledgement that yes, there is suffering. The second noble truth is the understanding that there is a cause for this suffering, and that cause is within our own minds. Suffering isn't coming at us from the outside world. The suffering that we experience is a result of a process in our own minds. And because it is created in our own minds, it is possible to be free of it. There is a path that we can follow that will lead us to this freedom from suffering.

This path, the Eightfold Path, is part of what I'd like to explore tonight. But I'd like to explore it in the context of how it leads us to the ending of suffering—what that means and how it is possible.

The Eightfold Path is really what we could call the practical side of the Buddhist teachings. It is a set of practices, things that we engage with and act on, to realize and understand for ourselves what the Buddha understood when he became awakened. Following this path is said to lead us to the ending of suffering.

I'd like to start with a brief overview of the Eightfold Path and then talk about how this path connects to freedom from suffering, to liberation. How does this path lead us to awakening?

The path that the Buddha described has eight components to it, as you would expect, and it's divided into three aspects, three different groups. There's the group of wisdom, which contains two factors of the Eightfold Path: wise understanding and wise intention. The second aspect is what we could call the ethical section of the Eightfold Path, comprising three components: wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood. The third section is what we could call mental cultivation or mental development, and it is comprised of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration.

The first two factors—wise understanding and wise intention, the wisdom aspect of the Eightfold Path—acknowledge that there's a radical shift of perspective that we need in order to come to the deep understanding that the Buddha discovered for himself. This understanding is around suffering, around this dukkha: how it's caused, how we can be free of it, and what it actually is.

We've talked about dukkha quite a bit during the week, so I'm not going to go over that too much more. But what I will say is that this wise understanding is essentially framed in terms of the Four Noble Truths, which is actually quite interesting. Wise understanding is the first part of the Eightfold Path, and the Eightfold Path is the last aspect of the Four Noble Truths. And the first aspect of the Eightfold Path is the Four Noble Truths. It has a cyclic nature to it, and I'll come back to that.

Initially, this wise understanding is a kind of intellectual understanding, an intellectual exploration. We hear about the teachings of the Four Noble Truths. We hear about this dukkha, how it's caused—we've talked about the wanting, the wanting things to be other than they are, as the source of this dissatisfaction in our lives.

This understanding begins with hearing about the teachings, hearing this new perspective on what dukkha is. It's not out there. There's something going on in here. When we are suffering, there's something going on in our minds. This is a radical shift of perspective, not something that most of us would have come up with on our own. The Buddha is offering this as a teaching for us.

So we begin with wise understanding as a teaching. And this teaching begins to inform us, perhaps, if we resonate with it. Those of you who are here, I think there is some connection with this teaching. There begins to be a sense of maybe there's something possible here. For me, when I first met these teachings, I was in a state of such despair.

It was kind of like my sense was simply, does anybody know some way out of this despair? And that's said to be the beginning of the search. The question that the Buddha proposes is that when there is suffering, the question naturally arises: does someone know a way or two out of this suffering? And the Buddha is proposing, "I have found a way."

So it's a bit of a leap of faith for us to take these teachings in and to have the sense of confidence that yes, this did work for the Buddha—maybe it will work for me. Initially we go on borrowed trust, borrowed faith, borrowed confidence. We begin with a kind of intellectual, perhaps reflective, acceptance—or at least curiosity and interest and willingness to explore these teachings.

And this perhaps begins to motivate us to engage with the practices. So this motivation touches into the second aspect of the Eightfold Path: wise intention. From the wise intention to engage in these practices, we begin to reorient our lives. We see that this suffering is not our own problem alone—it is widespread. Everybody has the same struggles. And we start to have a sense of connection with other beings and a wish not to add difficulty to their lives.

So this begins the movement into the next aspect of the Eightfold Path, which is the aspect of ethical conduct. The intention to engage in the practices and teachings also moves us into an intention to behave in ways that don't contribute to the suffering of the world. We start to act and be committed to non-harming, to peaceful conduct. This second aspect of the Eightfold Path—the aspect of ethical conduct—comprises wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood. It is about harmonizing our relationship with the world, coming into peace, living peacefully, with a heart that is open and connected to other beings, a heart that inclines towards non-harming.

The third aspect of the Eightfold Path, the mental development component, is comprised of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. And we might ask: why do we need mental cultivation? This comes back to what the Buddha said about dukkha. The understanding about this dukkha is that it is happening because of the way we relate to the world. We want things to be other than they are. We want pleasant things to stay. We want to get rid of things that are unpleasant. We think that if we could only arrange the world in the way that would suit us, that would be happiness.

And so this belief that we could arrange the world to suit us doesn't come into alignment with reality very well. It proves itself to be a mistaken notion. There's a poem that illustrates this beautifully—an excerpt from Rilke's Eighth Elegy:

And we, spectators, always, everywhere, turn toward the world of objects. It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down. We rearrange it, then break down ourselves.

This is our life. And it is this belief that we can rearrange everything that is the source, in a way, of this dukkha. It is something in our own minds—a mental mistaken notion. And so the need for mental cultivation, which can begin to reorient our minds in a way that is more in line with truth.

So we look at our minds, we see how they work. This is really what we've been doing here. We have been practicing the sīla aspect of the Eightfold Path through the practices of the precepts and non-harming, and we are engaged with the cultivation of wise ef-

fort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. This is what we've been doing in our sittings, in our walkings. We observe our minds. We see the scattered, jumpy mind. We see the habits of mind that are propelling this jumpiness, this agitation.

The mental cultivation of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration begins to bring our minds into some settledness. It begins to allow us to see how these mental habits work. These three work together, as I hope you've been seeing over this week. There's the effort that we make—wise effort—which allows us to stay connected to our experience in the moment. Wise effort is connected to the motivation to cultivate skillful mind states and let go of unskillful mind states. Mindfulness is what allows us to recognize what's skillful and what's unskillful.

It allows us to stay in the present moment, connected with our experience, seeing our experience moment after moment. And these two together—wise effort and wise mindfulness—allow the mind to settle down. It is the bringing together of effort and mindfulness that leads to concentration, that leads to stability of mind. And this concentration begins to show us how our minds work.

So that was the briefest of overviews of the Eightfold Path. I sometimes do that in eight weeks.

The next piece I want to talk about is freedom. The Eightfold Path is a set of practices that are said to lead to freedom, to liberation. So what is this freedom? I've talked about it as freedom from suffering. The Buddhist understanding is that suffering results from unwholesome mental energies, and the Buddha boiled it down to three mental energies that are at the root of our suffering: greed, hatred, and delusion. He said all of our struggles come down to those three. The definition of freedom from suffering is the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion.

I'd like to read you some texts about liberation, about freedom. The Pali term is *nibbana*, Sanskrit *nirvana*, which is the one more familiar in the English lexicon. This is really what we can think of as enlightenment, awakening, freedom, liberation—they all mean the same thing. These texts I'm going to read are from different sources in the Buddhist texts, but they flow together, so I'm going to read them as one:

The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called nibbana.

Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed with mind ensnared, man aims at his own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and he experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, man aims

neither at his own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both. And he experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbana immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.

And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and no more remains for her to do. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, nor tastes, nor contacts of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is her mind. Gained is deliverance.

This is peace. This is exquisite. The resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana.

I want to highlight a couple of pieces from this. One is where it says, "If lust, anger, and delusion are given up, man aims neither at his own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief." That description is essentially equated to enlightenment, to freedom—experiencing no mental pain and grief. Just imagine what it might be like to live with no mental pain and grief. It's not saying that there won't be unpleasant physical experience. But if there is no mental reactivity to that unpleasant experience, it's a completely different thing. This is part of the promise, essentially, of the practice. This is possible: no mental pain and grief.

The other thing that truly inspires me is where he says, "This is nibbana immediate, visible in this life." This is something that is possible for us to cultivate in this life—the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. When I think of the word enlightenment, it seems like something I don't quite know what it means, like merging into oneness with all things. It doesn't seem like a place you would be living, going to work from. But the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion—I could envision going to work, perhaps, from that state. And that's what he's saying here: visible in this life. It's integrated into the world, this possibility for awakening. We don't have to remove ourselves.

The Buddhist texts also give a number of similes for nibbana. In one place, they're gathered all together, and it sounds like a poem, so I'm going to read them to you:

The unfashioned, the end, the effluentless, the true, the beyond, the subtle, the very hard to see, the ageless, permanence, the undecaying, the featureless, non-differentiation, peace, the deathless, the exquisite, bliss, solace, the exhaustion of craving, the wonderful, the marvelous, the secure, security, nibbana.

The unafflicted, the passionless, the pure, release, non-attachment, the island, shelter, harbor, refuge, the ultimate.

Since the source, the root of our suffering is understood to be greed, aversion, and delusion, we might ask how the Eightfold Path helps to bring them to their end.

These three are, as I said, the root causes for essentially all the states of mind that lead us into suffering. They are the three things that lie at the very bottom of all the reasons why we struggle. The Pali word the texts use for this is *kilesa*, usually translated as "defilement." These three are the root defilements of the mind.

Now, that's a somewhat unusual word—defilement. It doesn't sound very appealing. But then again, greed, aversion, and delusion are not very appealing either.

There's a teaching around these defilements that describes different layers to them, different ways they manifest in our experience. The most obvious or grossest layer—we could call them impurities of mind, or states of mind that lead to suffering—is when they create such a strong state of mind that we begin to act them out. This is called the layer of transgression. We actually act out of greed, aversion, and delusion, which means we may be breaking the precepts, engaging in harsh speech, being unkind to people, basically engaging in harming behaviors. That's the most obvious layer of defilement.

The next layer down is a little more subtle. It's called the layer of manifestation, where these defilements come up in our minds, come into consciousness, and we experience them—anger, frustration, aversion, annoyance, greed, eagerness, excitement, anticipation. We experience all of these things that keep us off-center, out of balance, off-kilter. But we don't necessarily act on them. This is actually where much of our practice lives. We sit in meditation and we notice what comes up into our minds.

The most subtle kind of defilement is called latent tendency or underlying tendency. This is where the movements toward greed, aversion, and delusion—and all their manifestations—are not present in the moment. We're free of them in the moment, and yet the tendency toward them still exists in our mind.

I'm sure you all have a sense of this. We all have patterns that are very deeply ingrained, things we get hooked into over and over again. It might be a pattern of loneliness or depression or anger. Whatever it is, we all have patterns we're hooked to. And we know there are times when we're not in that rut. It's as if there are ruts worn into our mind. There are times when we're not in those ruts, and we see, "Oh yes, I'm fine right now. That depression isn't here. That loneliness isn't happening." But we know, we have a sense, that if conditions were to change, that pattern would reappear. It's not act-

ive, but it's like there's that rut worn into our mind. And if conditions bring us close enough to the edge, we're going to drop right into that rut, and it's going to be hard to get out again.

We can think of this almost as neurological patterns—that's how I understand it. If that pattern isn't being fired at the moment, it's not active, it's not happening. But because the pattern is still there, it doesn't take much for causes and conditions to come together and activate it. Then we're caught again.

So the three sections of the Eightfold Path each address one of these layers. The most obvious layer is met by the ethical component of the path: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. As we engage in those practices, we refrain from acting.

They tend to counter our movement to act out on these defilements. So they begin to counter those tendencies to act out. In this way, that grossest level of defilement is met by the ethical component of the Eightfold Path.

The mental cultivation aspect—wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—this also counters the tendency to act out on our mental defilements, on greed, aversion, and delusion as they rise in our mind. Through the seeing with wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, as we see these things come up in our mind, we see the movement. We can actually begin to see the movement to act out and recognize, "Oh, there's that intention to act, and I don't have to do that. I don't have to go there." So the practices of mental cultivation also support our not acting out at what they call the transgression level of the defilement.

The aspects of mental cultivation also counter the arising of these qualities in our minds. They begin to provide tools to support their letting go. And there are two ways that this happens.

There's the cultivation of concentration through which the mind gets more stable, and through that stability of mindfulness and concentration—just being with experience moment after moment—it seems like there's not room for these defilements, not much room for greed, aversion, and delusion to come up. What happens is that we move into a place in this concentration that is called the bliss of seclusion. When the concentration becomes quite strong, the hindrances I spoke about the other night don't have anywhere to have a foothold. And so we become free for periods of time when the concentration is strong—free from some of these strong defilements. The concentration supports this, at least for moments or times when we're free from those defilements.

And it feels really good, you know. When we touch in or taste that kind of concentration when the hindrances are at bay, it's like, "Oh yes." It gives us a taste. It begins to give us a taste of what it's like to be free from those defilements. The mind really likes it. It's very nice to not have those qualities coming up in your mind. You begin to get a taste of that freedom.

And that is a temporary kind of freedom. The concentration is a constructed state, and it falls apart. With it, we see that as the concentration falls apart, all of these difficulties, these defilements, will just come right back. So the mental cultivation helps us to get a taste for what it's like to be free from these defilements, but concentration alone is not powerful enough to really uproot the third level of the defilements—the level of the latent tendency, those patterns that are deeply wired into our minds.

For the subtlest level of defilement, it takes a radical shift of understanding, a radical shift of perspective—that shift of perspective the Buddha found the night of his awakening—to eliminate this underlying tendency toward greed, aversion, and delusion. Such a fundamental reshaping of understanding comes through wisdom, and it's not an intellectual form of wisdom. It can't come through thought. It comes through a direct understanding.

So I want to talk a little bit about that direct understanding and also about the deepest root of the defilements, which is ignorance. Deep at the base of these tendencies, this latent tendency for greed, aversion, and delusion, is this quality of ignorance.

Our usual understanding of what ignorance means is something like lack of knowledge—a passive lack of knowledge, just something we don't have. If we'd had it, then we wouldn't have that ignorance. But the ignorance that underlies these latent tendencies is actually a much more insidious kind of ignorance. It's actually an active misunderstanding of the nature of reality. We have some fundamental misperceptions that we are living with all the time, and they impact how we perceive things, how we view things, how we relate to things.

The three primary misunderstandings are: we take what is impermanent to be permanent; we take what is unsatisfactory as a lasting source of happiness to be a lasting source of happiness—or another way to put this, we take what is suffering to be happiness; and we take what is not self to be self.

So, taking what is impermanent to be permanent. We all think we know that things are impermanent.

We do know that at an intellectual level. And yet we don't behave that way. We don't act that way. At some level deep in our minds, we are functioning from the place that we believe things are permanent.

The grossest example of this is the delusion that many of us have—I know some people who didn't have or don't have this delusion—that essentially we are immortal. There's a famous quote in the Mahabharata, the Indian epic poem. In one part of the poem, one of the characters is asked, "What is the greatest wonder?" And the character responds, "That every day we see that beings die, and yet believe ourselves to be immortal. That is the greatest wonder."

And it is true. This delusion we have around our own mortality is the grossest example of how we take what is impermanent to be permanent. But there's an even deeper level to this, because our moment-to-moment experience—actually, there's nothing in our experience that lasts for longer than a split second. Nothing. Nothing lasts.

This kind of touching into impermanence is not something that is really possible at the realm of our ordinary perception, our ordinary daily life perception. It really takes seeing through a mind that is clearly concentrated and mindful to begin to perceive this truth of how impermanent things are. So as we train with wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, we actually begin to touch into that truth much more experientially. We experience our lives as just being this ever-changing flow of experience, with nothing lasting for very long.

The second misperception is taking what is unsatisfactory to be happiness. This is closely related to the misunderstanding around impermanence. Because essentially, the impermanence of things, the fact that things are so in flux, means that there's no way we can find happiness by holding on to them, or by constructing or creating something, because it's just going to disintegrate.

In the belief that things have a kind of permanent quality—maybe not forever permanent, but at some level, some kind of permanence—we impute a sense that we can hold on to things. "I can hold on to this relationship, or I can hold on to this house." But the truth of impermanence makes the reality that there is nothing in our experience that could possibly be satisfying as a place to hang our hat and say, "This is what's going to make me happy."

As we observe this in our experience, again through wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, we see that impermanence inherently means there's nothing that's going to be satisfying to try to hold on to. And actually, we discover something even more remarkable: what we are trying to hold on to—we see in our exploration of

this misperception around suffering and happiness—we see that the suffering is created in our minds by trying to hold on to something. So we start to see that it is in our minds that the suffering is created.

But what's even more amazing is that we see that what we're trying to hold on to is also created by our minds. What we're trying to hold onto is concept. There's nothing out there in the world that can actually be held onto, because everything in experience is in such a constant state of flux. Our concepts create this illusion of permanence. And if you actually look at your experience of what you're holding onto, you'll see that it is an idea.

Now, this maybe sounds strange or unbelievable. What I'd like to suggest is that you don't have to believe this, but explore in your own experience: What is it that you are holding on to? What are you actually holding on to?

And this third one—taking what is not self to be self. This one's really hard to understand in a way, because it's so counter to what our experience seems to be. I'll try to shift your perspective a little bit on this.

There is a process going on in each of us. There's a process here, an Andrea process, and there are processes that each of you have. And there's a separation between those processes. It's not like I'm going to confuse this process here with that process there. So there is something happening. But we mistakenly impute a kind of solidity—again, it's back to that permanence notion. We mistakenly impute a solidity to the process. There's no thing that is inherently carrying through the entirety of that process. It is just a process, kind of like a river, just the flow of water, change. You can't really say what the river is. You can't take a bucket of water out of the river and say, "That's the river."

The water in the river is continually changing. You can't even say that the riverbed is the river. If there was a riverbed without the water, it wouldn't be the river. And the riverbed itself can change—if there's a flood, the ground of the riverbed can shift entirely. Our lives are like this river. There is a process, and after the fact, we impute a sense of "that's me." This idea that there is a solid me here is a mistaken understanding.

There are natural laws that govern this process—laws of cause and effect. If you think about a tree, how does it come into being? It starts with a seed. There are natural laws at work: that seed is planted, and if it gets moisture and sun, it will eventually sprout. If it's in a good situation—not going to get mowed over by a lawn mower or eaten by an animal—it has a longer time, perhaps, to grow into a tree. There are natural laws that govern the movement of that seed from seed to tree. There's no being in

there doing that. This seems a little easier for us to see in terms of a tree—that it's just a process, a natural process governed by natural laws. And that's what we are. We are processes governed by natural laws. No particular being here.

As we explore our experience through wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, these truths begin to penetrate. We begin to have insights around these misperceptions. We begin to directly recognize the impermanence of experience. We begin to directly recognize the unsatisfactoriness of anything as a reliable source of happiness. And we do begin to see this process nature of experience. The wisdom moves from being an intellectual understanding to an experiential recognition—what we could call an insight.

You might see a pattern in your mind, an emotional pattern of anger, for instance, arising in a moment. There's a way in which we impute permanence to that when it's happening. "Oh yes, I'm the angry person." We identify with it. It becomes me, becomes who I am. But when we're watching this pattern with mindfulness, with concentration, with those three aspects of the Eightfold Path, we might at some point actually see that pattern suddenly vanish. And then we see—it's startling when we have an insight like that. When something vanishes in our experience, it's like, "Wait a minute, where did that go? I thought it was such a real thing." These are actual moments of recognition: of impermanence, of unsatisfactoriness, of not-self. And these moments begin to wear away at the misperceptions, because for a moment we clearly see from a different perspective. We clearly see that there isn't anything we can hold onto.

This path is a gradual one. When I first got into this practice, I used to think there was going to be some mind-blowing insight and then ever after I was going to be happy. It's much more gradual than that. There are little moments of seeing clearly: "Oh, impermanence. Oh, that's dukkha." Or the recognition of just the process nature of experience—no one here. Just little tiny moments of that. And these moments have conditions that create the container for such insights to arise. Insights themselves are impermanent.

They are there for a moment, and when it's there it's like, *wow, this is so obvious, how can I not see this?* And then moments later—*huh?* There's this kind of disbelief. *How could... did I really see that?* There almost can be a disbelief in what we saw, because it seemed so clear and so obvious, and then yet suddenly it's not clear anymore.

So that space of insight is impermanent. When we have those little moments of insight, it's not like we live there forever after. We have a recognition into impermanence, and it's not like we live in that space of living that truth forever after. But there has been a kind of shift in our minds—a shift in that perspective, a shift in understanding that informs us.

We will get caught again in these very same misperceptions. Over and over again we'll get caught in these same misperceptions. And yet, having had those insights, there's a way in which an understanding has shifted underneath. Even if we're not experiencing it, there's a knowledge. *Oh yeah. I'm caught by this belief that things are permanent, or I'm caught by this belief that there can be satisfaction in life.* The misperceptions have been revealed to us, and so they don't quite have the same power to fool us quite so much anymore.

And so we can have a little more ability to just hang out with the struggle. Just, *okay, I know this is dukkha. I feel this dukkha. And I understand that there's a misperception operating here, which the mind isn't quite able to really deeply see at this moment. So I'm just going to hang out here and see what I can learn. How is the mind holding on here?*

These small insights begin to shift our perspective, begin to offer us the taste of freedom. Because in those moments of insight, there is a freedom. When there's that recognition—a true recognition of the process nature of experience—what a relief that there's no me here. No self, no problem.

We begin to get a taste of this: what it means to live with no mental pain or grief. For small moments, we get that taste.

So let's sit for just a moment.

CHAPTER 84

The Eightfold Path and Liberation

Andrea Fella · 58 min

> *In this structured yet deeply practical talk, Andrea Fella offers a fresh exploration of the Noble Eightfold Path, examining not just what the eight factors are, but how they actually work to bring about liberation from suffering. She begins by contextualizing the Buddha's journey and his discovery that dukkha—the dissatisfaction pervading our lives—is created by our own minds through wanting things to be other than they are. This understanding, she emphasizes, is actually good news: since suffering is mind-made, it can be transformed.*
>
> *Fella divides the Eightfold Path into its three traditional groupings: wisdom (sammā diṭṭhi and sammā saṅkappa), ethical conduct (sammā vācā, sammā kammanta, sammā ājīva), and mental cultivation (sammā vāyāma, sammā sati, sammā samādhi). She then maps these onto the three layers of defilements (kilesa): transgressive behavior, arising mental states, and latent tendencies. The ethical practices address acting out; mental cultivation counters both behavioral and mental arising of greed, aversion, and delusion; while wisdom—initially borrowed but eventually directly realized—uproots the deepest latent tendencies.*
>
> *Particularly inspiring is her discussion of nibbāna as 'immediate, visible in this life'—not an otherworldly escape but transformation occurring within daily experience, characterized simply as freedom from mental pain and grief. She concludes with the Buddha's analogy of shipwreck rope gradually worn away by sun, sand, and water, illustrating how moment-by-moment mindfulness slowly shifts our misperceptions about where happiness is found, even when insights seem to fade.*

I'd like to start this evening by following on from the comment this morning in the question and answer session about listening to Dharma talks. No matter what style the Dharma talk is, it's helpful to stay connected with your body during the talk. It's a practice. Listening to a Dharma talk can be a practice of hearing meditation—but not the kind of hearing meditation where we completely let go of content. Rather, it's the kind where we see how the content lands for us. So I'd suggest during this talk that you stay in tune with your lived experience while listening.

Because of the nature of my mind, the mind that I live with, this will be a fairly structured talk. But don't let that fool you. This kind of talk can take us a little bit more into our minds, and so I'd like to encourage you to stay in the body, stay in the lived experience, see how it impacts you. Dharma talks aren't so much about getting the whole

thing, getting the whole flow. There may be one or two words or a phrase that resonates with you here and now. Or there may be a phrase that comes to you a year from now in your meditation, and suddenly that phrase makes sense and you can apply it in your practice. The experience of working with Dharma talks is not necessarily a linear process, even though this will be a fairly linear talk.

When the Buddha was a young adult, about twenty-nine years old, he had a sense that there was something he needed to discover. He had come into contact with suffering, what he considered to be the problem of our human condition—this fact that we struggle, that we live trying to be happy, and yet it seems as if happiness is endlessly slipping out of our grasp. So he left his home and his family at about the age of twenty-nine and went out in search of what he hoped would be an answer to this problem.

He spent about six years searching, studying with the teachers of his day, and finding that while their teachings led to very peaceful states of mind, they didn't answer his question. So he explored in his own experience: What is this suffering? What is this dukkha, the Pali term that we usually translate as suffering? And he came to a very deep, transformative understanding about this process at work in our minds. He realized for himself the possibility that this process of suffering could come to an end.

After he had this recognition, this realization, he looked out at how people were living. The story says that he surveyed in his mind how people were conducting their lives. He saw that people were living in a way oriented toward what they thought would make them happy. But from this new perspective he had come to, this new understanding around what suffering is and how it works in our minds and hearts, he saw that in their very act of trying to be happy, they were doing the very things that would keep them tied to this process of suffering. And so out of compassion he began to teach what he had understood, what he had learned—this transformative understanding.

In his awakening, he saw that there was a new orientation, a shift of perspective that could be brought to our experience. A fairly subtle shift. In fact, when he first contemplated teaching, the story goes that he thought, "This Dharma that I have understood is very subtle, very hard to see. I would try to tell people about it and they wouldn't understand, and that would be vexing. So maybe I'll just sit here and enjoy this peace." Then the story goes that a deva came to him and said, "No, for the benefit of all beings you should teach. There are beings with but little dust in their eyes that could understand your teachings." And so he began to teach what he understood.

The framing of his teaching, not surprisingly, is oriented around this question of suffering. The Four Noble Truths, which Mary spoke about the other night, are framed in terms of suffering and the end of suffering. Sometimes the Four Noble Truths are stated simply as truths: this is suffering, there is a cause of suffering, there is a cessation of suffering, and there is a path leading to the cessation of suffering. But as Mary Grace pointed to the other night, the Four Noble Truths are actually practices. There are tasks associated with each of them. The Buddha said we should understand suffering. We should let go of the cause of suffering. We should realize for ourselves the possibility of freedom from suffering. And we should cultivate the path leading to the ending of suffering.

This Eightfold Path is really the Buddha's prescription for happiness. He said that if you follow these practices—the Eightfold Path being comprised of eight factors that can be seen as practices, eight practices that support us in our journey—you can understand and solve this problem around suffering for yourself. It's not a problem anybody else can solve for us. The Buddha understood the possibility for himself, and in seeing the possibility for himself, he offered this path to us.

he could be free from suffering. He understood by inference that this was not something confined to him alone, that others could also understand this and have this same transformative realization.

In this talk, I'd like to explore the Eightfold Path, which as I said is a set of practices guided by wisdom to encourage us to act and train our minds in a certain direction. The Buddha said following this path will lead us to this same understanding that he had.

I like to talk about the Eightfold Path, but not in the standard way perhaps. This isn't going to be a standard Eightfold Path talk. I'm actually going to do a very brief overview, and what I'd like to do following that is explore how it is possible that this path does what the Buddha claims it will do. How can it lead us to the ending of suffering? That's the exploration I'd like to make this evening.

The Eightfold Path has eight factors in it, and one of the ways of exploring this teaching divides those eight factors into three groups or aspects. The first two factors of the Eightfold Path are in a group that we could call the wisdom group: wise understanding and wise thought, or wise intention. The second group is associated with ethical conduct, comprising the factors of wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood—ways to bring ourselves into harmony with the world. The third group is what I'll call the mental cultivation or mental development aspect, comprised of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration.

The Eightfold Path in its standard ordering begins with wisdom—wise understanding, wise intention. It starts from needing to understand something about this dukkha, this suffering. This is the orientation around what the Buddha was trying to solve, and so the wisdom he is offering us is wisdom about this dukkha.

I'd like to speak for just a few minutes about this because we haven't really talked too much about dukkha itself. This suffering that the Buddha said we can be free of is not the suffering of physical bodily pain. That, he said, will continue. As long as we have a body, there will be that possibility of unpleasant bodily experience. So that's not the kind of suffering he said we'll become free of.

But he did say that in his transformative understanding around suffering, what he realized was that mostly what we call suffering is actually a product created by our own minds. It largely happens to us because we are in conflict with the way things are. Gil talked about non-conflict being part of our path, being our path. Dukkha comes about because we're in conflict. Things are happening and we don't like them. We resist them. We want to get rid of them, fix them, change them. Or we want to hold on to them. We like them, we want to keep them.

Because of the nature of the way things are, trying to hold on to things leads to what somebody called rope burn. You're trying to hold on to something that is changing, slipping through your hands, and it burns to try to hold on to that.

One of our main delusions is that we think happiness comes from figuring out a way to arrange the world so that it's the way we'd like it to be. That's what we think happiness would be. And so we end up pinning our hopes for happiness on the world, on things that are completely unreliable.

Rilke, the great German poet, expressed this in one of his poems. This is an excerpt:

And we, spectators, always everywhere turned toward the world of objects. It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down. We rearrange it and then break down ourselves.

That's the poignancy of our existence. We are endlessly trying to arrange the world, endlessly seeing it break down, and feeling the pain of that—taking it personally. What did I do wrong that the world changed and I couldn't arrange it properly? It's not personal.

It's the way it is.

One of the key turnings or shifts of perspective that the Buddha had—my understanding of the shift of perspective—is that he really began to understand this process of being in conflict with the world as the very cause for that suffering. When there's a sense of wanting things to be other than the way they are, in that very wanting, there is already dissatisfaction. It is the wanting itself that creates the dissatisfaction.

When we turn and see that, the mind begins to understand that it is its own doing that created that wanting. And it begins to understand that letting go of that wanting is a pathway towards freedom from suffering. We begin to see that the process of suffering is a process created by our own minds. The vast majority of what we call suffering—even suffering around physical pain—the vast majority of what we call suffering is created by our own minds.

This is actually really good news. It may not sound like it, but it is. Because it provides the opportunity for us to change our minds. If suffering was inherently out in the world, if it was something outside of us that created that suffering, there would be no hope. But it is a process in our minds that can be understood and freed.

This wisdom, this shift of perspective, is the wisdom that we need to have an understanding about. At first, just an intellectual understanding, just hearing the teachings. Very few of us, I think, would come to this understanding that wanting is actually the source of our suffering without having somebody point this out to us. "Look at this," he said. "Look at this process in your mind. See what happens."

The first two aspects of the Eightfold Path point us to this wisdom. At first it's a wisdom that we take in through hearing—hearing dharma talks, reading books about the Dharma—we start to learn some of what the Buddha offered. If that resonates for us, then we begin to think about it, think about how it resonates for us, think about how it might be understood. This is another form of wisdom. First there's this received wisdom or borrowed wisdom, and then we take it in and begin to massage it in our own understanding.

If it resonates for us, then we may begin to act on it. We may decide, "Some of this makes sense to me, so maybe I'll try this." Or if you're like me, it was more like, "Well, nothing else I've tried has made any sense. I guess I'll see what happens if I try this." So the intention is formed to explore these teachings. That sets us into motion, sets the path into motion. These first two aspects initially are about having us actually take the first steps. We hear, we understand, and we begin to act. We begin to engage with the teachings.

The second group in the Eightfold Path is the ethical section—harmonizing our relationship with the world: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. We live in accordance with ethical guidelines, harmonizing our relationships with the world, living in peace with other selves, with other people, inclining the heart towards non-harming.

We've been engaging with these aspects of the Eightfold Path here on retreat. Every day you have been engaging actually with the entirety of the Eightfold Path. That's part of what I want to point to in this talk: that the factors of the Eightfold Path are lived. They're not just an idea. You're actually living them.

You hear the teachings right now. We're practicing wise understanding to some extent. I'm exploring my understanding of the teachings with you. You're exploring it in your own minds as you're listening. So we're exploring this first aspect of the Eightfold Path.

All through the day we are committed to the precepts—to non-harming, to refraining from taking life, to refraining from taking what's not given, refraining from sexual misconduct, refraining from false speech, refraining from intoxicants. These are aspects of the components of wise speech and wise action. And wise livelihood—we are living wise livelihood here on retreat. You're like temporary monks and nuns here. You've renounced your homes. You've come here to be secluded.

You are living a Dharma life. This is a beautiful thing. You are living wise livelihood every moment of your day here.

The last three factors of the Eightfold Path—the mental cultivation or mental development aspect—comprise the factors of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration.

So why do we need mental development? This connects to the understanding that the suffering we are experiencing... suffering is kind of a strong word in a way. The dukkha that the Buddha spoke about is usually translated as suffering, but when we think of suffering, we often think of something pretty big. Dukkha has a very broad range of meanings. It can mean anything from the most obvious suffering—losing a partner or being in an accident with great pain and misery—to the subtlest kind of feeling that things are just a little bit off. You know, that's not quite the way I like it here right now. That's dukkha also. We might not call that suffering, but it's dukkha.

From this understanding that dukkha is created by our minds, the Buddha's mental training helps to counteract the patterns we have around suffering. So we look at our minds. We begin to understand how they work. We start to see how this process of dukkha functions in our own experience. This is a lot of what we're doing here on re-

treat. Moment by moment we're looking at our experience. We see the way our minds are scattered or jumpy. We see when they're expansive. We see when they're contracted. We see when they're frustrated and angry and bitter and prideful—the whole range of emotional states that we go through. We watch the processes of our mind and we start to get familiar with the habits of our mind, the patterns of our mind. Especially those mental habits that are propelled based in not being aware—the habits and patterns that have been practiced over years in our lives. Patterns of anger or frustration or procrastination or disappointment, or pick your favorite.

So we get to see these patterns. The mental cultivation provides a container in which we can start to really see them, see how this suffering is created, see how our mental habits work.

These three aspects—wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—work together. Wise effort is the effort to stay connected with our experience moment to moment. It takes some effort. And we also, informed by wisdom, informed by this understanding of what dukkha is, of what suffering is, begin to see and understand that there are certain states of mind that tend to lead us towards suffering, and other states of mind that tend to lead us more towards happiness. The effort we engage with is the effort to cultivate those states of mind that lead us away from suffering and to let go of those states of mind that lead us towards suffering.

We make the effort to be present, and mindfulness is part of that effort. We're making the effort to be aware, informed by this wisdom, this understanding of what's helpful and what's not helpful. Mindfulness keeps us connected with our experience in the present moment. It also helps us to understand and recognize which states are helpful and which states are not helpful.

The combination of effort and mindfulness together creates a stability of mind, a kind of continuity of attention. It's that continuity of awareness—if you're just aware for just a moment, if you're just mindful for just a moment, there's not that much that you can really see very clearly. But when that mindfulness starts to be present for longer stretches of time, the mind starts to be able to clearly see into how things happen. That very continuity starts to reveal the process at work. We begin to understand that process through having the mindfulness be more continuous. And this continuity of mindfulness is the concentration.

So the Eightfold Path is a set of practices, and we're practicing them all here. Moment by moment we're engaged in these practices. It's not abstract actually. These practices support living with a little bit more ease. And there is the understanding that these

practices go further than just ease in our lives. They actually can allow us to experience that deeper shift of perspective that the Buddha offers. Freedom. Freedom from suffering. A deep, deep kind of happiness and peace.

So what is this freedom? Sometimes we call it enlightenment. The Pali term is nibbana, Sanskrit nirvana. The Buddhist understanding of what this freedom is, what this enlightenment is—its simplest definition is actually really straightforward. The Buddha said that suffering is a result of greed, aversion, and delusion acting in our minds, and that freedom from suffering is the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind.

I'll read you some texts from the Pali Canon about this quality, or this—what is this nirvana, nibbana? This is a set of different texts, but they flow together, so I'll read them all together:

The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called nibbana.

Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed, with mind ensnared, man aims at his own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and he experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, man aims neither at his own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and he experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbana, immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.

And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing more remains for her to do. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, nor tastes, nor contacts of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is her mind, gained is deliverance.

This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana.

There are a couple of pieces in there that I'd like to point to that particularly inspire me. One is the possibility—the definition, essentially, of nibbana here as experiencing no mental pain and grief. If you can just imagine what that might be like. What that might be like—no mental pain or grief.

And the other piece: This is nibbana, immediate, visible in this life.

These two pieces together point to an understanding, a transformation that happens in the midst of our lives. When I first heard about this enlightenment thing, I kind of thought it must mean some big mind-blowing experience, and after that, then everything would be great. Maybe I'd just be drifting off in some beautiful space somewhere.

This definition—immediate, visible in this life, experiencing no mental pain and grief—is something I can envision having perhaps in the midst of work. This is inspiring to me, this possibility. To me these words say this isn't something otherworldly. This transformation happens right in this life, right in the midst of our day-to-day experience. That that's possible. That sounds like some of what is being pointed to here—the possibility of transformation within our lives, not separating from our lives. Transformation occurring through our lives.

So since this understanding of nibbana is that it's the absence or the releasing of, the cessation of, the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion, we might ask: How does the Eightfold Path help us come to the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion?

Greed, aversion, and delusion are understood to be basically the roots of all the kinds of mind states that proliferate, creating our experience of suffering. They're what we call the root defilements. Defilement is a translation of a Pali term, kilesa. Maybe defilement sounds like a kind of yucky word. But greed, aversion, and delusion—it would be nice to be able to let go of them. They're understood to be the things that defile the mind or keep it from purity, keep it from clearness. Defilement to me has that image of making something impure or not clear.

There's a teaching around the defilements that they're like different layers of how they manifest in our experience. The most obvious layer of how these defilements come up for us is in our behavior—that we act out of greed, aversion, and delusion.

They express themselves through hostility of speech or harshness of action—basically, in ways that cause harm in the world, engaging in harmful behaviors. So that's one level, one layer of how these defilements manifest in our minds, in our experience, through acting out.

The next, more subtle layer is when they arise in our minds but don't get expressed in action. This is the arising of greed, aversion, and delusion—the arising of anger, frustration, judgment, hostility, pride, exuberance, boredom in our minds—but where they don't somehow come out into our behavior.

This is largely where our practice actually lies. We commit to a stillness of posture so that we can see this level. Essentially, that's part of the practice—in the commitment to stillness, we begin to see this level of defilement before it comes out into our behavior. This is pretty powerful to be able to see.

The most subtle level of the defilements is something called latent tendencies. This is where these qualities arising from greed, aversion, and delusion are not being experienced in our present moment experience—they're not actually happening for us in the moment—but there's an underlying tendency for that pattern to erupt.

I think we all have a sense of this. Particular favorite patterns that we've practiced a lot in our lives. For me, it was anger. I cultivated anger very well. And at times when that pattern wasn't active, there was a sense—maybe you have this sense for yourself too—that its not being activated was partly a product of conditions. If something happened that I didn't like, it would be very easy for that pattern to be triggered.

So this is that level of latent tendency. It's not active in our mind stream at the moment, but it's mostly a matter of conditions whether it comes up or not. It could arise almost at any time, easily activated.

When we look at these three levels of defilement alongside the three aspects of the Eightfold Path, each aspect addresses one of those levels.

The most obvious level of acting out is met by the practices of wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood—committing to those ethical precepts. We counter the tendency toward acting out. In a sense, we use the precepts almost as mindfulness bells. If we start to see the tendency arise in our mind to break one of those precepts, it halts us. It's like, "Wait a minute, that's not the way I want to be living." And so the three aspects of ethical conduct support our not engaging in that level of defilement.

This is pretty powerful, actually. It has a rebound effect on our mind as we cultivate the precepts. As we cultivate wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood, there's a positive rebound effect on our mind. Cultivating non-harming rebounds on our mind as a kind of compassion. Cultivating not taking what's not given rebounds on our minds as honesty and contentment with what we have. So the practices of ethical conduct support reducing one layer of the defilements—the most obvious layer.

The aspect of mental cultivation—wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—also helps counter this tendency toward acting out. Because what happens as we start to observe our patterns and habits, our favorite habitual tendencies of mind, is

that as we get familiar with them, we start to see them before they lead us into action. As we get familiar with those feelings associated with whatever our pattern is—anger, for instance—the feelings then become a trigger, a trigger to wake up.

That's what I've seen in my experience. The more I pay attention to those patterns, the more when the pattern arises, it starts to bring mindfulness along with it. And so that helps us recognize, "Oh, there's that pattern. No, I don't want to act on that." We also reduce the transgression aspect by cultivating wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration.

This aspect of mental cultivation also counters the tendency toward the arising of defilements in our minds. One of the ways it does this is through the cultivation of concentration. As we practice and begin to get a sense of the continuity of mindfulness, as the mind becomes more steady, we start to have periods when the hindrances—the qualities that John talked about this morning—stop coming up. And that's a really great experience. It feels really good when the hindrances stop coming up. So we get a taste, a little taste of what it's like to have that freedom from the defilements.

But that's a temporary kind of freedom, because it's conditioned on that continuity of mindfulness. It's conditioned on the concentration kind of holding those tendencies at bay. Still, it's very powerful for us to get a flavor, a taste of that freedom from the defilements.

The subtlest level of defilement—the latent tendencies—requires a kind of radical shifting in our mind, a turning. Because those tendencies, those latent tendencies, are underlaid by a very powerful force of ignorance. And ignorance is not uprooted simply by concentration. It takes wisdom to uproot ignorance.

This is where that first aspect of the Eightfold Path, the wisdom aspect, comes in. Now the wisdom that we bring at first, that wisdom of understanding and reflection, that's not powerful enough to uproot ignorance. That wisdom informs our practice of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. And as that wisdom and the mental cultivation come together, we begin to understand more directly for ourselves the truth of that borrowed wisdom.

So we see directly for ourselves these moments of freedom. We see a releasing, a letting go around how we've been clinging to these processes of suffering. Our view begins to change.

The path essentially begins and ends with wisdom. Initially it's an intellectual understanding, but that intellectual understanding, coupled with the path of cultivating mindfulness and concentration with effort, leads us to deeply understand the truth of

those teachings—the teachings of impermanence, the teaching of unreliability, of not-self. The mind begins to understand that the way we've been trying to be happy... and this is not theoretical, this is not book knowledge.

We see in a moment—we may see wanting come up in our minds. We see that feeling of dissatisfaction that comes with that wanting. We feel the pull to satisfy that wanting, and yet we watch, we observe. We may see that wanting vanish in a moment. And seeing that vanishing, we directly understand—it feels like being let go from a vice grip. We see directly in that moment the truth that it is the wanting that has created that dissatisfaction. It's not the not-having of whatever it is that we wanted. That's not what creates the dissatisfaction. It has nothing to do with the thing that we think we want. It has to do with the wanting itself.

In that moment of actually seeing that, of having enough continuity of mindfulness and concentration, just observing our patterns, we see how they are put together. And in seeing that, the mind begins to release around them. We experience moments of insight, shifts of perspective around patterns.

We may see simple shifts, which I know most of you—probably all of you—have had: a kind of shift around some difficult pattern. "Oh, this is just anger." Rather than it being *my* anger, rather than it being something that I've done or need to fix or change—"Oh, this is just anger. This is just a process"—becoming much easier to hold. That kind of shift of perspective, seeing anger just as a process. We see little moments, shifts of understanding.

These moments help us to gradually turn our minds toward this understanding—the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, the understanding of suffering, the understanding that the cause of suffering is this craving. Turning our mind toward that understanding. Gradually, small moments, gradually turn our minds in this direction. It takes time.

There's an analogy—I know many of you have heard this analogy, it's one of my favorite analogies—the Buddha gave around our practice. He compared the practice of being attentive to our experience to a shipwreck. Think about the parts of the ship strewn around the beach. Day by day, the sun, the sand, the wind, the water work on those parts. Think of the rope, the rigging. Day by day, if you go back and look at that rope, you're not going to see much change. But come back after six months and try to pick up that rope, and it may fall apart in your hands.

Moment by moment, small moment by small moment, mindfulness, effort, and concentration, supported by wisdom, begin to wear away at the way we misunderstand how happiness can be found. It shifts our perspective.

And one thing that's helpful to remind ourselves about is that insights are impermanent. We have a moment of understanding, and in that moment—it may even be more than a moment, it may be a few minutes or even a few hours of being in a space where you can just see your patterns and it's not a problem. And it seems so obvious. How can I not see this? And then, a few moments later, suddenly there's your anger and it's like, "Oh, that person shouldn't have done—wait a minute. I'm caught again. What just happened?"

This is a phenomenon we all have to accept. It's not a mistake, actually. It's not that we've done anything wrong. And sometimes we can second-guess our insights. We think, "Well, it must not have been real if it went away." But it is. It is a moment. It's come together out of conditions, and you've been able to, for a few moments, see and be aligned with how things are, with the truth of how things are—not in resistance, not in conflict with the way things are. For a few moments you've been able to do that.

While it doesn't stay, while we can't live in that perspective for the rest of time—most of the time, I'd say, most of the time we have a shift like that and it goes away—what it has done for us is it has taken that borrowed knowledge we've learned and integrated it so that it is something we have actually understood. It's no longer borrowed wisdom. We may not be able to live out of that wisdom, but there is a knowing of that wisdom.

What I've seen in my own practice is that little by little, the accumulation of those kinds of openings has led me to be able to call on that knowledge. It's like, "Oh yeah, okay, I see this pattern coming up. I see I'm caught by this again." But I don't take it quite so personally. It's like, "Yeah, I know that there's a kind of misperception going on here. There's a confusion going on. There's a delusion happening in the mind that it is caught by this." The mind can be aware of that because it knows this alternative perspective is possible, even though it can't live from it.

And so we just meet our experience from that perspective. And over time, over time, it begins to be easier to see when we're caught by these misperceptions, by this confusion of where happiness is to be found. And slowly we begin to understand what it might mean to live free of mental pain and grief.

Let's sit for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 85

Using Dukkha as a Guide

Andrea Fella · 56 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella examines the Pāli term dukkha and its three distinct meanings in the Buddhist texts: the suffering addressed in the Four Noble Truths (arising from mental reactivity), unpleasant vedanā (feeling tone), and the inherent unreliability of all conditioned phenomena (sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā). She emphasizes that the dukkha which can be transcended through practice is specifically the mental suffering created by craving (taṇhā) — our wanting things to be other than they are.

Fella offers practical guidance on working with suffering as a navigational tool rather than an obstacle to overcome. She describes how mindful investigation of dukkha educates the mind-body organism, eventually enabling spontaneous letting go of harmful patterns — much like the body instinctively withdraws from a hot stove. Drawing from her own three-month retreat experience with self-hatred, she illustrates how deep insight can arise precisely through patient, accepting awareness of difficult mind states.

The talk addresses the layered nature of suffering in practice, from obvious afflictive emotions to subtler forms of wanting embedded in our meditation practice itself. Fella counsels practitioners to meet whatever layer of suffering is currently obvious rather than trying to excavate hidden causes, trusting that deeper patterns will reveal themselves naturally when conditions are ripe.

Tonight I'd like to explore the topic of dukkha, of suffering, and how we can use this experience of suffering as a guide in our practice.

I'd like to begin by talking a little bit about this word dukkha. That's the Pali term which we usually translate as suffering. But that translation often, in our language at least, has a broad context, a large context sometimes. When we hear the word suffering, we think of catastrophe, disease, accident, tsunamis. We think of larger things. The term dukkha actually has a broader set of meanings, and I'd like to explore this broader set of meanings from a couple of different perspectives as a way to begin.

The main usage of the term dukkha in the texts is within the context of the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, dukkha-sacca; the truth of the cause of suffering; the truth of the cessation of suffering; and the truth of the path leading to the cessation

of suffering. In this context, the understanding in the Four Noble Truths is that dukkha is something that can be transcended, overcome. We can come to the end of this dukkha.

So what is this dukkha that we can come to the end of? There are three definitions in the texts that I know of, and I'll talk about all three just briefly tonight—three different ways that the term dukkha is used.

As it's used in the Four Noble Truths, this kind of dukkha is a result of mental reactivity. The second noble truth indicates that the cause of dukkha is wanting, craving—the Pali word tanha. So this kind of dukkha of the first noble truth is a specific kind of suffering that's related to the fact that we crave things. Basically, we want things. We want to have things that we like, we want to get rid of things that we don't like. When things are pleasant, we like them, we want more of them. When things are unpleasant, we want to get rid of them, push them away. In a very simple way, a very natural way—in fact, a very human way, a very biological way almost—we react to pleasant and unpleasant. This dukkha of the First Noble Truth is really about a kind of mental reactivity to our experience, and I'll talk more about this in depth tonight.

The other two kinds of dukkha that are talked about in the texts: the first is in the context of what's talked about as feeling, vedana—the way all experience, no matter what our experience is, has a quality of this feeling tone of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, which we sometimes call neutral. The term for the unpleasant feeling tone is dukkha. Just like our body feels unpleasant sensation when we cut it with a knife, or if we fall down and bruise our knee—there's unpleasant sensation that arises in our body. This physical unpleasantness is also used as the term dukkha in the texts.

The other place that the term dukkha is used is in a famous three-part phrase. The first is sabbe sankara anicca, which basically translated means something like "all conditioned things are impermanent." The second phrase is sabbe sankara dukkha—"all conditioned things are dukkha." This is often translated as suffering, but in this context, as I'll explain, "unreliable" is perhaps a better term. And the third phrase is sabbe dhamma anatta—"all experience is not self."

In this usage, sabbe sankara dukkha, any phenomenon that happens is understood to be dukkha, is understood to be essentially unreliable as a place or an experience around which true deep happiness can be found. Whatever experience we have—whether it's a pleasant experience, an unpleasant experience, a neutral experience—

the very unreliability, the very impermanence of that phenomenon, indicates that it is not going to be a place where we can find lasting satisfaction. It's going to disappear. So there's no way that we can find lasting satisfaction out of that experience.

This three-part phrase is often described as the three characteristics of experience. I'm sure you've heard this: the three characteristics—all phenomena are impermanent, all phenomena are suffering, all phenomena are not self. In this understanding, it's actually all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, all conditioned phenomena are dukkha, all phenomena are not self. This is true whether or not there's any reactivity in our minds. The fact of change means that phenomena are unreliable just in their own nature. The fact of our clinging or not clinging, grasping or pushing away, holding onto those phenomena is irrelevant in terms of their having this quality or characteristic.

This, I think, is where the understanding comes from when people say, "Oh, the Buddha taught everything is suffering." Well, he did, in this sense, teach that everything is unreliable.

Everything has the flavor of, if clung to, it will produce suffering.

So these two kinds of dukkha—the dukkha of physical pain in the body, and this unreliability of phenomena—these are not kinds of dukkha that will go away with practice. Phenomena will remain unreliable whether or not we cling to them. It is not these kinds of dukkha that the Third Noble Truth is talking about transcending.

What can be transcended is our misunderstanding of experience, our misperception, our confusion around experience. This confusion leads us to be unable to accept these two kinds of dukkha. It's very hard for us to accept physical pain. It's very hard for us to accept the unreliability of experience. We want to push away physical pain. We want to hold on to experience, hoping that something—anything—will do it for us. Surely there's got to be some experience out there that will make me happy.

So it's our misunderstanding, our confusion around those two kinds of dukkha that can't change, that produces the dukkha of the First Noble Truth. Our reactivity to physical pain, our grasping onto phenomena hoping something will make us happy—this reactivity is the dukkha of the First Noble Truth. And this is the kind of dukkha that the Buddha said can come to an end.

The dukkha of the First Noble Truth has quite a broad range. It is far more than the major kinds of suffering we think of when we use that term in English. Some translators have used other terms. Thanissaro Bhikkhu uses the term "stress" to translate dukkha. There are ways that I appreciate this term, partly because stress, for us, is a

mental phenomenon. When we hear the word stress, we usually think of something happening in our minds. This points to the aspect of dukkha of the First Noble Truth as being something that happens in our minds.

In fact, one definition of freedom from this kind of dukkha, the ending of dukkha—one way that the state of nibbana, of freedom, is defined—is as freedom from mental pain and grief. One can experience that state of no mental pain or grief. This really points to the fact that the dukkha of the First Noble Truth is a mental phenomenon. It happens in our minds.

Now, of course, it happens in reaction to bodily sensation. It happens in reaction to phenomena, to events in the world. It happens in response to things we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. It happens in response to things we think or feel or perceive.

So this translation of "stress" conveys this sense of mental reactivity. It also conveys the recognition, the understanding, that dukkha can be pretty subtle. We can be a little bit stressed. We can have a little bit of clenching in our stomach as we sit and wait for a practice discussion. That's dukkha. We can have a little bit of anxiety about the last egg on the table. That's dukkha.

The range of dukkha traverses from the subtlest kinds of unease to the major sufferings of our lives. It includes all of our afflictive emotional states, as well as subtler states of unease—just a subtle sense of offness, things not quite feeling right, a sense of "hmm, if only I tweaked a little bit, things would be better." Dukkha includes all of these.

Understanding that dukkha is in our minds—that it's a mental phenomenon, a mental experience, a mental process—helps us see that the dukkha of the First Noble Truth happens in our minds. And the Second Noble Truth indicates that the cause of dukkha is this wanting, this craving, essentially this reactivity: not liking things and wanting to push them away, liking things and wanting to hold on to them. Reactivity around wanting things to be pleasant, wanting to get rid of things that are unpleasant. Not being aligned with, not accepting—I talked about acceptance a little bit yesterday morning—not accepting the way things are in this moment. Endlessly feeling like we want to negotiate and fix or change or alter or shift things.

Wanting things to be other than they are—the Second Noble Truth teaches us that this wanting, this craving (tanha is the Pali term), is the cause of our distress, our suffering. This wanting is the cause of the dissatisfaction, the unease.

We can explore this as a mental exercise. Think about something you might want to have. Maybe you want a different room, or more leftovers at supper. Maybe there's something you'd like to have.

And maybe it doesn't cause you much suffering, but just thinking about something that you might want here on the retreat. Then just imagine the possibility of that wanting going away. If the wanting goes away, the dissatisfaction goes away. Any kind of struggle or stress or unease goes away.

So the suffering, the dukkha, is caused by this craving, this wanting. And there are so many different ways that we want things. I'd like to explore this a little bit with you, just exploring how we want things.

I did an exploration myself of how I want things, and there are so many different ways. I was kind of shocked when I went through them all. I mean, there are the obvious ones—wanting to have things that are pleasant, wanting to get rid of things that are unpleasant. There's wanting to fix or change something. This is one that's very common for me. Rather than wanting to get rid of something that's unpleasant, I want to fix it, I want to tweak it.

We might want to be seen or recognized. We might want to be someone. We might want to be the one who's in charge. We might want to be the one who has a good meditation practice. We might want to be the one who can attain states of concentration. We might want to be the one who is peaceful.

We might want to know what to do. Something that seems to come up for us sometimes in practice is we're in some state, and the thing that comes up in our mind is, "What's next? What am I supposed to do with this?" And that's a kind of wanting. There's a feeling of, "It's not okay just to be with this. There's something I'm supposed to do with it." So wanting to do something.

All of these kinds of wanting, these ways that we want—as we begin to explore the connection between wanting and our suffering, we really begin to get it. Not only is the suffering created in our minds, the wanting is also created in our minds. And when we explore it even more deeply, we realize that the thing that we want is actually also simply something arising in our minds. We don't actually want that spot in the hall, or we don't actually want that thing that's out there. What we want is our idea of that thing.

As we really begin to explore this wanting-suffering connection, we begin to really get it that this process of suffering is something that happens in our minds. This is really good news, because the fact that it happens in our minds—and the fortunate fact that it's not hardwired—means something important. It's not automatic. It's not biologically wired that when there's something unpleasant, we have to hate it and want to get rid of it. It's not biologically wired that when there's something pleasant, we have to

gravitate towards it and hold onto it. Fortunately for us, it's not biologically wired. It is created in our minds. This fact means that it's possible to shift, change, alter our relationship to experience.

When we see that the wanting is creating the suffering, and the more we see this in our own experience, the more we actually recognize this link between wanting and suffering, the more we recognize—it's not us that actually recognizes it, in my experience. It's like the training. We sit and pay attention to dukkha.

The first noble truth, the Buddha's instruction: understand dukkha. Understanding means not thinking about, not reflecting on, but turning towards, meeting the experience of dukkha. Being mindful of body and mind in this state. Anger is arising, a state of dukkha. Body feels like this, mind feels like this. This is understanding dukkha.

We get an education in the suffering nature of the experience—of anger in this case, of any kind of dukkha. When we're willing to sit with it, be with it, understand it in this way, the body and mind understands. We don't have to learn this. It doesn't have to be me that knows this. The organism begins to understand.

This is suffering. This is not well-being.

And as the exploration continues—as we continue to explore this dukkha, in this case anger, noticing body, noticing mind—we may begin to see the wanting that is tied up with that anger. The wanting to be right, whatever kind of wanting. There are so many different ways we can get into anger. So whatever wanting it is, whenever we see that kind of climbing towards anger, we begin to understand the wanting that's tied up with the suffering.

And then at some point, even further down the line—for me, this kind of exploration took months for this particular pattern, a dukkha pattern I was observing around anger—at one point I saw my mind inclining towards that anger. A thought arose about a person I was angry with, and I felt the mind kind of leaning in. There was this momentum of a freight train wanting to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry.

Because the organism had spent enough mindful time in this space of understanding dukkha for what it was, the mind itself recognized that intention towards anger: that way lies suffering. And the mind itself let that intention go.

This is part of how our practice unfolds. We explore our suffering, we use our suffering to help us understand ourselves. That mindfulness of the suffering helps our mind begin to understand how the wanting contributes. And then when the mind sees that

wanting, the mind understands that it doesn't want to go towards dukkha, so the mind can let it go—almost the way your body lets go of touching something hot on the stove. Before we even really feel the pain of the heat, the body is already pulling back because it knows that way lies suffering.

So this exploration of understanding dukkha begins to educate this organism, this mind-body process. What is dukkha? Dukkha does not equal well-being. It's a very simple lesson the mind and body learns.

We can use this exploration of dukkha as a guide for us. The Four Noble Truths lays out the entirety of our practice, of our path, in terms of exploring this question of dukkha: exploring understanding dukkha, exploring how we might be able to let go of the cause of dukkha, exploring the ending of dukkha, and exploring the conditions and causes that support that ending of dukkha—the path of practice, the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha pointed out that this exploration around dukkha is our practice. And so we can look at dukkha as being a guide for us. Whenever there's any kind of dukkha, small or large, it points out that there's something happening in our mind—some extra holding, craving, pushing away. The dukkha is a signpost for us: there's something here to pay attention to. Anytime there is dukkha, there's some kind of wanting. So the suffering is a pointer for us that there's something that can be let go of. We can begin to explore these different kinds of wantings.

There's a kind of New Age saying, something along the lines of "life gives us the lessons that we need." And I believe this is true, but I don't think of it quite in the way perhaps that the New Age sense of it conveys—that life is out there somehow designing situations for us so that we meet these situations. We get the lessons we need because in every moment we are meeting our own minds. We are meeting our minds and how they are craving, wanting, pushing, pulling, liking, not liking. In every moment. This is what creates our suffering. This is what creates the lessons that we need. Life does give us the lessons we need. Our mind gives us the lessons we need, if we are willing to open to this exploration of dukkha.

So we really can use our suffering as a guide for us.

The second noble truth concerns letting go of craving. The first noble truth the Buddha recommends is understanding dukkha, understanding suffering. The second noble truth, the action the Buddha suggested we explore, is to abandon the craving, abandon the wanting.

That's easier said than done. That is not often something we can choose to do, in my experience. I remember sitting on retreat at the three-month course and feeling the dukkha, feeling the craving, feeling the clinging onto whatever it was, and recognizing: I have no idea how to let go of this. The mind was so tightly latched onto that experience. There was no way for me to consciously let go.

And so this instruction around letting go of the cause of suffering—a lot of our practice has to do with our relationship to this instruction. It's not so much about actively saying, "Oh, there's clinging, be gone clinging." That just doesn't happen very often. But we can recognize—actually what I found happens is that when we really see the clinging happening, we recognize the clinging, we feel the suffering of that clinging. And so the way to letting go of that clinging is to recognize that this very clinging is suffering itself, and this suffering needs to be understood.

So can I be with the suffering of the holding itself? This is a lot of our practice. It's basically a letting be of this craving. Can we let it be? Can we allow it with mindfulness—not allow it and encourage it, not allow it and act on it. The middle path is about neither repressing nor expressing our reactivity.

So that craving, that wanting to get rid of, that wanting to hold on to—it's fine for those to come up. If they've come up, they've already come up. They've already arisen. That's what I was saying yesterday. That's the acceptance of what has already arisen. Aligning ourselves with truth. Yes, this clinging is here. Can I meet that? Can I be with that?

Very gentle being with allows that clinging to take its own course. And again, we also learn from this exploration. We're understanding the suffering of that craving itself. We begin to understand viscerally that this craving itself is not conducive to well-being. So again, the body-mind organism gets an education: this craving is not the way to happiness.

So really I'm encouraging—hopefully encouraging you—to be willing and interested to explore the dukkha, explore the suffering. The willingness to meet it, to be with it, with the understanding that this education the mind and body are getting helps the mind learn how to let go. The mind will begin to understand how to let go of this clinging. It's often not something we can consciously choose to do, but the mind can let go of it.

As I described with that situation around the anger—my mind, the mind seeing itself propelling headlong towards anger, propelling headlong towards suffering, the mind knew. No. And it wasn't any kind of aversion or resistance to going to the anger. It was the mind going, "That way lies dukkha. Let it go." To the mind: let it go.

So this is a lot of how we practice with the second noble truth. This letting go of wanting, this practice around being with, letting be the clinging—the whole exploration of letting go of wanting is actually an interesting process in our minds.

I've described a little bit about how I've seen it happen: the mind beginning to get the education around dukkha, seeing how the wanting leads to the suffering, the mind seeing the wanting arise and simply letting it go. That's part of the process of letting go around wanting.

And then there's another kind of—almost stages of letting go—that happen in our practice. Our initial levels of dukkha are the more obvious kind. We have anger, hatred, frustration, desire, confusion, boredom, the kind of pride we have, the afflictive emotions we have, these emotions that feel off to us.

As we practice—kind of like my exploration around anger—as we practice with it, our mind begins to understand the suffering of that and begins to let it go. Those afflictive emotions, a layer of them, can begin to fall away or loosen. They don't catch us quite so much anymore. And as we practice, some of the more obvious forms of suffering can begin to let go, and underneath, a subtler kind of suffering can be revealed.

So there are layers of suffering, layers of clinging, very deeply layered in our minds. And in a way, we sometimes have this recognition in our practice or some kind of exploration around wanting that begins to arise around the practice itself. I'm sure that many of you—all of you—have experienced this wanting around the practice. We have a difficult state arise and we want to practice partly to get rid of that difficult state. So there's a

kind of subtler wanting that's going on. There's the wanting that's locked in place around the difficult state—the wanting to be seen or heard or to be right. And then as we explore that, we begin to see that kind of wanting. We may begin to understand that inside, as we're exploring with our practice, there's also a wanting around doing the practice itself.

We often recognize this pretty early, actually. I've had somebody come up to me after one of my weekly classes in Redwood City, California, and he was talking about how his wanting to engage in the practice had been really helpful because it helped him get

over some really unpleasant, unfortunate circumstances. But he sees now that this is wanting. "If I don't want that," he asked, "then how do I get over these unfortunate, difficult circumstances?"

Through this kind of exploration, we begin to understand intellectually first that there is a wanting involved in our practice. We begin to recognize: the fact that I want to practice—some of it is a wholesome kind of *chanda*, the kind of desire that can fuel wholesome states, wholesome practices. And some of it is also connected with wanting to get rid of all the difficulty. So we see this kind of mixed motivation. It's an intellectual seeing of that, in a way. We recognize, "Yeah, there's wanting in my practice."

In my very first week-long retreat—my very first ten-day retreat—I felt myself create this identity: "I am going to be a good meditator." I could see that this was happening, but I could also see it was a really useful thing to be doing at that time because there was so much of that more obvious kind of suffering happening.

In a way, this staged letting go of wanting works like this: we have this obvious kind of suffering, and in order to let go of that more obvious suffering, it's helpful to take a step onto a stepping stone. Can I land on the practice for a while? And landing on the practice, landing on exploring the difficult emotions, we begin to loosen our attachments to this stepping stone. Then we begin to land more fully on the practice.

At that point, when we're more into exploring experience and some of the larger layers of suffering have fallen away, we begin to actually experience the subtler levels of suffering around the practice itself—wanting to get rid of difficult states, wanting to find or construct states of calm, peace, or joy.

In terms of this question of using suffering as a guide, we can. This person who came and talked to me was confused. "I see that I want to do the practice in order to get rid of all that difficulty," he said. "So I'm not supposed to want to do the practice, but then what do I do? I just get mired in the difficulty."

I said, "Well, how about letting go of being stuck to that difficulty?" We use the wanting of letting go of suffering to help us let go of that more obvious suffering. Usually in that place, the more obvious suffering is obscuring the suffering around the practice itself.

The suffering around the practice itself, the wanting around the practice itself—I asked this person, "Are you experiencing the suffering of wanting to practice?"

He said, "No. It feels good to want to practice. I just know there's wanting in there."

This is a kind of intellectual knowing of that wanting. It's not an actual meeting of that wanting. And my rough guide for people in using suffering as a guide is this: when it becomes clear to you that you are suffering, that is when to begin to explore it, to begin to investigate it.

So the time to investigate that suffering around the practice, around wanting to get rid of difficult states, is when we start to feel the suffering of it. And you will, at some point, really viscerally feel the suffering of that—the suffering of wanting to construct a state we had yesterday. You will feel that. That is when to use that exploration, suffering, as a guide. Not when it's just an idea in our mind: "Oh, I want that state, I want that beautiful state, so I'm going to practice." If we're not feeling the suffering of that, that's not the time to try to let go of that wanting.

You'll feel this. Steve Armstrong has this great saying: "There's nothing like a great sitting to ruin your day." You have a sitting that's just so clear, so collected, and the next sitting isn't. And you spend the rest of your time trying to figure out what you're doing wrong. How can I get back to that? There, the wanting of that state becomes really clear. In the midst of that beautiful state of mind, there may have been some clinging. But that wasn't the time to begin to explore it.

It wasn't so obvious at the time.

In terms of working with these layers of suffering, I suggest simply meeting the outer layer—what's obvious around the suffering. Rather than trying to jump over it, or digging inside, thinking, "I know there's something deeper in there, and that's what I have to get to." That's just an idea. And generally, it's not helpful to have that leaping-over attitude or agenda in our minds, because our minds are great constructors of experience. If we're looking for something, we'll probably find it, whether or not it was actually there to begin with.

So meeting what is here now, what is obvious, what is clear, what we can touch in this moment, rather than digging and searching—this is investigation. My teacher Sayadaw U Pandita uses an analogy of investigation as being like polishing a bowl with a soft cloth. You take the bowl and you're polishing, rubbing, staying in contact with it. You're meeting the entire surface. That's investigation. Not trying to take an ice pick and pick the thing apart. Not trying to pull it open and see what's in the middle. Just meeting what's obvious.

I'd like to end by reflecting on this teaching of the Buddha around the Four Noble Truths—that the understanding of suffering, when suffering is arising, is our path. It's not something we have to get over in order to get to the real practice.

I held that delusion, that belief, for quite a long time. On one three-month course, I spent a great deal of time both being lost in and exploring, investigating with mindfulness, the arising of self-hatred. For a chunk of that retreat—the first few weeks, I don't know exactly how long—I thought, "Okay, this self-hatred is happening, but I need to get over this, I need to get past this, and that's when the practice will really begin." It was so pervasive. It was so strong. It was so much a part of everything. This was my self-hatred retreat. It was up in spades.

And at some point I had to surrender. I thought, "Okay, I guess this is not going to be the retreat in which I get enlightened. But maybe I'll learn something about my self-hatred." So I surrendered to this. If self-hatred is what's arising, that's what I have to pay attention to.

When I finally made that shift, there was much more willingness to be with the self-hatred, to watch it as it arose. It certainly didn't make it pleasant. And there were a number of understandings, insights that unfolded over the course of weeks.

Then one evening, I saw the whole pattern of self-hatred coming up, beginning to arise. After a dharma talk, I went back to my room and thought, "I'm just going to meet this." There was a strong sense of resolve. I'm just going to meet this. The moment I saw the mind shading towards that thought—"you're no good, you're a failure"—those thoughts that would come up in my mind, the moment I saw it, I would simply recognize: that's contact, and that's an unpleasant phenomenon. Just noticing that, over and over again.

And in that process, at some moment in this exploration, I saw very clearly: this is simply a phenomenon arising in the mind. It's just an empty thought. It is nothing. It's a thought.

In that moment, the pattern of self-hatred just crumbled and was replaced by bliss within a split second. Then there was this little thought that said, "Oh, never again am I going to feel that self-hatred." And immediately I recognized: no. This insight too is impermanent.

There were a number of really profound seeings in that split second. First, there was the seeing of the emptiness, just the corelessness of that thought. Then there was a recognition of grasping onto the insight itself, the recognition that that way lies suffering, the letting go of that, the balance of mind that resulted. Very deep insight.

And in terms of that pattern of self-hatred, that particular insight was like uprooting a tree. I didn't trust it for years that it was really so largely gone. It was a couple of years before I even noticed anything like self-hatred again. Then I began to recognize

little bits coming up here and there—the thought "you're no good" arising. But it was like, "Oh yes, there's a thought." There was no belief in that thought anymore. That insight into the coreless, ephemeral nature, the fact that it was just a thought, had cut the belief in that pattern.

So very deep insight into anicca, anatta, while observing self-hatred. In that moment I recognized it just doesn't matter what's going on. What matters is that I meet it. The practice can unfold right in the midst of dukkha. It doesn't have to be something that we work our way through, that we chug our way through, and then finally we come to a space where we can sit in calm and peace and clarity and maybe at some point become enlightened. No—this exploration of dukkha is completely intertwined with our freedom.

It's not a problem. It is simply something to witness, to bring mindfulness to. Mindfulness and wisdom brought together. The wisdom of understanding the helpfulness of observing. This is just a phenomenon. Can I observe this phenomenon? Mindfulness and wisdom together bring this freedom, no matter what our experience is.

Suffering is kind of the way we navigate our minds. Clinging results in suffering. Subtler forms of clinging are what get revealed as we practice. We're not going to get through this practice without experiencing suffering. And we can actually have some lightness around it too.

CHAPTER 86

The Wandering Mind

Andrea Fella · 1h01

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella reframes the wandering mind from a meditation obstacle into a profound object of investigation. Rather than dismissing mind-wandering as a failure to overcome, she encourages practitioners to explore this universal pattern with curiosity, recognizing it as evidence of the Buddha's teaching on anattā (not-self) and the out-of-control nature of consciousness.

Fella identifies several flavors of mind-wandering: active thinking and planning, emotionally charged thought storms, low-energy drifting into dreamlike states, and pleasant spacing out. She references the Buddha's second discourse on the uncontrollable nature of the five khandhas, noting that if consciousness were self, we could simply command it to be otherwise. The talk also explores the Buddha's description of how sense contact leads to perception, thought, and mental proliferation (papañca).

Practically, Fella offers guidance for both sides of the wandering phenomenon. When mindfulness spontaneously returns, she suggests noticing what we've woken up into—the thoughts, emotions, and feeling tones present—while also appreciating the effortless quality of that returning awareness. She encourages familiarity with mindfulness itself, not just its objects. For observing the mind leaving the present moment, she describes how continuous practice reveals the cause-and-effect process of wandering. Importantly, she notes that increased wandering after periods of stability often signals a shift to subtler levels of experience rather than practice failure.

In our practice, it's often helpful to recognize certain patterns of experience that recur and then to explore those, getting familiar with them, beginning to recognize them, recognize the conditions in which they occur, how they come together, how they fall apart. We can learn a lot by observing phenomena that happen to us over and over again. Each time we see a familiar pattern, it's like we get a different perspective on it. We learn a little bit more about our minds.

Tonight I'd like to explore a particular pattern that we all share in spades, one that happens to all of us quite frequently: the pattern of the mind wandering out of the present moment. The wandering mind.

This is actually a pattern that we can be interested in, we can explore, we can learn something about. But it's often a pattern that we think is something we just need to dismiss in order to get back to the present moment. I'd like to share with you some of my own exploration around this pattern, some of the things I've learned, some of the things I've understood, and hope to encourage you to make your own exploration.

In this sharing, I'd also like to point to the fact that I'm just picking one pattern here, one particular pattern that we may not necessarily think is so interesting to explore. I want to encourage you that whatever pattern is common for you, whatever pattern is familiar for you, it is well worth exploring. There's so much that you can learn. With so many patterns in my own mind, I kept thinking, "Well, when I get past this one, that's when the practice will really start." What I've come to see is that it is through these very patterns, through understanding and exploring these very things that seem to be in our way, that our practice deepens.

The wandering mind is a term we often use for the mind that loses touch with present moment experience—a wandering out of the present moment. That's kind of the way we think about it, or almost the way it feels at times. There are many different ways this pattern manifests.

Some of the more frequent ones, especially earlier in our practice or earlier in settling into a retreat, involve active reflection, active thinking. The mind picks up on a theme and starts thinking about it—about the past, about the future, planning or remembering, or even describing the present moment.

Then there's the flavor of the wandering mind that is more of a charge out of the present moment. There may be some kind of emotional reactivity coming up, and the thoughts hook into that emotional reactivity and just run away into a pattern of frustration or anger or wanting or loneliness. Whatever the emotion is, often there can be a charge of thoughts related to it—a kind of mind storm.

There's another flavor of this wandering mind that is much less charged. It's more of a drifting out of the present moment. The energy perhaps is a little low, not quite connecting with experience, and the mind just floats out of the present moment. You may notice this in thoughts that don't have much particular meaning to you. They may be dreamlike, or they may be just strange words floating through your mind. Often this is a manifestation of the energy being a little bit lower.

And then there's another flavor that is a kind of spacing out. It doesn't necessarily have much thought connected to it, but the mind loses touch with present moment experience. We find ourselves almost in a zoned-out space. Again, probably not much charge to that, and in fact it may feel kind of pleasant, but there's not much connection with the present moment.

These are just a few of the flavors I've seen of ways the mind can leave the present moment. But a general quality of all of these is basically a state of very low or non-mindfulness. That's actually what's happening: the mind is in a state of low or non-mindfulness. The mind doesn't actually wander anywhere; it doesn't go anywhere. The state of mind shifts, and mindfulness is not arising in the moment. That's the flavor of what we traditionally or typically might call the wandering mind.

There's not much we can do when the mind is wandering. When we're lost in it, very little can be done about that. We can't make ourselves come out of that wandering. When we're in a lost state, we cannot willfully choose to have mindfulness re-arise. It has to re-arise on its own. Fortunately, it will re-arise on its own at some point. And when mindfulness re-arises, at that moment we can begin to explore our experience again.

I'd like to explore this phenomenon of the wandering mind from both sides of where we wander. The easiest place, the place I'll start with, is the places where we can wake up. Then I'd also like to explore the ways we wander, the ways that the mind starts to wander. There is so much we can learn by observing this process of the mind.

We learn about our own minds through this process. We learn about the personal patterns of our minds, how we get caught in certain patterns of thought. We get familiar with the flavors, the habits of our mind, the familiar ways it gets caught. One of the things we learn about is our personal proclivities, what we tend to get stuck to. We recognize this by recognizing the flavor of what we are waking up into when we come back, when mindfulness re-arises.

We also learn more deeply from this phenomenon that the mind is basically out of control. We sit down to meditate, we have the intention to be present, we choose an object perhaps, we bring our attention to the breath, and we have this intention to stay present. But our choice doesn't seem to hold much sway over our mind. The mind just does its thing and at some point will wander off. We have very little control over the fact that the mind wanders out of the present moment.

There is some ability, when we are mindful, to choose mindfulness. It's not us doing it, but the processes of our mind do have some small amount of choice in what happens when we are present, when we are mindful. I'll talk a little more about that part in a few minutes. So there's very little control we have over the mind wandering out of the present moment, but there is some degree of choice that can be made at that point. We have no control over how long our minds wander. We have no control over when that moment of mindfulness will spontaneously re-arise.

We often think of these things as problems, that we don't have control over our minds. We feel like we should be able to not have the mind wander. But this process actually points to a very deep truth: there's very little control. Our minds are out of our control. And if we explore this, we see that this is actually a pointer to the Buddha's teaching on not-self.

He pointed to this in the second discourse that he gave. He pointed to this aspect of being out of control. The processes of our mind and body are out of control. I'll just read you a section of this. He talked about the processes of body, of form, of feeling, of perception, of intention, of consciousness as all being out of our control. He restated it for each of these aspects. I'm going to read it with respect to consciousness:

"Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were the self, it would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible to say with regard to consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.' But precisely because consciousness is not self, it lends itself to dis-ease. It is not possible to say, 'Let my consciousness be thus.'"

How many of us would choose, if we could, to say, "Let my consciousness be thus"? That would be wonderful. But consciousness does not lend itself to that.

We usually explore our experience, we often meet our experience and navigate our lives, navigate our world through a perspective of me, of mine, of I—the sense of self. Because we have this view of self, because we're seeing things from this perspective of self much of the time, it influences how we perceive our experience. We may not see things that don't conform with that belief or that view. We have the view, the belief of self, and so much of what we perceive, what we recognize, how we take it in, confirms this belief for us. We don't always notice things that don't confirm it. The wandering mind, the out-of-control nature of our experience, is just such a piece of evidence for not-self. This simple experience of the wandering mind can really point us to a very deep truth if we can take it in.

The exploration of the wandering mind can also support an understanding of cause and effect. We see something that triggers a memory. We start thinking about that memory and we're lost. This is a pretty common way to wander out of the present moment—through some sense experience that we start thinking about. This is a cause and effect process, a pretty simple process. There isn't anyone responsible for it, there isn't anyone here doing it. It is a process of mind, a natural process. In recognizing something, the associative nature of memory creates this effect of a memory arising. If we're present for this process, we can see this cause and effect relationship unfolding. We see, almost eerily, that it is just happening. It is simply a process unfolding—again, underscoring, giving us

evidence for this teaching of not-self.

Through the exploration of the wandering mind, we can learn things about our personal patterns of mind. We can begin to recognize the out-of-control nature of the mind. We can begin to understand something about cause and effect. We can also begin to learn something, appreciate something about awareness itself, about mindfulness itself—begin to get familiar with the experience of what it is to be aware.

The easiest place to start this exploration, at least in my own experience, is in the moment when mindfulness re-arises. That moment when we remember, "Oh, I've been lost in thought," or "I've been spaced out, or disconnected from experience." Mindfulness has re-arisen.

Often in that moment there can be a little bit of judgment—sometimes subtle, sometimes really obvious—just a little bit of a sense of, "That's not what I was supposed to have been doing. I sat down to meditate. I sat down to be present. My mind was off. That wasn't what I was planning." And so we can have a little bit of that judgment come in when our mindfulness re-arises. You're all familiar with this.

But when we can really recognize and accept and truly acknowledge the out-of-control nature of the mind, we begin to see there's no point in judging the fact that our mind has wandered. Causes and conditions arose that made the mindfulness go away. Causes and conditions arose to make the mindfulness come back. In the moment when mindfulness comes back, it's already back. There's nothing to come back to in that moment. Mindfulness has already re-arisen.

Can you take an interest in that moment? What is that about?

One of the things about that particular moment that I find really interesting is the fact that mindfulness has re-arisen spontaneously. It didn't take any effort at all for that moment of mindfulness to arise. We so often find this practice of awareness, of mindfulness, to involve a lot of efforting and doing. And that moment when mindfulness comes back is a pointer to the possibility of an easeful quality of mindfulness.

Our usual instructions in that moment when mindfulness re-arises—the kind of familiar instructions we explore—are to notice what you're waking up into. Often it's thinking. Mindfulness has re-arisen. What are we aware of in that moment? Thoughts perhaps: planning, worry, judging, fantasizing, ruminating, arguing, describing. Whatever it is, acknowledging whatever it is that we have woken up into.

Sometimes I like to suggest that thoughts are pretty potent forces in our minds. They have a creative power that is quite amazing. So when we've gotten lost in thought, when our minds have gone off in thought, often they have not just created the world of thought but they've created a whole complex of emotions and body sensations as well. So when you wake up into thought, what has been the impact of that thinking on your experience? Taking a moment to recognize that. And to recognize that mindfulness is here already. There's nothing to come back to. If you can be aware of what you've woken up into, that is enough, if you're practicing mindfulness.

Of course, if you're practicing concentration, in that moment of coming back into awareness, recognizing that moment of awareness, the choice there can be, "Oh, I'm back. Okay, let me come back to my object of concentration." So that's the moment when we have some choice in our experience.

It can be really helpful to notice if there has been some kind of emotion that's been created because our mind has wandered off into thought. There's been a kind of charge out of the present moment—the mind going off into a pattern of frustration or desire may have generated the feeling of frustration or desire. So taking that in, recognizing, "Oh, that is part of the impact of that experience."

These things are helpful in terms of recognizing what we've woken up into. And as I mentioned yesterday morning in the reflection, sometimes when our mind wanders out of the present moment, it can wander into beautiful emotions, wholesome emotions. It might wander into thoughts of dear friends that you've spent time with recently, and the feeling that's been generated by those thoughts is mettā. Or perhaps the mind has wandered off into an offering that you made, and the joy and the generosity of that offering may be the impact of those thoughts. So sometimes the wandering mind can wander us into beautiful qualities as well. And in the waking up, it's really helpful to recognize those qualities.

Then we can explore the feeling tone—the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral aspect of our experience—when we wake up. If the mind has charged off into

worry or frustration, the feeling tone is probably unpleasant. If the mind has wandered into fantasy, the feeling tone may be pleasant when you come back.

One thing I've found particularly helpful in this exploration around feeling tone and the wandering mind is recognizing that the very drifting itself—sometimes in that low energy state when the mind just drifts out of the present—can often be a very pleasant state in itself. Sometimes it's almost the pleasantness itself that we've gotten lost in. The mind has gravitated, in that low energy state, toward that pleasant experience and simply gotten lost in it.

So in the waking up, experiencing that pleasantness can bring energy into the present moment. We get the benefit of feeling the pleasant that the mind had gravitated toward, but now with awareness.

These explorations are looking at almost the content of what we wake up into—looking at the thoughts we wake up into, looking at the feelings, the emotions. What is present as we come back into awareness?

But there's another side of this waking up that I'd like to explore with you, and that is the recognition of the familiarity we can develop with the experience of mindfulness itself as mindfulness comes back. For me, this exploration has been about seeing if I can touch into the very moment that mindfulness returns.

At one point during a three-month course, this became my practice. I could see the mind wandered out of the present moment a lot, so I started getting interested in how soon I could notice that I was back. Initially, as I explored this, it felt like there was a kind of lag. When I consciously recognized that mindfulness had returned, it was as though there had been a little bit of fuzzy mindfulness preceding the clear recognition —the clear recognition of "I'm back."

Sometimes it feels a little like climbing out of mud. There's a little bit of mindfulness, and then we sink back into whatever we've been lost in. A little bit of mindfulness, and we sink back. A little bit of mindfulness. And at some point, mindfulness kind of recognizes itself. "Oh, I'm back. Here I am."

In that moment, what is the feeling? What is it like to be aware? When mindfulness re-arises, it's a great time to explore what it feels like to be mindful. We can't really know what it's like when we're lost—mindfulness isn't there to take that in. But in the moment when mindfulness re-arises, there's a lingering memory of what it was like just

before, when we were hazy, disconnected, not present. And in this moment, there is the clarity of being aware again. We begin to get a sense of that clarity, of what it is to be mindful.

This feeling of mindfulness is actually quite familiar in a way. Once we start to recognize it, it's there in so much of our experience. We just don't notice because we're more interested in what we're aware of and not so interested in the awareness itself.

Our meditation practice gives us tremendous opportunity for this exploration. In a day, hundreds, maybe thousands of times, we have this moment when mindfulness returns. For myself, this exploration—getting interested in the re-arising of mindfulness, getting interested in mindfulness itself—was really helpful in letting go of judgment around the wandering mind. It didn't matter how many times my mind wandered. Every time it happened, I had this opportunity to notice this distinction and get a little more familiar with this feeling, this sense, this experience of mindfulness itself.

This familiarity with mindfulness serves you, because this moment of remembering, this moment when mindfulness re-arises, actually happens to us more than we consciously recognize. We get a very brief moment of recognizing something in the present, and then we move into recognition of that thing and start thinking about it or doing something with it. We very quickly move from recognition into response.

We're in the bathroom and hear a faucet dripping. There's been a moment of awareness—maybe not conscious mindfulness, but a moment of awareness of that phenomenon. And the mind immediately, very naturally, goes to take action: turn off the faucet. In this simple way, we are designed to respond to what we experience. But we're not so familiar with recognizing that we have become aware, that we have become mindful.

So this familiarity with the experience of mindfulness—with what it is to be mindful—begins to point mindfulness out to us more and more throughout the day. It's a very helpful exploration, one that encourages us to recognize more of these spontaneous, effortless moments of mindfulness, which happen a lot. And when those moments arise, when mindfulness returns, the processes of our mind have some choice. We can then choose to cultivate mindfulness more consciously.

We count on these spontaneous moments of mindfulness for the process of meditation to even begin. So the more we can recognize how frequently they happen, the more we can connect with this lighter touch to mindfulness and connect with our intentionality—be present when we are already mindful, bringing our attention more clearly to experience.

Then there's the exploration of the wandering mind, of looking at where the mind wanders out of the present moment. That place where we are aware and the mind kind of loses touch with what we're paying attention to and either drifts out or charges out. We can actually see this start to happen. It is possible to watch the mind begin to get familiar with the beginning of the wandering. It's a harder place to explore; it's much easier, much more obvious to us, the moment of waking up. The moment where the mind starts to lose touch with the present moment is a subtler experience. But a little bit of understanding about how this process can happen can raise some interest in this.

How does the mind wander out of the present moment? The Buddha actually has a very clear description of this in the suttas. He says it starts with sense contact. There's the eye, there's the sight, there's the contact, there's the eye consciousness—the meeting as contact. And with the contact there's feeling; what one feels, we perceive, we recognize. What we recognize, what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we tend to start mentally proliferating about.

This happens to us all the time. We're sitting in meditation and there's a sound—a creaking floorboard. So there's been that sense contact, the sound, the recognition of the sound: a creaking floorboard. And then there may be some thoughts about it. The building's getting a little old. The floor didn't used to creak. Maybe I should offer some dana so they can fix the floor. I wonder if they really can fix the floor. They probably have to tear up the whole thing and shut down the whole retreat center. And the mind is off.

From sense contact, this is a very common way for our mind to wander out of the present moment. Mindfulness is not present for some part of this process—that's when the mind wanders. So we can watch this process happening. We can begin to recognize how this process unfolds.

Now, it's not that we can force ourselves to see this process. Actually, my own experience and exploration of this level of investigation is that usually it begins to be more apparent as the mindfulness gets more continuous. It's not something I can do. It's not something I can decide: "Oh, I'm going to look at how that process of perception leads to thought, leads to papañca, leads to that mental proliferation." But the more continuous, the more present we are, the more we can begin to see how these processes work.

I've worked with people on other retreats describing this process, and it doesn't necessarily resonate in the moment or it's not something they can see in the moment. But then a few days later suddenly they're recognizing, "Oh, I see—this is how the mind does this." So it's kind of like just putting this information in the room may help you to be able to see a new process in your minds.

This is seeing cause and effect at work. We see sense experience. We see a memory arise based on that sense experience. We see the thoughts arise based on that memory. We see perhaps an emotion created based on that. So we begin to see how things unfold: cause and effect, cause and effect, cause and effect. And at times it can really just be like dominoes falling. Not me doing it, but just one thing triggers the next, triggers the next, triggers the next. When the mind is more continuous, it can watch this process unfolding and gain a sense of the not-self nature of these processes of mind.

We can also wander out of the present moment on a feeling tone as well. I talked about wandering out based on perception leading to thought—some recognition of something. That's a really common way for our mind to leap out of the present moment. Concepts arise in the mind and we think about concepts. But we can also wander out of the present moment just based on feeling tone, without concept being involved necessarily. I mentioned this a few minutes ago: the mind kind of moves into a pleasant state and then just drifts into pleasant. Not so much thinking about it, but just the feeling of pleasant.

We can get lost in pleasant. You're paying attention to the breath, the breath gets really comfortable, the comfortableness gets really pleasant, and the mind just kind of drifts off into a pleasant zoned-out state. Not particularly thinking, but also not particularly present.

So we can see that the mind can wander out of the present moment when it gets hooked to a feeling. Another exploration I've had around wandering out based on feeling tone—and this is an interesting one—is when feeling tone gets kind of neutral. I've recognized in my own experience that when there's not much feeling tone happening, that can be a place where our habits are ready, where our patterns of mind are ready to just jump in.

For example, on one retreat I was starting to experience quite a bit of neutral experience—a neutral feeling in the body, a lot of calmness in the mind—so not much of either pleasant or unpleasant experience, just really balanced, calm, quiet body. By that point I had learned enough to have the idea in my mind that when things get neutral, maybe, just maybe, something really good will happen. That the neutrality itself is kind of like a doorway to something. And so a little bit of expectation would arise—a little bit of "Ooh, is something going to happen?"

And when nothing happened, the mind hooked into its habitual pattern of "Oh, I'm a failure. I can't do this right. I'm no good." The mind went from neutral experience, where not much was happening, to picking up on its habitual pattern—essentially self-hatred in this case. So being interested in how the mind does what it does around neut-

ral experience is important. It's a very common place for the mind to leap into. It's like there's not much else happening, and the familiar patterns are very likely to pick up when there's not much going on.

We can also notice another exploration around the mind beginning to wander: we can begin to notice when the mind starts to lose a little bit of contact with what it's paying attention to. For instance, you're paying attention to the breath, noticing the experience of the breath, right with the breath. At some point you might begin to recognize that the mindfulness and the breath are right together, and then you might notice there's a little less contact between the breath and the mindfulness. The mindfulness is still present, but it's just not quite as connected to the breath—the mindfulness has let go of the breath a little bit.

On one retreat I could see this. I could see the mindfulness start to let go of the breath. When I noticed that, since I was paying attention to the breath, I noticed there was a little less clarity of the mindfulness, less clarity of the experience. So I began recognizing, "Oh, the mind isn't as clear with the breath—come back." I did that, and the mind kept letting go, and I'd think, "Come back, come back a little bit more closely."

After this happened three or four times, I finally recognized: well, the mind has let go of the breath, but I'm mindful of that. Let me see what the mind is doing, rather than having an agenda to bring it back to the breath. Let me just see. If I'm mindful of the mind leaving the breath, let's see where it goes. And the mindfulness opened into a kind of new, broad, more spacious awareness that was very new for me.

So being interested in where the mind is leaving the experience is valuable. Now, there were kind of two choices there. When you're aware, you can choose where to direct the attention, but you can also choose to follow the awareness, to stay present with what the mindfulness is naturally orienting to—watching essentially what the mind is naturally doing.

There are some conditions that lead to the wandering mind. The obvious ones are the defilements arising, thoughts reflecting on the past, reflecting on the future, thinking about the present. These are the obvious ways. But the mind can also wander for some other reasons.

I really want to put this out there because early in my practice, or at some point in my practice, I thought that if my mind was wandering, it meant that I needed to be doing something more—that I had obviously stopped being properly aware if the mind started wandering. But there can be times in practice, particularly if you've noticed there's been a period of pretty steady mindfulness, a period of time where the mind has

been fairly present for the breath or present for experience—whether you're doing concentration or open awareness—just present without a lot of wandering. And then suddenly you notice the mind is starting to wander.

In my experience, it often doesn't mean that suddenly I've lost the effort. It sometimes means that the mind is settling into a new level.

For example, sometimes as the mind starts to relax and let go of the outer layers or familiar layers of patterns of mind, it's like the normal structures of our mind start to fall away. Sometimes there can be some deeper things that have almost been repressed by those normal structures. And when those structures have fallen away, it's like there's room for things that have been buried to begin to come up.

So this does happen to us. It's like we drop through a layer and another layer reveals itself. It's not that we've gone backwards. It's not that we've suddenly messed up. It's simply that the mind has opened up to a new layer of things that hadn't been so obvious before.

Or another way this can happen: the mind begins to get concentrated, settles into concentration, but the energy is not quite balanced with that concentration. The mind then almost slips or sinks into dreams, into a kind of dreaminess, into nonsensical thought. Again, this doesn't necessarily mean that you're doing anything wrong. It's like a little bit of energy imbalance.

For myself, in that kind of space, I've learned that it's often actually not a very great energy imbalance. If you're sitting there in meditation, fairly concentrated, and dream-like images are arising, and you're not actually falling asleep, the energy is just slightly off. What I've found is that it takes just a very little bit of bumping up the energy to have it come back into balance. Maybe simply opening the eyes or straightening the spine a little bit—some very small adjustments. Earlier in my practice I would think, "Oh, my mind is wandering. I really better try hard." And that would just send me into restlessness, because I was over-applying the effort. So often that place of low energy where the mind starts moving into dreaminess requires just a little bit of energy added to the system.

Then there's another interesting phenomenon that I find happening particularly with mindfulness, with awareness practice. As the mindfulness gets more continuous, I've noticed this several times in several different forms: there's a certain time where you're really recognizing, "Wow, the mind's pretty continuous. Mindfulness is pretty continuous. Really right there with experience, moment after moment after moment." And suddenly the mind starts wandering again. What's going on?

When that happens, can you get curious about it? Get curious about what's actually happening there, because what I've seen often is that as the mindfulness gets more continuous, it's kind of like the mindfulness begins to gravitate toward subtler experience. We can have an idea or an agenda about what we're paying attention to. It's as if our mind gets used to paying attention to experience at a certain level—we're used to experiencing this flow of body sensation, this flow of energetic experience, these kinds of ways thoughts appear. The mind gets used to that, and it's almost like part of our practice mind has this filter that says, "This is what we're seeing, this is what we're recognizing, this is what we're noticing."

But the mindfulness, being more continuous, is actually starting to gravitate toward something a little different—a subtler level of body sensation, a more refined recognition of thought. Because we have this kind of agenda or idea about what we're paying attention to, there's a mismatch. These are places where, when there's been a continuity of mindfulness and the mind starts to wander, I generally step back and ask, "Well, what is the mind actually paying attention to here? What's happening?" And I'll often see that the mindfulness has naturally touched into a subtler level of experience that I almost hadn't been aware of, that I hadn't recognized consciously.

So I'd like to encourage a curiosity about the wandering mind. There are so many different ways, so many different reasons that the mind wanders. And not always is it because we're not applying our effort enough. In fact, sometimes when the mind wanders, what I've begun to appreciate—especially on long retreat, like so many of you are here for a long time—on retreats of this length, when the mind starts to wander, it can often be a kind of hallmark that there's been a shift in the practice. Maybe one that you've not consciously recognized. Can you open up and recognize what is happening now?

Now, if you've been spacing out and going for walks and talking on the phone and doing that kind of thing, and you start noticing the mind wandering, well then it may be that your mind has gotten restless and agitated and you need to bring the attention back more closely. But if you've been practicing and suddenly, after a period of relative stability, the mind is wandering a lot, get curious about it. There's so much to learn.

Now I'd like to finish by saying that I've talked about many different ways I have explored this phenomenon of the wandering mind—things I've learned, things I've recognized. And what I'd like to say is that I'm not suggesting here that you try to do or try to see things in the way that I've expressed them.

Mostly what I'm hoping is that you'll be interested in this phenomenon of the wandering mind and become curious about it. Look at it for yourself. Maybe having heard something of my own deepening of practice through this exploration, it might help you to have a lighter attitude about the wandering mind, a more curious attitude.

If I've encouraged that, I feel this has been a worthwhile exploration.

And anything at all that comes up for you can be explored with this kind of attention—whether it's ordinary experience, feeling just like normal, everyday life, or whether it's self-hatred, frustration, anger, hostility, the wandering mind, states of bliss. Whatever is happening, that is where the unfolding of your practice is. Explore that. Meet that. Be with that.

CHAPTER 87

Wisdom and Insight

Andrea Fella · 56 min

In this talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of paññā (wisdom) as understood in the Buddha's teachings. She begins by examining the Buddha's fundamental insight: that suffering arises not from lacking what we want, but from the wanting itself. This shift in perspective—recognizing that happiness dependent on impermanent, unreliable conditions is inherently unsatisfying—forms the foundation of Buddhist wisdom.

Fella outlines the traditional framework of wisdom within the threefold training (sīla, samādhi, paññā) and its relationship to the Four Noble Truths. She explains the three levels of wisdom: sutamaya paññā (wisdom from hearing), cintāmaya paññā (wisdom from reflection), and bhāvanāmaya paññā (wisdom from cultivation through practice). These three spiral together, each supporting the other in a deepening understanding. She emphasizes that wisdom isn't merely intellectual—it requires engagement and action.

The talk becomes especially practical as Fella describes how wisdom manifests in meditation: as shifts of perspective when we suddenly recognize "this is just anger" or "this is just wanting"; as the gradual recognition of cause and effect through repeated observation; and as the direct seeing of defilements not arising when mindfulness becomes continuous. She draws a meaningful distinction between psychological insights—which help us understand our conditioning but may not uproot patterns—and vipassanā insights into the three characteristics (anicca, dukkha, anattā) that can profoundly transform our relationship to suffering. Through her personal example of working with self-hatred, she illustrates how deep seeing into the ephemeral, not-self nature of thoughts can release patterns that psychological understanding alone cannot touch.

Tonight I'd like to talk about wisdom, the wisdom of the Buddha, which is actually quite specific because it really specifically addresses the question of dukkha, of how we suffer, why we suffer.

When the Buddha had his awakening, it's said that he looked out at the world and saw that while beings really are hoping for happiness, while beings are acting in ways that they think will bring them happiness, they're actually behaving in exactly the opposite way. Typically in seeking for happiness we tend to think that having things will make us happy, or that perhaps seeking to become someone will make me happy—a respected person, a liked person.

The Buddha recognized that this way of trying to find happiness is really depending on things, relying on finding our happiness in dependence on things that are really outside of our control. And so it's not a very reliable, not a very wise way to try to find happiness. If we're seeking to have things to make us happy, those very things are impermanent, unreliable, destined to decay. If we are seeking for happiness based on becoming someone or having respect or fame or good opinions of other people, that relies on the opinions of other people. How reliable is that?

And so in his awakening, the Buddha really had a shift of perspective about where happiness can be found. His proposal is that it's not so much the not having that makes us feel dissatisfied, that we're engaged in this dukkha, but rather it's the wanting to have. The wanting to have is the source of our struggle. And so this fundamental shift, the wisdom that the Buddha offers us, is around this fundamental shift: How can true happiness be found?

Within the teachings of the Buddha, there are a couple of different ways that wisdom is brought into the teaching. One explicit way it's brought in is in the threefold training: sila, samadhi, paññā. Sila is ethics, samadhi is concentration, paññā is wisdom. That threefold training, that gradual training, is understood to be overlaid on top of the Eightfold Path, where the wisdom is found in the first two aspects of the Eightfold Path: wise understanding and wise intention.

So what is wise view, wise understanding? This is defined in different ways, different perspectives actually of how we can look at what it means to have wise understanding. The most common way is framed around dukkha. No big surprise, because this is the problem the Buddha was trying to solve. And so wise understanding is the understanding of the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

That wisdom also incorporates the actions the Buddha suggested that we take with respect to those truths: that we understand suffering, that we let go of the cause of suffering, that we realize the cessation of suffering, and that we cultivate the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

So the wisdom of the Buddha in this teaching includes the understandings that we need to connect with—that there is suffering, how suffering is caused, that it's possible for suffering to end, and that there is a path. But also this wisdom includes that we have to practice. We have to take action on these truths. It's not about believing them. The belief in these truths doesn't do much for us, but the action, the cultivating the understanding of suffering, that supports us. And this is the way that wisdom grows in us.

Another way that wisdom is defined in the texts—there's quite a few different ways, but one very central way—is recognizing and understanding what is skillful in terms of leading us away from suffering and what is unskillful in terms of our actions. Those actions that are unskillful tend to cement, re-cement the process of craving in our minds. Actions that are skillful tend to help us to move away from that craving. So the actions that are unskillful are those that are based in greed, in aversion, in delusion. The actions that are skillful are those that are based in non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. And so again, this wisdom of the Buddha is pointing us to how we can engage. What are actions we can take that will support us? What are actions to let go of?

In this exploration of both these definitions—the teaching on the Four Noble Truths and this exploration of what's skillful and what's unskillful—there is an understanding that cause and effect underlies our lives. The skillful actions that we can take will be a cause that will lead to the effect of increasing happiness in our lives. The letting go of the unskillful actions will have that same effect. Skillful actions tend to lead us towards happiness; unskillful actions tend to lead us towards suffering.

And so this teaching, the wisdom that actions have consequences, is deeply embedded in the teachings of the Buddha. We begin to see this as we explore what it means to understand suffering. As we understand suffering, we begin to see the cause and effect relationship. Exploring suffering, we begin to see what causes it.

We begin to see this pattern of cause and effect. And as the mind begins to see this pattern, it begins to recognize that certain things help us, certain things are skillful, certain things are unskillful. So all of these teachings on wisdom are really interwoven. They're stated in different ways, but I really see that they are interconnected.

Another definition of wise understanding is stated in terms of this cause and effect nature of experience through the teaching on dependent origination, which is basically an elaboration of the Second Noble Truth that describes how suffering is created. The Second Noble Truth states that suffering has a cause, and its cause is craving. The teaching on dependent origination elaborates that teaching.

There's one sutta in which the Buddha is asked, "What is wise understanding?" And he says that in this world, mostly people are enamored either with the idea of existence or the idea of non-existence. But one with wise understanding, when things come into being, the idea of non-existence doesn't occur to them. And when things fall out of being, as things disappear, the idea of existence doesn't occur to them. He says that the teaching of the middle is that when this is, that is—things are dependent on conditions. And he goes through the teaching on dependent origination in that discussion. So this is another definition of wisdom. All these pieces—the understanding of suffering, what

supports us to move away from suffering, what we need to let go of, the understanding of cause and effect—all of these pieces are the wisdom of the Buddha. The Buddha, exploring his own experience, came to articulate the wisdom in these forms.

There's another way that wisdom is described in the suttas, a teaching that says there are different kinds of wisdom or different levels of wisdom. There's the wisdom that comes from listening, reading, hearing information. They talk about this as a form of wisdom. The term for this is *sutamayā paññā*, *suta* being the term for hearing, *paññā* being the word for wisdom. So *sutamayā paññā* is the wisdom that comes from hearing. This is the first place where the wisdom comes from for our practice—we hear some teachings.

The second kind of wisdom is connected to our ability to think and reflect. This is called *cintāmayā paññā*. That learning we've experienced through hearing, through reading, we take it in. We start thinking about it, reflecting on it. Does this make sense to me? How does it make sense to me? And in the teachings of the Buddha, in what we've heard, there is this encouragement to engage. So part of this reflective process is asking: does this make sense enough to me to engage, to practice, to put these teachings into action?

At the beginning of our practice, and often throughout our practice, we need to hear teachings, we need to reflect. The teachings of the Buddha, the wisdom of the Buddha—I find them, at least, to be quite inspiring, this possibility of freedom. It lifts my heart, it makes me sense that perhaps this is possible. And initially there's a kind of faith that may happen, not necessarily based in anything tangible in ourselves, but the faith that somebody else has said this works. "Maybe I could try this."

And in fact, that's how it felt to me when I first met the teachings of the Buddha. Somebody had sent me a book. I was in a space of pretty severe suffering, and I read through this book and gleaned this little bit of wisdom out of it. Most of my suffering at that time was around afflictive emotions. And the little bit of wisdom that I gleaned, if I had to articulate it now, would be something like: rather than acting on those emotions, turn your attention and notice them.

My response to that was, "Well, how's that going to work? How's that going to do any good?" But I had really hit bottom. And so there was this teaching, and there was a statement in the book that this is helpful, this has helped—it had helped the author of the book. And I thought, "Well, nothing else has worked. Why don't I give this a try?" That's how it felt to me, that willingness to engage with the wisdom of the Buddha.

That's kind of how our faith might feel at the beginning—just a willingness, a willingness to give it a try.

So those first two kinds of wisdom need to be put into action. It's not just about taking in information and thinking about it. We need to engage. And it is that engagement that begins to lead to the third kind of wisdom: the wisdom of cultivation of mind, the wisdom of experiential understanding—bhāvanā-mayā paññā, a wisdom of insight.

These three kinds of wisdom, I've seen in my practice, spiral on each other. With some insight, with some recognition of the benefits of the practice, there's an interest in deepening the understanding of the teachings, which leads to further reflection, a further engagement, which leads to a deepening of the insight. So these kinds of wisdom support each other. It's not like we gain all the information first and think about it and then practice. It's really a spiral, a deepening spiral into the terrain of this wisdom.

I'd like to explore with you tonight some of the different ways we actually experience wisdom—not in the abstract, not just as ideas. I'd like to explore some of the things I've noticed, ways that I've experienced this wisdom arising.

The first thing that is helpful to connect with, or to recognize, or perhaps to open to, is that wisdom develops through contact with dukkha. When dukkha is happening, it's not a mistake. This is our learning. This is the place where wisdom can develop. We're cultivating, we're following the teachings of the Buddha, and the Buddha's teachings are about understanding dukkha. Joseph sometimes says that we want insight into dukkha, we want to see clearly into dukkha, but without experiencing the dukkha. This dukkha is not a mistake. It's the pointer to how we cling, as I talked about a couple of weeks ago.

There are different ways that wisdom functions, and those first two kinds—the wisdom of learning, the wisdom of reflection—can be helpful to us in our practice. There are times, if we're struggling, when it can be helpful to consciously reflect, to bring in, to actually allow wisdom thoughts to come into our mind. This might be as simple as remembering, consciously connecting when we're experiencing something—when we're experiencing a state of anger, consciously recognizing: this is dukkha. Or: this is impermanent. This kind of reflection.

So this is using wisdom. It's clearly not that we know it as truth for ourselves in that moment. But I've seen for myself, in bringing these kinds of reflections in, how helpful it is to create a little bit of space around the difficulty. This is one way we can use wisdom in our practice.

I encourage people to find language that really resonates with them for these wisdom reflections. We have all been practicing here, we've all been practicing for quite a long time, all have had flavors of insights, different kinds of insights. So how have those insights landed for you? You might be able to find a way to articulate that for yourself in a short phrase. One that I like, borrowed from my teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, that happens to really resonate for me, is: this is nature. What is happening right now is a very natural phenomenon. It's happening because of causes and conditions. It's already happening. It's like there's a tree growing in front of me—this tree is already here. I might as well not deny it. This is nature.

The three core insights of vipassanā are around: this is dukkha, this is impermanent or unreliable, this is not me, not mine, not who I am. This is a process of causes and conditions. There are various ways to phrase those core insights. Finding a language that works for you in bringing in this wisdom can be very helpful.

And wisdom can sometimes be more intuitive in a way. We can recognize, we can have a sense—for instance, if we have a decision to make and we're sitting with ourselves, feeling into that decision, perhaps trying on various scenarios—there can be an intuitive sense of: hmm, not quite right. Or: that lands, that resonates. That kind of wisdom takes in, or encompasses, our understanding of ethics, our understanding of suffering.

So it's a broader kind of wisdom. It can often be felt, I find, in the area of the chest. And then there's the kind of wisdom that we may tend to seek out or hope for—the really clear seeing where the mind just goes, "Wow, look at that! Oh my God, things are really impermanent." Suddenly the mind sees the impermanence in a split second, really clearly seeing into something in a moment. So there are different ways that we might experience wisdom.

Let me offer some specific examples. One that's very common, really common, is a feeling of a shift of perspective around an experience. We're caught in something, exploring it, trying to meet it with mindfulness, and then there's a little bit of a shift of perspective. "Oh, this is just frustration. This is just depression. This is just wanting." There's that shift when it suddenly becomes, "Oh." That's a time when the resistance falls away. Wisdom is operating in that moment.

What I'm partly exploring here today is to point to ways that wisdom arises in your practice, and the recognition of it as wisdom. We begin to see that this is not me doing this shift of perspective. We can't do that. I remember on some of my early retreats, after I'd had some shifts of perspective, I was like, "Wow, that's so amazing." Then I would sit down at my next sitting and get all upset and feel pressured that I had to do

that again. And it's like, "Oh, I can't do that again." Well, of course you can't do that again. It's conditions that come together. I can't choose to make wisdom arise. It's not under personal control. It is, however, something that we can cultivate the conditions for. We can bring our attention to our experience, and wisdom can arise. We can see that shift. So the seeing of wisdom arising cultivates more wisdom. It's a support for the cultivation of wisdom to actually see and recognize wisdom.

This shift of perspective that we have—one way I think about it is that it's almost like putting a car into neutral. When we are engaged in some afflictive emotional state, it's like the gears are engaged. We've got our foot on the gas. Those thoughts in our mind about the difficulties are like our foot on the gas. The gears are engaged and the momentum is building. Then we recognize, "Oh, this is just anger," and it's kind of like the gears get disengaged.

Now when the gears are disengaged like that, it's not that the momentum of those gears stops immediately. When you think about being in a car going down the freeway at a hundred miles an hour and you put the car into neutral, the car doesn't stop. So with this shift of perspective, this form of wisdom, the car goes into neutral, the mind goes into neutral, but the momentum of that difficulty doesn't necessarily stop right away.

This is not to denigrate this form of wisdom. If we sit in a car after it's been put into neutral, it will come to a stop, because we're no longer giving it the momentum, no longer giving it the gas. Likewise, when we disengage the gears of our mind, perhaps that pattern, that difficult, afflictive emotion, doesn't stop right away. But we're looking at it from a larger perspective. And we can simply watch it wind down and watch the momentum of that pattern dissipate.

Another way that we can experience wisdom is in seeing the causes and conditions of a pattern as it unfolds. Looking at a familiar pattern, perhaps one that recurs for you—each time you look at that pattern, each time you recognize, "Oh, there it is again, there it is again," if we can look at that pattern again and again and again, the mind begins to gather data about that pattern. Each time that pattern appears, there's a little bit more data about it. And the wisdom of the mind begins to put that data together, begins to understand some of the consequences of that pattern.

In my early explorations around anger, for instance, I began to recognize that initially my sense of anger was that it was going to cause the person I was angry at suffering. I was completely oblivious to the suffering it was causing me. Each time I looked at it, each time I brought my attention to that pattern over and over again, the mind got its education that this is suffering, this is dukkha.

This kind of wisdom of the mind putting together these patterns—there's an analogy that I find resonates with this. I just imagine way back in the time of early humans, before we had any books about the stars, any shared knowledge about what's up there in the heavens. Every night, on a clear night, people might go out and look up at the stars. Each night you look up—that's the pattern. Over and over again, over the course of many nights, many years, many observations, the understanding of patterns began to develop. The understanding that there's a kind of background of stars, and then there seem to be some lights that move through that background pattern. Over the years, seeing how those happen in a regular pattern. It's phenomenal to me to think about how many observations it took to understand what we understand about the stars.

Our understanding of our own minds unfolds in this way. We observe over and over again. The mind begins to put together the patterns. The mind begins to understand the patterns. The mind begins to understand: these experiences are suffering, these are the situations that lead to that suffering, these are ways to move away from that suffering. Again, this is wisdom at work, the wisdom of the mind.

As the mind starts to see these causes and conditions, the recognition develops over time. This anger—this is suffering. Any afflictive emotion, grasping, craving. Craving is one that can be hard initially to recognize as suffering in itself. We're so focused on the thing we want and the idea that when we get it, everything's going to be great, that we don't actually see that in the process of that getting, there's a cramping and a holding. The very wanting itself is suffering.

The mind seeing this over and over again helps to explain, I think, why it takes so long for us to get it. Craving is suffering. The pattern has been so entrenched: get what you want, you'll be happy. Get what you want, you'll be happy. And we miss the suffering of the craving itself. The more we can see that, the more we recognize that, the more the mind begins to understand it. The mind knows viscerally—the body and mind know—that craving is suffering. And then as the mind sees itself heading in that direction, it begins to recognize: that way is not such a good way to go.

I think I said this a couple weeks ago—that the organism kind of inclines towards well-being, but it fundamentally misunderstands how well-being is to be found. This exploration with mindfulness begins to reveal much more deeply how true well-being can be found. Seeing the causes and conditions, seeing that this way lies suffering, the mind choosing not to go there—that's wisdom.

Sometimes it can feel like we bring in the wisdom of that. We see this habit, and we think, "I want that thing, but I've seen over and over again that it leads to suffering, so let me just not do that." It can sometimes feel like an intentional choice, and there is wisdom in that as well. And sometimes it's more like the mind just knows: no, we don't do that. We don't go there. That way lies suffering. Different levels of wisdom arising.

We can also see wisdom in the recognition that something happening in the present moment is just a phenomenon happening in the present moment. Many of you have reported this recognition—that a thought is arising, even a very charged kind of thought, and the recognition that that thought is just a thought in the present moment. It's just a phenomenon arising in the mind. In that seeing of thoughts as phenomena arising in the present mind, often there's a recognition that there's been a cause for that thought. Sometimes that recognition of "this is just a thought" comes with the understanding that it's just arising as a phenomenon—a set of causes and conditions have created that thought. And so that begins to point us to the recognition that this thought is not mine, it's not me, it's not who I am.

Another way we can see wisdom, and this one's a little different, is seeing the non-arising of defilement, of kilesa—mind states that are based in greed, aversion, and delusion. In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha talks about seeing the non-arising of the hindrances in particular. He says that one recognizes the non-arising of a hindrance. On one retreat somebody asked, "Well, how does one see the non-arising of something?" I reflected on it and came up with four different ways that I've explored in my own practice. This is actually an interesting thing to recognize—when something is not arising, especially when it's a hindrance or a pattern so familiar to you, a familiar pattern of depression or loneliness.

or of anxiety.

If you can recognize when it is not present, when it's not arising, that does a great deal—it really helps to undermine our belief in its "me-ness." When we see that it's not always there, we see that it's not me. So it shows us the impermanence of those states, and it begins to poke holes in the identity we have around them, to recognize when they are not present.

So how do we recognize when these defilements don't arise?

The first way I reflected on is through the teaching of right effort, which talks about a kind of skillful avoiding. With right effort, we cultivate the effort—I think the way it's phrased is—we cultivate the effort to the non-arising of unwholesome states that have not arisen. One way to explore this is to recognize that as we examine our experience,

we see certain things land us in suffering. Perhaps it's a good idea not to follow through on those conditions. So we begin to see the conditions that take us to suffering, and we can actively refrain from going there. We learn through experience what leads us to the defilement, and we avoid that.

Now, you might think—for instance, this can be kind of subtle—you might find yourself getting annoyed in the lunch line. And you might think, "Well, the way to avoid that defilement of annoyance is to avoid the lunch line, to just wait for twenty minutes and go when it's empty." And that is one way to avoid that defilement.

Another way to avoid or protect—to put it in a more positive way, we protect our mind from defilement—is through mindfulness: standing in the lunch line and observing our minds, beginning to see what are the conditions for that annoyance. It's not just the standing in the lunch line; there are some other things going on. So using mindfulness as a form of protection there. We can acknowledge what things lead us toward a defilement and avoid those things. That's the simplest way of seeing the non-arising.

Another way is one that I think all of you can reflect on, and that is this: in your practice, you have had experiences. You are experiencing less suffering now than you did before. This kind of reflection—seeing some situation arise here and now in the moment, some suffering around a particular situation—you may be able through reflection to recognize, "Hmm, five years ago this would have been a far more serious thing for my mind." So essentially seeing there's less suffering now than there was five years ago. Again, this is using reflection, but it is a way of connecting with the fact that hindrances, defilements are not arising.

Probably the most direct way to see the non-arising of a defilement is when the mindfulness gets more continuous and the mind can begin to see intention—the seeing of intention in the mind before an action follows. We can begin to see the intention toward an outburst, or the intention toward even an emotional state, the intention to say something or do something unwholesome. In seeing the arising of that intention toward something unwholesome, if the mind is really clearly present to see that unwholesome intention arise, the mind can let go of it in that way I was talking about before. Knowing that that way lies suffering, the mind can simply let go.

And in that split second of seeing the arising of that intention and seeing the mind let go of it, you directly in that moment see the non-arising of that suffering. It does not arise. You see that if you'd not been there, if you'd not been present to see that unwholesome intention, the mind would have just picked right up on that intention and gotten

on that train and done that thing and fallen into the suffering. So as the mindfulness gets more continuous, you can actually more directly see this non-arising as an actual experience.

The last way I thought of in terms of seeing the non-arising of defilement is essentially the knowing that defilement is not present in the mind when there is love, compassion, joy, or equanimity present. You recognize the mind is balanced. Defilement is not here. And that's a feeling as well—the mind is free of defilement in that moment.

I'd like to also take a few minutes to distinguish between different kinds of insights. I've been talking about the insights in our practice around seeing into anicca, impermanence; dukkha, unreliability; anatta, not-self. There are also psychological insights that we have. We begin to see how our personal patterns were created, our particular flavors of difficulty. And this can be one of the great benefits of our practice—that we begin to see into how our own minds have been trained.

For myself, I think I mentioned the pattern of self-hatred as one that was pretty predominant for me. On one retreat, I began seeing into that pattern from the perspective of my life, my history, my conditioning, and how it was related to relationships. And there was a really clear recognition at one point of the interplay of those relationships and a big opening. It felt like a big opening around the self-hatred, a feeling of compassion and forgiveness in terms of the various relationships that had been at play in its creation. I really saw this is causes and conditions in a way. I saw so much how, of course, the self-hatred is part of my life.

It was such a feeling of opening that I really felt like there'd been a big breakthrough around that self-hatred. An understanding had come there. That's what I would call a psychological insight, because it was a connection to understanding the history and how that history came into play around that pattern.

And there were a few days that I was without self-hatred after that particular recognition. But I was surprised when, some days later, the pattern of self-hatred came back just as strong. That psychological insight had given me some understanding of the conditions at play, but it hadn't really deeply undercut the pattern. I was surprised. I actually thought the mind had let go of that pattern. I saw that no, it hadn't.

But what I did see—the benefit of that psychological insight, a great benefit—was that it gave me a deeper understanding that yes, this is from causes and conditions. So it did take some of the identification out of that pattern. It took some of the personal

sting out of that pattern of self-hatred. And so it was a little easier, a little less threatening, when that self-hatred arose. It was a little easier to meet the pattern every time it came up. And it came up again and again on that retreat.

So psychological insights have a role in our practice. They definitely support us.

The vipassanā insights came later. On that same retreat, I ended up having a deep insight into just the thoughts around self-hatred. After several more weeks of looking at this pattern, spending so much time with it, one evening I was just watching the pattern over and over again. And at some moment, I saw the very arising of the thought that was associated with that self-hatred—the barest little filament of that thought coming up. In seeing that arising, with mindfulness pretty present and continuous, the mind in that instant saw: this is just a thought. It has no reality.

That was really an insight into the ephemeral nature of the thoughts around that pattern. That insight was surprising, actually. In that very moment of seeing that this is just a thought, I went from self-hatred to bliss in a split second. And then there was this thought that occurred to me: "Oh, never again. I'll never feel self-hatred again." The next thought was: "No, this insight is for here and now. This recognition is the causes and conditions that come together in this moment to let me see this."

So it was an insight into the ephemeral nature, the anattā nature, of that thought. And it did have a very deep impact on that pattern. That recognition allowed a major uprooting of it. Not that it's completely gone, not that the thoughts are gone. What seems to be gone is the belief in those thoughts. And in a split second, that seemed to happen.

The vipassanā insights have this power—this really deep power—to loosen our holding, our clinging, our attachments. They can have that power. And there are many times when it is just seeing it again and again and again, like the wearing away of something. Over and over we see it, like looking up at the stars, and the mind slowly puts together the understanding, and the wisdom grows.

CHAPTER 88

Living the Eightfold Path

Andrea Fella · 58 min

In this comprehensive talk, Andrea Fella illuminates the Noble Eightfold Path as the Buddha's practical prescription for liberation, beginning with a reading from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11)—the Buddha's first discourse. She explains how the path's three sections address progressively subtler layers of mental defilement: ethical conduct (sīla) counters harmful actions, mental cultivation (samādhi) prevents unwholesome states from arising in the mind, and wisdom (paññā) uproots the deepest underlying tendencies.

Fella offers a particularly accessible explanation of how these underlying tendencies function like neural pathways—not always active, but easily triggered—and how only direct insight can transform them. She explores the three fundamental misperceptions that sustain suffering: taking what is impermanent to be permanent, what is unreliable to be a source of happiness, and what is not-self to be self. Through a vivid personal story of suddenly shifting from argumentative intellectual identity to childlike joy at a passing truck, she demonstrates how the sense of self constantly changes yet we fail to notice.

The talk emphasizes that retreat practice is not abstract—every moment of sitting, walking, and even service work actively cultivates the path. Fella grounds the seemingly transcendent goal of nibbāna in the Buddha's own definition: simply the absence of greed, hatred, and delusion. This freedom, she reminds us, is "visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise."

I'd like to start this evening by reading the first two paragraphs of the very first discourse the Buddha gave.

Thus have I heard. On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Varanasi in the deer park at Isipatana. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five thus: "Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana."

"And what, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana? It is this noble eightfold path, that is: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana."

I like remembering that the first discourse of the Buddha, which is often remembered as being the discourse on the Four Noble Truths—which it is—begins with this enjoinder to practice the Eightfold Path. It is this Eightfold Path that leads to liberation. I think of the Eightfold Path as the practical side of the Buddha's teaching, or one of the practical sides. The teaching he offers is really a very practical one, and the Eightfold Path is his prescription for us to come to peace, to knowledge, to understanding for ourselves. As he says in this initial aspect of the discourse, this leads to nibbana—freedom, freedom from suffering, freedom from dukkha.

This is what I would like to explore tonight: a little bit about the Eightfold Path, just as a reminder of what these eight aspects are. You have all probably heard many teachings on the Eightfold Path. The key piece I'd like to explore is my understanding about how this path actually does its work on us—how, if we engage with it, if we practice these teachings of right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, this will lead us to peace.

The Eightfold Path, instead of being seen as eight separate practices, is sometimes divided into three aspects: an aspect related to wisdom, an aspect related to ethical conduct, and an aspect related to cultivating our minds. The wisdom aspect comprises right understanding and right intention. The ethical conduct aspect comprises right speech, right action, and right livelihood. The mental cultivation aspect comprises wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration.

In this typical ordering of the path, beginning with wise understanding and right intention, the path begins with some kind of wisdom, some kind of orientation towards what we are trying to do. In this case, the orientation the Buddha offers us is how we can free ourselves from dukkha. The beginning stages of the Eightfold Path involve understanding this dukkha—beginning to understand what this stress, this dissatisfaction, this suffering, this unreliability is, and how it's caused.

The way we struggle in our lives largely comes about because we are resisting the way things are, or we're trying to hold on to things to keep them the way we'd like them to be. We think, "If only I could arrange my world so that I could have everything I'd like and get rid of everything I don't like." Endlessly we engage in this activity. I think we don't really believe that any one thing is going to do it for us forever, but we do believe there's some way we can just keep arranging, keep getting what we want and getting rid of what we don't want, and that somehow we can hold it together on this teetering edge and have happiness that way.

Rainer Maria Rilke expresses the condition we find ourselves in. An excerpt from his Eighth Duino Elegy: "And we, spectators, always, everywhere, turn towards the world of objects. It fills us. We arrange it. It breaks down. We rearrange it, then break down ourselves."

The Buddha recognized that this endless rearranging, this endless trying to construct, create, hold on to things we like and get rid of things we don't like—this very process of arranging itself, the mind that thinks it needs to arrange—this is the source of dukkha.

Wise understanding begins with a recognition, perhaps even just a hearing of this: that the way we suffer, the way we end up dissatisfied in our lives, is largely about how our minds are working, this idea that we can arrange things to suit ourselves. Initially, wise understanding begins with an intellectual understanding. I talked about this last week—the three aspects of wisdom. We begin by hearing knowledge, hearing wisdom, taking it in, and then reflecting on it. How do I understand this? Does this make sense to me?

Wise understanding is largely about understanding dukkha, understanding what it might mean to recognize that our minds create this. The primary definition of wise understanding is that we begin to recognize and understand the truth of the Four Noble Truths: that there is suffering, that suffering has a cause, that it is possible for this suffering to come to an end, and that there is a path for that. This teaching of the Four Noble Truths really addresses dukkha, the problem the Buddha was trying to solve. It addresses dukkha. It addresses the cause of dukkha.

and understanding that there's this cause and effect relationship in our experience—when we engage in certain activities of mind and body, certain results happen.

The Four Noble Truths expresses this cause and effect relationship. As we engage in that rearranging activity, inevitably we end up suffering. Either because we're not getting what we want, we're not able to succeed in that process of rearranging, and suffer-

ing hits us immediately. Or we do get what we want—for a while we have a sense of happiness, thinking "I figured it out, this is right, this is it"—and yet the inevitability of the decay, the ending, the dissolution of conditions will lead to struggle, suffering, sadness, loss.

And so the Four Noble Truths acknowledges this cause and effect relationship. The understanding is that if we let go of the cause of suffering, it is this very letting go that leads us to the ending of suffering. And the path, the Eightfold Path, is what we can cultivate that will lead us to this ending.

When we hear this teaching, perhaps it hits us at a particular moment. For myself, hearing something of these teachings at a moment when I had really hit bottom, there was a sense of "there's somebody out there who seems to have a sense that there's a way out of this suffering. Why don't I try this?" Even though I didn't really understand. Even though I didn't have a sense of how it would work. There was hearing the teaching, having some confidence in what I was reading, what I was hearing—that this is possible, this freedom is possible.

This engages intention—the intention to act, the intention to step onto the path, to begin the practices. This is wise intention, the second aspect, the wisdom aspect of the path.

So we find ourselves interested in, exploring, engaging with practices, and the next aspect of the Eightfold Path offers us some fundamental grounding practices in ethical conduct. Again, because the fundamental exploration is around non-harming, around not creating dukkha, leading away from struggle and suffering, it makes sense that this ethical conduct is oriented towards non-harming. If we find ourselves engaged in activity that's harming, we are creating suffering, whether for ourselves or for others. And so this aspect of the Eightfold Path encourages us to engage in behaviors that are skillful: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood.

I think of the ethical conduct aspect of the Eightfold Path as harmonizing our relationships with the world—and also harmonizing our relationships with ourselves. Because as that sutta Akinchino read some days ago, the sutta of the acrobats, the young little girl acrobat says, "By protecting you, watch out for yourself and I'll watch out for myself, and that way we'll protect each other." And the Buddha took it a step further, recognizing that yes, when we protect ourselves we protect others, and when we protect others we protect ourselves. Through protecting others through this conduct of the Eightfold Path—through wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood—we protect ourselves. We protect ourselves from remorse. We protect ourselves from unwholesome states of mind through acting skillfully.

So we explore this possibility of engaging peacefully in the world, living with a heart that inclines towards non-harming.

The last three factors of the Eightfold Path, in the mental development section—wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—the fact that mental development is considered part of the path is really necessary because it is in our minds that suffering is created in the first place. This is a real shift of perspective. Before we start training, before we meet the practice, before we meet this teaching, I think very few of us would question that having what we want makes us happy. So this mental training is about reorienting ourselves around where happiness actually comes from. And it takes some training.

This mental cultivation—wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—we look at our minds, we turn and explore what's going on, how our patterns work. We begin to see dukkha, we begin to see dukkha arising, with the instruction to understand dukkha as the orientation for wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration. This is how wisdom comes into this aspect of the path. Our instructions for practice, how we apply wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, is directly related to wisdom. Understand suffering. Look at your dukkha. See how it's created. Understand the cause. We begin, through the understanding of our dukkha, to really recognize how it's caused, that it is caused in our own minds.

This process of applying effort and mindfulness to our experience gives our mind an education. The organism itself begins to recognize, to learn that certain patterns of engaging, certain patterns of mind associated with wanting, with greed, with not wanting, with aversion, with confusion, with cloudedness, with misperceiving reality—that these things lead to or do not lead to well-being. And fortunately our organism wants to go towards well-being, so it starts to let go of those movements in that direction.

This very exploration—wise effort, wise mindfulness applied with this wisdom of the Eightfold Path—begins to lead us towards happiness. And the bringing together of wise effort and wise mindfulness begins to cultivate wise concentration. Continuity of our attention on our experience is one definition of concentration. And it is that very continuity of mindfulness that begins to reveal

how our minds do what they do—how our minds get caught by anger, by frustration, how our minds get caught by desire, by pride, how we get completely confused.

And so the mental development factors—wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—are the last three factors of the Eightfold Path, but they lead us back to wisdom. Not just intellectual understanding, but experiential recognition. I explored some

of this last week: the ways we experience wisdom directly in our practice, the shifts of perspective, the seeing and the letting go. We experience for ourselves, and our organism begins to recognize what are the things we need to let go of, what are the things we need to cultivate to move towards happiness.

The Buddha pointed to this quite directly. He said, "Develop concentration. One who is concentrated understands things as they really are." So he's directly pointing to this last factor of the Eightfold Path, wise concentration, as leading to the ability to see clearly. And what does one understand as it really is? One understands as it really is, "This is suffering." One understands as it really is, "This is the origin of suffering." One understands as it really is, "This is the cessation of suffering." One understands as it really is, "This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering." Develop concentration. One who is concentrated understands things as they really are.

So this points to how the Eightfold Path is a cycle. We develop our minds, we cultivate our ethical conduct, we develop our minds, and this supports our being able to see more deeply, which gives us a deeper actual wisdom, an actual meeting of wisdom.

We are living this Eightfold Path here on retreat, moment after moment. It's not an abstract thing. Actually, every moment you are here, you are cultivating these factors of the path. Just your presence here is an expression of wise intention, of wise understanding. The fact that you've chosen to come here and engage—when you sit, it's an expression of wise understanding and wise intention. What you are exploring, the way you see things, bringing wisdom to bear on your experience, then beginning to see that—this is wise understanding and wise intention.

Wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood—sometimes we don't think about how these are actively being cultivated on retreat. When I was in Burma, my teacher Sayadaw U Janaka gave a Dhamma talk about how we were practicing the Eightfold Path in every single moment of our practice. I found this really inspiring, actually, to recognize that I am walking the path through being here on retreat.

His explanation of how we were cultivating wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood is that they are fulfilled through abstinence. Primarily, wise speech and wise action are defined in terms of not engaging in specific speech and actions. The precepts that we take reflect many of them: refraining from killing living beings, refraining from taking what's not given, refraining from sexual misconduct, refraining from false speech. Mostly we're silent here, so we fulfill our wise speech through silence. U Janaka expressed wise livelihood as being the fact that you're here on retreat—you're living the Dhamma livelihood, essentially temporary monastics here on retreat.

It's helpful, I think, to recognize that these factors are active in our practice. We don't often think about things when they're absent; they don't land on us too much when they're absent. So it can help to reflect, to recognize: yes, my ethical conduct is being cultivated here.

And I see also that there is a wholesome side of the ethical conduct being cultivated as we practice here. We're actively cultivating generosity as we engage in our service work, our yogi jobs. This center would not function if you all did not participate in this. The bathrooms wouldn't get cleaned. The floors wouldn't get swept and mopped. The dishes would pile up in the kitchen. It would be a mess. And so as you're engaging in that—even just keeping your own room clean is an act of service for the next yogi that will come to take your space. This is an active cultivation of generosity, of kindness. Reflecting on your service here as being an active cultivation of the path—not just something to finish up and get done with.

If you can recall this service aspect—this quality of generosity, kindness, and compassion in what we're doing here—it can truly support your practice.

The third cluster of the Eightfold Path comprises wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. This is the most obvious aspect of what we're cultivating here: moment to moment bringing wise effort, infused with wise understanding and wise intention, to bear on how we pay attention to our experience. Moment after moment we explore: What's happening now? What's my relationship to this now?

We are doing this not as an abstraction but as actual practice. And so what's the point? The Buddha expressed it clearly in that first discourse. He says practicing this leads to peace, leads to liberation, leads to freedom, to nibbana.

Cultivating the Eightfold Path in practical ways tends to make us more contented in our lives. We end up having a more easeful life, with less reactivity. This is one benefit of the path. And yet it's also understood to lead to the deepest kind of peace—not just having a little easier time at work or in relationships, but deeply letting go of the roots of suffering in our minds.

So we speak of freedom, enlightenment, nibbana. That word *enlightenment* is out there in the world. I certainly encountered it in my twenties before I ever met the teaching of the Buddha, and I had some idea about what it might be. Usually the idea involved some kind of mind-blowing something or other, and then forever after somehow being disconnected from everything—floating around, not really... I don't know what I thought, but it didn't have much to do with living life, my sense of what enlightenment meant.

The Buddha's actual definition of nibbana is quite different. He says it's the absence of greed, the absence of hatred, the absence of delusion. To me, that's an inspiring definition. It doesn't sound like it's necessarily disconnected from living life. I could envision living life without those qualities. This brings enlightenment right into the world.

I'd like to read you two texts on nibbana:

The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called nibbana.

Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbana—immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.

Visible in this life. To me, that again brings it into the world, into something that is not abstract, not a transcendent kind of thing—although the description here does say one experiences no mental pain and grief. In some ways that does sound transcendent. And yet we can imagine perhaps, even now, what it might be like to experience no mental pain or grief. That's freedom.

Since freedom is understood to be the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion, we might ask: How does the Eightfold Path help us let go of these? How does this path help us come to the end of greed, aversion, and delusion?

These three are sometimes referred to as the three roots of suffering, the three root *kilesas* or defilements—the three root qualities, the activities in our mind that make us get caught, that lead us to suffering, to mental pain and grief. All the qualities of mind that put us into suffering are somehow rooted in these three.

The commentaries speak about the assorted kilesas as having a layered quality to them. Some are obvious, coming out in our behavior. Some are less obvious, arising just in our minds without manifesting in our behavior.

This is an interesting teaching to explore. The most obvious form of suffering comes out into our behavior—we act out through our speech, through our bodies. We perhaps actively harm somebody, we yell, we lie, we speak harshly, we harm with our sexual energy. These are ways we engage when we are not clear, when greed, aversion, and delusion manifest through our bodies. That's the most obvious layer of kilesa.

A bit more subtle is the layer of kilesa that, rather than manifesting in behavior, comes into our minds. We experience hostility, anger, frustration, pride in our minds but don't necessarily let it out into the world.

That's a subtler layer of kilesa, of defilement in our minds.

The most subtle layer of kilesa is called "latent tendency" or "underlying tendency." I think this is familiar to all of you. There's a way that some of our patterns, some of the most common ways we get caught, operate at this level. For myself, anger was one of those. I had a strong habit of anger, and it wasn't always operating—it wasn't always present. I wasn't always angry. But generally I had a sense that the anger was not present at the moment because conditions happened to be good for me at that time, and that it wouldn't actually take that much for it to arise. Somebody looking at me funny, or a computer breaking down—it doesn't take much before that anger flares up.

So this underlying tendency is like those ruts in our mind, or if you think of it neurologically, the patterns of neurons that maybe aren't being fired at the moment, but it might not take too much for something to trigger that pattern. We can think of the patterns in our neural circuits almost like these underlying tendencies—not active all the time, but there as a possibility. That's the most subtle kind of defilement.

Now, the Buddhist teaching addresses all of these layers—not just the layers that come out into our behavior and into our own minds, but actually this underlying layer as well. Each of the three sections of the Eightfold Path addresses one of these layers of defilement.

The ethical aspect of the Eightfold Path addresses the most obvious layer, the layer in which we act out. When we are committed to engaging with wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood—committed to refraining from acting out—this supports us not to engage with the defilements that impel us to act unskillfully. So this aspect of the training supports us to let go of those bodily and verbal unskillful actions. The ethical aspect of the path counters the tendency towards transgression, towards acting out. In a way, we can use the precepts as a mindfulness bell. If we find ourselves getting ready to hit a spider on the wall, it's like, "Wait a minute, I'm engaging with the precepts here. Let me use one of those bug catchers instead and take it out of the room."

The mental cultivation aspect of the Eightfold Path also counters this tendency towards acting out, because we begin to see the arising of these qualities in our mind. We begin to see, "Oh, there's anger coming up." And the very seeing of that unskillful mind state arising gives us a choice about whether to act on it or not. So mental cultivation—

wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration—also supports not acting out of defilements. The seeing of the defilement as it arises in our mind gives us the choice. We turn towards the experience instead of acting on it.

Wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration also counter the tendency towards these qualities arising in our minds. We cultivate concentration, and as we cultivate concentration we begin to feel the bliss of not having the hindrances arise. Concentration holds the hindrances at bay—the qualities of ill will, of sense desire, of sloth and torpor, of restlessness, of doubt. As the mind moves into concentration, these qualities stop arising in our minds. So this counters the arising of these defilements in our minds. This feels really good—and it's temporary. Those underlying tendencies are not necessarily uprooted by simply resting in concentration. It puts us in a state where they're not active, but it doesn't necessarily alter the terrain underneath.

So the subtlest levels of defilement, these underlying tendencies—this is where the wisdom aspect of the path comes in. It really takes a radical shift of understanding to begin to loosen those underlying tendencies. And this fundamental shift, this shift of perspective, doesn't come just through thinking about the Four Noble Truths—reflecting on, "Well, this is dukkha, and this is what I did, and this is how it felt, and what I did last week, and maybe I should try this." It takes meeting dukkha directly, seeing the cause, allowing the release. It takes the direct experience. So effort, mindfulness, and concentration create the possibility, the ground from which wisdom can grow. And that wisdom begins to uproot these underlying tendencies.

These underlying tendencies are deeply connected with ignorance, with not understanding. Our usual definition of ignorance is something like a lack of knowledge—that we don't have some bit of information, a kind of passive state of just not knowing something.

The ignorance that underlies greed, aversion, and delusion is much more insidious than simply not knowing something. It's actually an active misunderstanding of reality. We walk through the world actively misunderstanding, misperceiving, misinterpreting experience through filters of perception.

There are three primary misunderstandings. We take what's impermanent to be permanent. We take what is unreliable to be reliable, as a place where we could actually find happiness. And we take what is not self to be self.

As we train the mind through wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration, we begin to see these misunderstandings. Little holes get poked through them. We begin to see at certain times that experience is in no way permanent—it is continually

flowing and changing. There's nothing in our experience that could possibly be reliable because it's like sand slipping through our fingers all the time. Things don't even last for a moment. Because they don't last, they are inherently unreliable. We start to see this directly for ourselves, and this begins to undercut those misperceptions, those misunderstandings.

We take what is not self to be self. We misunderstand, we misperceive our own experience to be an enduring entity that has control over itself. And yet when we start to look at what we think this enduring entity is, we see that it doesn't last either. Look at what you are experiencing as "me." You'll find it doesn't last very long. We go through so many different iterations of "me" in a day, and we begin to see that they actually have very little relationship to each other.

One time on retreat, this seeing of how different selves have no relationship to each other became very clear to me. I was doing walking meditation in front of the retreat center and was replaying in my mind a scene from the morning question and answer period, having an argument with this person who was asking questions. I was noticing this. I could see it, and I was suffering over it too. This was not pleasant. I could really feel the identity around this, coalesced around being right. I was right. I was intelligent. I was analytical. I was argumentative. I was right. All of that. I could feel all of it, experiencing it, noticing it, recognizing it. I saw no way out of it but just kept experiencing it.

And then, as things happen, conditions changed. I was doing the walking meditation and a truck drove up—a big delivery truck that made a lot of noise. It banged and crashed, the door slammed, brakes squealed. In a split second, my mind shifted and said something like, "It's a truck! Oh my gosh, it's a truck!" The feeling was like I became a two-year-old, just reveling in the joy of truck. In that moment, there was simply no relationship between those two selves. It became very clear.

So explore what you take to be self. You'll see it doesn't endure.

We start the path with understanding, taking in knowledge, taking in teachings. We begin to apply them, seeing some things for ourselves—this wisdom, seeing some of the truth of the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. We see that for ourselves. The wisdom begins to become internalized. And yet these insights too are often impermanent. We find ourselves in a space of understanding.

We see thoughts arise in our mind and we recognize these are just thoughts. These have no bearing on anything really. They're just thoughts arising and passing. There's experience coming and going. We find ourselves in a space where we're not getting

caught by things. Somebody jumps ahead of us and gets the last little bit of carrot in the salad and it's like, "Oh, look at that. Wow. Impermanence." We're in that space for a while.

And then maybe a day later, or even a few minutes later, something else happens and it's not there anymore. When we're in that space it can seem so obvious. It's just like, how can I not see this? How can I not recognize that the mind creates its own suffering? How can I not see this? It's so obvious. And yet, moments later, conditions change and it is no longer so obvious.

This doesn't have to be a problem. It's not a mistake. It is a change of conditions. And there is a way in which that wisdom has gone in. We've seen things from a different perspective. We have experienced it from a different perspective. And so we can now begin to recognize when we are not seeing it from that perspective.

It's kind of like we've seen things clearly. We recognize, "Yes, that's what white is. That's what white looks like." And then we begin to see when we're not in that space where things are flowing easily. It's like, "Oh, this is off-white. Or this is gray, even." So we begin to recognize that we're carrying misperception. We're carrying ignorance. We're carrying delusion with us.

Sometimes people ask me, how can you see delusion? Partly, you can start to see it as you move into these spaces of clarity. When you move back into a space of delusion, you now can see the difference. You now can recognize, "Yes, the mind is operating from a place of delusion right now. Okay, let me watch this. Let me take care here. I know that the mind tends to get caught when it's in this kind of space. So let me watch."

So it's not necessarily a problem. It's not a problem—we just continue. We continue, we continue, we engage with this path. When we've seen impermanence, unsatisfactoriness at a deep level, it gets easier to see through those misperceptions.

Living this path, exploring how to live this path, supports us to move towards that freedom—first in little moments, and then the promise, the direction the Buddha says this heads. It's like slanting, sloping towards the sea, this path. Leading towards freedom. Leading towards Nibbāna. In this very life.

CHAPTER 89

Wise Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · 58 min

In this opening talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a detailed exploration of what distinguishes wise or right mindfulness (sammā sati) from ordinary awareness. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), she carefully examines the Buddha's repeated instruction: "One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world." Each element of this phrase reveals a specific quality of attention that transforms mindfulness into a liberating practice.

Fella explains that "abiding" (viharati) suggests a receptive, restful quality—like dwelling at home—while "ardent" brings balanced, persistent effort. "Contemplating the body as a body" points to experiencing phenomena directly rather than through concepts and identities. "Clearly comprehending" (sampajañña) includes recognizing that feelings, thoughts, and perceptions arise, persist, and pass away. The phrase "free from desires and discontent" indicates we practice not to get or get rid of something, but to understand how the mind creates suffering.

Through a personal story of working with loneliness after a relationship ended, Fella illustrates how continuous wise mindfulness can reveal the construction of suffering and naturally dissolve reactive patterns. She emphasizes that mindfulness joined with wisdom—understanding impermanence and the unreliable nature of experience—is what truly frees the heart. This talk provides essential orientation for sustained retreat practice and daily life alike.

Your first full day on retreat. One day down, forty-one to go. One day down, eighty-nine to go. Sometimes it's like that in our minds. On these long retreats especially, we keep a calendar in our minds.

Before I begin the talk proper, I'd just like to express my great appreciation for the diversity of this group, and to say that my journey towards cultural humility began a few years ago. Much as with mindfulness practice—the more we see, the more we see that we don't know, the deeper we recognize that our understanding needs to deepen—in very much the same way, I have seen that the more I understand, the more I see I don't understand. This lesson in cultural humility is one of ongoing learning for me. I'm open to feedback, so if you're so moved, you're welcome to leave me a note.

Tonight I'd like to speak about mindfulness, a key aspect of what we're doing here. I'd like to spend some time exploring this quality: what it means, how we use it, how we practice with it, how it's helpful for us.

We all have a kind of intuitive sense of what mindfulness means. Most of us here have practiced for quite a while and have a sense of what it means for us. This quality in general evokes words like being present, being aware, perhaps witnessing, knowing what's happening while it's happening. That was my own working definition of mindfulness for quite a while.

I see mindfulness as a reflective capacity of our minds. It's a function that allows this mind-body system to be aware of itself. It reflects the processes happening in the body and mind, kind of like a mirror does. It's a perfectly ordinary process, a capacity that our minds have—this reflective capacity, this capacity to know what's happening in the present moment. It's just a normal capacity of our minds. It functions. We know what's happening.

But what we don't really recognize or pay attention to is the fact that it is a process in our minds. We're not really cognizant, at least before we meet this practice, of mindfulness as a quality. Mindfulness happens to us, we become aware of something, and then we start thinking about it or planning about it or deciding what to do about it or thinking about what should happen next. We get our agendas going, our decision-making processes going. We don't typically recognize that something interesting has happened—that we've become aware of what's happening in the present moment.

I think it really took the brilliance of the Buddha to point out that this quality is really interesting, that it's special and will help us. But he didn't simply say, "be aware." He actually encouraged us to be aware from a particular perspective—one that will support us in moving towards happiness, moving away from the way our mind gets caught in wanting things to be different, the way our minds get caught in wanting things to be reliable that aren't reliable, the way our minds construct identities and believe in them, the way we want things to be permanent. The Buddha highlighted a particular way of paying attention that supports this understanding, that supports a deepening of our understanding of how our minds get caught.

If you were to see somebody on the street who was angry, and you went up to that person—just a random person on the street—and said, "Do you know that you're angry?" they would probably say, "Yes, I know I'm angry. What do you think? Are you nuts? Of course I know I'm angry." And then if you were to say, "Well, notice your anger," they would say, "I am noticing my anger. I'm angry at this person or this thing or this situation."

Telling somebody to notice their reactivity, to be aware of their reactivity, isn't quite enough. The Buddha is pointing to an additional perspective, a shift of perspective, one that includes an exploration of what it feels like to be angry from the inside. What is the experience of anger? What is the experience of being a human being? What is that like? And recognizing with discernment—for instance, in the situation around anger—when anger is connected to a situation that is perhaps unjust and needs some addressing, but addressing it from a heart filled with compassion rather than a heart filled with hate.

The Buddha suggested these shifts of perspective: look at experience in and of itself; see if we can act not out of reactivity, but out of kindness, compassion, love. This points to the shift of perspective that the Buddhadharma offers us.

One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, has a kind of famous quote, the title of one of his books: awareness alone is not enough.

It takes wisdom joined with awareness to have mindfulness be a capacity that frees our minds and helps us to understand our minds.

So the Buddha actually recommended that we cultivate right mindfulness. And the definition of right mindfulness or wise mindfulness is often described as the cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness. I'm sure most of you are familiar with this teaching. The four establishments of mindfulness being: established mindfulness on the body; established mindfulness on feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral; established mindfulness of knowing mind states; and established mindfulness understanding how experience either helps move us towards freedom or keeps us caught in the cycles of suffering. Understanding the patterns of our minds that lead towards freedom or towards suffering—these four foundations of mindfulness.

In this text, in the Buddha's main instructions to us on how to practice mindfulness, there's a repeated phrase that he repeats for each of these four foundations. He says, "One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world. One abides contemplating feelings as feelings, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world." And likewise for mind states and dhammas.

This phrase really encapsulates in a way what he means by right mindfulness. And so I'd like to look at this phrase, look at essentially each word in this phrase and see if we can understand what is this perspective. What is the perspective the Buddha is offering us with mindfulness? It's not simply awareness. It's not simply being aware.

The first word that I'd like to look at is "abides." Just allow that word to land in your experience. How does it land for you? Abiding. The word abiding is translating the Pali word *viharati*, which is related to the term used in the brahmavihara practice—the divine abidings, the divine abodes. That literally means something like home or dwelling. Dwelling, contemplating, dwelling, abiding. To me, this calls up or evokes qualities of rest, of being at home, of contentment, of receptivity. Abiding doesn't feel like a doing to me. To me, this points to the possibility of the open, relaxed, receptive quality to our mindfulness practice that Carol was pointing to during some of the instructions this morning. Abiding in mindfulness.

The next phrase is "contemplating," and in this case we'll take one: contemplating the body as a body, or contemplating feelings as feelings, or contemplating mind states as mind states. It's kind of a funny phrase, a funny framing for something. What does it mean to contemplate the body as a body?

Different translations can help to perhaps evoke some of the meaning here. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as "contemplating the body in and of itself." To me, this brings in the sense of contemplating, directing our attention to—and that's one of the meanings. Step back for a moment to the word contemplating: contemplating means to observe, to look at. So here the Buddha is suggesting we direct the attention perhaps. It can be understood as directing the attention to the body. It also could be understood as receiving the experience of the body. I think the translation allows for both understandings.

This term for contemplating is encouraging us to look at experience in a particular way. And in this case, look at experience, observe experience, observe the body as a body, observe the body in and of itself. To me this points to observing, knowing, recognizing the body as simply a body—not me, not who I am, not any of the identities I may pick up.

The commentary actually says something interesting about this phrase. It says that this repetition—contemplating the body in the body, contemplating feelings in feelings, mind states in mind states—indicates that we need to precisely determine the object of contemplation and isolate it from objects with which it might be confused. That's an interesting statement. What is it that the body might be confused with? Actually, we easily confuse our body with concepts. We confuse our body with self. So the encouragement here is to look at the body as a body, not through the lens of our ideas, our opinions, our agendas, or identities around the body. And likewise with the other foundations.

The actual experience of body is sensation, vibration, pulsing, tingling, hardness, heat, coolness, tightness, pressure.

moisture, dryness. The actual sensation of body is just sensation. We conflate this experience with concept very easily though.

You can get perhaps a little taste of this right now if you allow your attention to rest in the experience of your hand. What is that experience? What is the experience in that part of the body? Tingling, pulsing, moisture, pressure. Just feel into the texture of that experience.

And now look at your hand. Pick your hand up and look at it. Think about it as a hand, what it does for you. It reaches for things, it picks things up.

And now—what's your experience at this point of those sensations? For me, at least, there's a kind of distancing from those sensations, partly because we're thinking about the concept of hand. We're seeing it through the lens of a concept. This kind of thing happens to us all the time. We don't necessarily actually experience our body; we think about our body.

Another aspect of this contemplating the body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states, is that the instructions in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta are actually fairly non-interfering. The instructions on observing experience don't instruct us to do things with what we notice. They just say: notice it. Over and over again, these specific exercises in the text tell us simply to know things as they are. One knows, "This is a body." One knows, "This is pleasant. This is unpleasant." One knows, "This is greed. This is the absence of greed." One knows, "Joy has arisen." Not to do anything with it, but simply to know it.

The effect of this is really to encourage a non-interfering, non-reactive, non-judgmental awareness. This is a key to how the practice of mindfulness supports us in freedom.

So coming into your experience—what is it? Having explored those words a little bit: "One abides contemplating the body as a body." Or an alternative translation: "One abides observing the body in and of itself." Not a lot of doing in there. And yet it is directing us to a particular way of being aware.

The next word brings in some doing. "One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful." Ardency. This word brings in the energy, the effort component. We don't simply settle back and think, "Oh, if awareness is there, great. If not, well, it'll come back sometime." This is encouraging us to actively engage—alert, diligent, engaged, wholehearted. These are some words that people use to incline toward this quality.

It encourages a commitment to the practice. We have to do the practice. Bhante pointed to this last night: nobody can do it for us. This is the Buddha's encouragement—do the practice. He told Ānanda, "Practice now before it's too late. Be diligent."

So it's really pointing to a balanced yet sustained effort in our practice. It does have to be balanced.

Not too tight or too loose. The analogy that the Buddha used around balanced effort is that of tuning a musical instrument. If the string is too loose, it won't make beautiful music. If the string is too tight, it will snap. It's got to be tuned just right—just the right amount of tautness for the string to make beautiful music. So a balanced effort, not too tight and not too loose. This is an art, finding this balance. And I know we'll explore this throughout the retreat. It's a huge topic. I could spend an entire talk just on this one phrase: balanced, persistent effort.

This persistence also encourages continuity in our practice—moment after moment after moment. Something interesting here is that we now have two different words working together. We've got "abiding" and we've got "ardent." Abiding has the sense of settling back and resting. I asked one class to tell me what this word evoked for them, and somebody said, "The dude abides." I didn't know what this referred to until it was explained to me, but there's apparently this film, *The Big Lebowski*, and this is one of his mantras. The dude abides. Really a laid-back kind of place.

But we do have to engage as well. It's not just "the dude abides." It's possible—this is kind of a koan for our practice—to abide *and* engage. What does that mean? This has been a very interesting exploration in my own practice. They're not opposites. It's not either engage or abide. It's not either be diligent or be relaxed. What does it mean to be relaxed *and* diligent? That's the balance point of our practice.

We can settle back and see the mind receiving experience, kind of in the abiding mode. Settle back and receive experience. Carol was pointing to this this morning—just settling back and receiving sound. And yet, we can't just settle back. There needs to be that kind of meeting, meeting of experience. We can direct the attention. We can choose to pay attention, for instance, to the breath—directing the attention and then settling back and receiving. What is the experience of an in-breath? What is the experience of an out-breath? Abiding and diligent. Abiding with engagement.

The next word is "clearly comprehending." One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending. This word, *sampajañña* in Pali—one of the more familiar places it's used is in the first foundation of mindfulness. There's a section called clear comprehension, and it refers to being engaged with knowing your activities throughout the day. Continuity of awareness again, continuity of mindfulness.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it encourages us to notice when we're walking, when we're standing, when we're sitting. It encourages us to notice when we're going to and fro. It encourages us to notice when we're reaching and bending our limbs. It encourages us to know when we're urinating and defecating—it's in there—when we're eating, when we're talking, when we're remaining silent. All of our activities, it's encouraging us to cultivate mindfulness. So again, this points to continuity in this word, clearly comprehending.

This word also has additional meanings in other places in the texts. There's another definition for clear comprehension that I particularly like. It says that one's clear comprehension is recognizing feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away. Feelings, thoughts, and perceptions are known as they arise, persist, and pass away.

That is one's clear comprehension. This is pointing to the wisdom piece. How do we want to be paying attention? What is it that we want to be attuning to? Clear comprehension is encouraging us to attune to the process nature of experience. Not what the feelings are, but that they arise, persist, and pass away. Not what the thoughts are, but that they arise, persist, and pass away. Noticing objects as objects, noticing that experience appears, stays for a while, and vanishes.

This is a perspective the Buddha is offering as important for our freedom. And this perspective encourages us again towards non-reactive awareness, because we are simply recognizing what's arising in the moment. It's a feeling arising, persisting, passing away. If we imagine or reflect on what that means—a feeling arises, persists, and passes away and is known to do that—where is the room for reactivity? Where's the room for wishing it to be a different way?

The commentaries also indicate that this word, clearly comprehending, includes noticing the purpose for which we are paying attention, noticing the purpose for which we're doing something. And the purpose that the Buddha pointed to was freeing the heart from suffering. So again, this brings in wisdom. The wisdom of the Buddha is intimately connected to seeing suffering, seeing how it's connected to the impermanent,

unreliable nature of experience. Seeing how our minds—oh, do our minds wish things were permanent! Oh, do they wish they were reliable! And seeing how that very wish wraps us right into our reactivity, our suffering, our struggling.

So engaging with our experience in mindfulness, we notice: what is it that hooks us? We walk into the dining room. We see somebody putting food on their plate. How many times have I gotten hooked into that? How much food somebody is taking, or how little food somebody is taking. Comparing, judging, evaluating what I'm doing versus what somebody else is doing. It's just feelings as they arise, thoughts as they arise, persist, and pass away. Sights arising, persisting, passing away. Can we know that? Exploring, understanding where it is that we struggle. Where do we get hooked? We will talk about this over and over and over again. This is just an overview here.

The next word is mindful. Again, we've talked about this, and we all have a sense of what mindfulness is. One of my colleagues, Gil Fronsdal, has been doing some study on this term. He's been practicing for thirty-five years or so, and he says, "I don't really know what mindfulness is." Kind of shocking to him, in a way, to recognize that. In his study of this in the texts, one of the things that was remarkable to him was that the word mindfulness, as it's used, isn't used as something that we do. The words associated with mindfulness are words like abiding. We abide in mindfulness. We cultivate mindfulness. We establish mindfulness. So these words actually indicate that mindfulness may be a state of being rather than something that we do.

Gil equates mindfulness as more of a kind of samādhi, in a way. And like samādhi, we cultivate the conditions for mindfulness to become established. We don't do the mindfulness. We can recognize when mindfulness arises and know it is present. We can cultivate mindfulness by observing the body as a body. We can cultivate mindfulness by directing attention to particular experience.

So the active side of mindfulness practice is observing, knowing, understanding, effort. These activities—knowing the body as a body, knowing feelings as they arise, knowing this is pleasant, knowing anger as it arises, knowing anger as it passes away—these activities help to establish mindfulness. Abiding in mindfulness. So what we engage with are these activities of observing, of knowing, of understanding, knowing what arises, directing the attention at times.

The last phrase, "free from desires and discontent for the world," points to the development of concentration, of mental composure, of unification of mind. And the way it's framed—"one abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending

and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world"—it sounds like it has to happen first. We have to be free from desires and discontent before we engage with this practice.

Now that's not easy to do. Most of us see right away that we are not free from desires and discontent when we sit down. We want our pain to go away. We want our concentration to come back. We want the sitting to end sooner. We want the food to come sooner. We want different food. We want more of this, less of that. Endlessly we have desires and discontent. And so if it is the case that we have to be free of this before we engage, then one might think, "Well, I might as well go home. Why bother?" We're probably not able to get there right away.

Bhikkhu Anālayo, in exploring this text, points out that the way this word appears in the Pali—translated as something like "having removed" or "being free from" desires and discontent—the way that verb is used, that tense of the verb, can mean having completed something, but it can also indicate something happening simultaneously. So we engage in the practice of mindfulness, and simultaneous with that, we explore how to free our minds from desire and discontent.

This to me is another framing of the practice. We are not engaged in this practice in order to get something or get rid of something. This is another pointing to a perspective of our mindfulness practice: we're engaged to free ourselves from these desires and discontent. We may be able to set aside desires and discontent at times, or we may be able to recognize that a desire or discontent has arisen—that frustration has arisen. We may be able to recognize, "Oh, this is frustration." The Satipaṭṭhāna encourages us to do this: Greed has arisen. Anger has arisen. Confusion has arisen.

When we can recognize it in that way, it's as if we take a step back. It may be that we are frustrated, and when we are frustrated, it's like we're looking at the world through frustrated lenses. I was doing walking meditation in the basement here at IMS some years ago, and I knew I was having an aversion attack. This frequently happened to me while doing walking meditation, especially in a crowded room. I was doing the walking meditation knowing that the aversion was there, and I turned around at the end of my walking path. I looked down the path to the other end, and there were somebody's shoes sitting there. My mind exploded. "Who put those shoes there?" The filter of aversion was so strong that those innocent little shoes became the source of another aversion attack.

Sometimes when we have these reactive states in our mind, we're looking through those states as if through a filter of aversion or greed or confusion or anger or frustration or depression or loneliness—whatever it is. We may be looking through this filter.

And yet it's possible to recognize, "Oh, aversion is happening." Then it's as if, at least at times, we're now looking at that experience rather than looking through it. It's like taking the glasses off and looking at them rather than through them. The filter is no longer quite so potent in our minds.

This is how the setting aside begins. We're not necessarily able to be completely free of desire and discontent in our minds, but we can recognize that desire is arising with a balanced perspective, with non-judgmental, non-reactive awareness—knowing that aversion is arising, that desire is arising. We bring this perspective of being free from desire and discontent, as best we can, to the practice. And slowly, in a deepening cycle, in a deepening spiral, we begin to understand more and more what it means to be free of the more obvious levels of desire and discontent. Those levels fall away, and then we may feel, "Oh, things are good for a while." Then we start to see, "Oh, there are some subtler desires and discontent there." We deepen our understanding of what it means to be free from desire and discontent as we practice.

So: one abides contemplating the body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states—ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world. This phrase brings together both the what and the how of our practice. What we are paying attention to: we bring our attention to aspects of body, body as a body, body in and of itself.

We bring our attention to feelings, feelings in and of themselves, feelings as feelings, feelings known as they arise, persist, pass away—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Mind states as mind states: anger, aversion, non-greed, non-aversion, non-confusion, concentration, distraction, contraction, all the different states of mind. What we are paying attention to are the body-mind processes happening.

From this perspective of body as a body, body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, clearly comprehending—these are just phenomena, empty phenomena rolling on, as Munindra said to Joseph so many times.

The *what* we are paying attention to, and *how* we pay attention: abiding, settled back, receiving, diligent, connecting, present, persistent, balanced effort, clearly comprehending, recognizing objects, experiences as just experience. With this perspective of recognizing we're not in this to get something or get rid of something, but to understand: how does our mind create struggle, create suffering? How does our mind get confused about the unreliability of experience?

Our mind gets confused about this and just endlessly tries to figure out some way to make things reliable, endlessly tries to make things reliable. And we feel like it's our fault, or something wrong with us, when we can't figure out how to do it. It's not our fault. It's just the way it is. This is the truth.

Wise mindfulness encourages us to open to the truth of experience and not be confused, not be deluded about trying to create happiness based on things that are unreliable, passing away.

So with right mindfulness, with wise mindfulness, we begin to see our reactivity. We begin to see how our minds create the struggle. This non-judgmental, non-reactive awareness—we begin to see loneliness, confusion, depression arising in our experience. We begin to understand how it's put together.

Pretty early in my practice, I had a really beautiful example of this, of just how powerful wise mindfulness was. I was in the Peace Corps at the time and had a relationship that had broken up—a ten-year relationship, so it was a pretty devastating experience, actually. The anger that was happening, the loneliness, the confusion—I was out of control. The mind was out of control. And I saw, wow, this is out of control. I can barely function here.

And so somebody sent me a book on mindfulness, and I just began trying to pay attention to this confused mind. I was noticing that I was going to bed lonely every night. This was something that was happening, so let's notice loneliness. It didn't particularly surprise me that I was lonely when I was going to bed at night, but I was interested. I had begun to be interested in my mind. I had begun to be interested in how does this mind do what it does?

So I started observing this loneliness every night as I went to bed. One night, some number of nights into this process of observing the loneliness, I noticed that the loneliness clearly began when I set my alarm clock. Now this struck me as very odd. I could not figure out why on earth setting my alarm clock would have anything to do with loneliness. I just kept noticing.

Some nights later—I don't even remember whether it was the next night or a couple nights later—I had noticed there was a pattern around the loneliness that I now recognized. It was clearly connected to this alarm clock somehow. And one night as I was again just observing—I actually had very little instruction in mindfulness practice at this point; it was just curiosity, what is this about, what is it like to be lonely—one night as I was setting my alarm clock, I noticed a memory. I was with my partner in this

memory, with my partner in Disneyland, looking up at a clock on a marquee in Tomorrowland. And I could see that there was a connection between setting the alarm clock, the image of the clock here, and the clock in my memory.

And I could also in that moment recognize that the loneliness was something along the lines of a reaction to that memory: "Oh, that was so happy. I'll never be happy again. I'm always going to be miserable. I'll never have another partner."

I'm always going to be alone. That was where the loneliness had arisen from.

I was amazed, actually. This was some four months into my meditation practice—amazed that mindfulness could reveal the source, could show how this loneliness was constructed, how it was created in my mind. That was pretty amazing to see.

But what was more amazing was the next night when I went to bed. I looked at that alarm clock. I remembered the memory, of course, because it had become conscious in my mind. But the loneliness did not happen. It was as if having seen the hook between the memory and the reactivity had decoupled that reactivity.

Now, I'm not saying I didn't get lonely again—I'm not saying that. But that pattern of going to bed lonely every single night? That stopped. It was a very powerful recognition of how this practice of noticing what's happening in the mind and body brings freedom. I've had many, many experiences like that since then. You've had your own experiences like that.

So right mindfulness begins to create the conditions for insight—the conditions to actually see into how suffering is created, how struggle is constructed in our minds. And it gives us choice. This is another potent aspect of wise mindfulness, especially as it becomes more continuous. The more continuous the mindfulness gets, the more we see choice points, the more we begin to recognize moments where we can choose to act or not act on a particular mind state.

We begin to be able to choose to act out of compassion, out of love, rather than out of anger and hostility and hatred. We begin to be able to respond skillfully rather than react out of habitual patterns.

Continuity is the key here. It is what brings power to our mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is a factor of awakening—the first of the seven factors of awakening—the ground out of which all the other factors grow. In order to become a factor of awakening, mindfulness needs to be continuous. We need to have that sense of abiding in mindfulness, dwelling in mindfulness, with that perspective of not wanting something to happen or wanting something to not happen—being free from desire and discontent.

We bring this perspective, what my teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls wise attitude, skillful attitude for our practice. When we have wise attitude, it doesn't matter what we're paying attention to. It doesn't matter whether anger is arising or bliss is arising. I can't tell you the number of times that deep insight has arisen when I was finally willing to say, "Oh yes, self-hatred—yes, that's what's happening," and not fight it or try to sidestep it or pretend it wasn't there, but really decided: "Yes, self-hatred, here you are. I'm going to look at you."

That willingness to meet our difficulties opens us to insight. When difficulty is happening, that is our path. When bliss is happening, that is our path—knowing bliss is happening, not indulging in bliss.

When we join this power of mindfulness with continuity, it becomes concentration. Mindfulness and concentration together are what allow us to deepen into happiness, understanding, and wisdom. And the wisdom is what frees us. The wisdom is what opens our hearts, frees our minds, and takes us toward happiness.

CHAPTER 90

Investigation

Andrea Fella · 57 min

In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella offers a detailed exploration of investigation (dhamma vicaya), the second of the seven factors of awakening. She clarifies that investigation in Buddhist practice is not about thinking or figuring out why something is happening, but rather about exploring what is happening moment after moment in present experience.

Fella explains that the Buddha described wise attention (yoniso manasikāra) as the nourishment for investigation, which involves attending to experience through the lens of the Four Noble Truths: recognizing suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path leading to its end—all in the present moment. Through vivid personal examples, including recurring memories triggering embarrassment and experiences with loneliness and depression, she demonstrates how suffering is constructed anew in each moment rather than being stored somewhere waiting to emerge.

The talk emphasizes a gentle, patient approach to investigation—like rubbing a bowl with a soft cloth rather than picking experience apart. Fella encourages practitioners to gather data about their patterns over time, allowing understanding to emerge organically rather than digging for assumed underlying causes. She addresses both difficult mind states and wholesome qualities, noting that mindfulness naturally supports the abandonment of unwholesome states while strengthening wholesome ones. The gradual nature of practice is honored through the Buddha's analogy of shipwreck parts slowly worn away by sun, wind, and water.

Tonight I'd like to talk about investigation, which is the second of the seven factors of awakening. As a factor of awakening, it is an important quality for us to cultivate because it is one of the factors that supports us in seeing things as they are—that *yathabhuta* that Carol was talking about the other night.

The English word "investigation" sometimes conjures up the meaning of thinking about or figuring out. Yet this is not what the Buddha had in mind with this quality of investigation, this second factor of awakening. In practice, in investigating our experience, looking at our experience, being with our experience, rather than trying to figure out why something's happening, we are encouraged to look at what is happening moment after moment after moment. This, I think, is one of the key ways we can recognize investigation: we are exploring what is happening in the present moment.

And yet again, as I was saying last week and as we've said all week long, it's not simply about being aware in the present moment. There's a perspective that we bring to make this looking at what's happening in the present moment a factor of awakening.

When the Buddha described this factor of investigation, *dhamma vicaya* is the Pali term, and it may be translated as "investigation of states." Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as "analysis of qualities." The word "analysis" also has that notion of figuring out and thinking about. I really think we want to look at this from the perspective of not figuring out but being with.

As the Buddha described this term, he offered for us what its nourishment is. He encouraged us to nourish the awakening factors, and he said that the factor that most nourishes this quality of investigation is something called wise attention. This brings the qualities of wisdom and awareness together, this wise attention.

One of the key definitions of wise attention is found in one of the suttas where the Buddha is talking about how one attends when one attends with wise attention. He says: One attends wisely, "This is suffering." One attends wisely, "This is the cause of suffering." One attends wisely, "This is the cessation of suffering." And one attends wisely, "This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering."

When I first heard this, I didn't really get it. I thought, well, he's just saying the Four Noble Truths. But the way it's phrased, when I read it and reflected on it, it's pointing to the present moment. He said, "This is suffering. This is the cause of suffering." And so I think what he's pointing to is that we explore the present moment experience, looking at what's happening from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths. Is what's arising in the present moment suffering? Is what's arising in the present moment the cause of suffering, the craving? Is what's arising in the present moment the ending of suffering? Or is what's arising in the present moment some of the beautiful qualities of heart and mind that support us on our path? Essentially using the Four Noble Truths as a framework for exploring our experience. He's pointing us into the present moment around exploring the Four Noble Truths.

The more I have explored this and reflected on this in my own experience, the more I have come to appreciate that this reflection—I'll just take one right now, "this is suffering"—is really a deep pointing to truth: that when suffering is arising, it's arising in the present moment. Suffering occurs in the present moment. It doesn't occur anywhere else. It may be that there is a thought of the past arising in the present moment and that reactivity has been constructed around that thought. But the actual experience of suffering is happening right now.

On one retreat, I kept having this memory come up. It was a repeating memory, one of those that came up over and over again. It was of a time that I had been acting in a play, and I had forgotten my line. The wall went down between myself and the audience, and I looked out at the audience and there they were looking back at me. Embarrassment arose. That memory—looking out at the audience and seeing people looking at me—embarrassment arose. On this retreat, that memory came and embarrassment arose over and over again.

Finally, I really began to clearly get it. Obviously there had been conditions in the past; I had been in that play and that had happened. But what was happening—this was on a three-month course, and seeing this over and over throughout that time—I really began to see that what was happening was that the thought was arising, the memory was arising for some reason, and there were conditions for that.

Things don't happen randomly, so the memory was arising. And the feeling of embarrassment was constructed all over again. It was being created right in the present moment. It wasn't as if there was some store of that embarrassment sitting there somewhere waiting to be dredged up. It was actually being recreated.

That's a pretty amazing thing. And it's pretty freeing, actually, when we really get that. Because the fact that it is constructed in the present moment means that there are processes going on in our mind that are putting it together right here and now. And when they can be seen, the mind begins to choose not to go down the route of suffering.

So this is suffering, arising in the present moment. Whether we're suffering, as Joseph said, over something in our past, or even more amazingly, something that we imagine out of whole cloth for our future, it's being constructed now. The cause of that suffering is also constructed now—the craving, the wanting.

Last week I talked about this story of noticing loneliness when I went to bed every night. I'll mention it again briefly in case some of you don't remember. My partner had broken up with me, and I was going to bed lonely every night. It didn't particularly strike me as odd that I was going to bed lonely. I thought I understood something about why. In my mind, it was something like, "Well, of course I'm lonely. I'm going to bed alone."

Yet through the exploration of the feeling of loneliness, as I described noticing that it arose when I was setting my alarm clock, and then seeing over the next few nights this memory of being with my partner in Disneyland looking up at the clock, I could see that the actual present moment cause of the loneliness had to do with the reaction to that memory. It had nothing to do with going to bed alone. The cause of that loneliness was

created, again based on this arising memory, in the present moment. And as I described, when that connection was seen, the mind chose not to go down the path of loneliness. I couldn't have done that. I couldn't have said, "Don't do that anymore." But the wisdom that understood "that way lies suffering"—the mind let go of it.

Now it doesn't always happen that quickly, as I will describe going through some of these examples in investigation.

So suffering and its cause are happening in the present moment. Through the witnessing of what's happening in the present moment, the mind begins to let go of the causes. When the causes are released, the suffering is released. The fact that pretty much everything that we can know happens in the present moment really is encouraging us to do this investigation here and now, looking at what is happening—just what is happening moment after moment.

This is what we've been talking about almost every day. How do we look at what's happening in the present moment? We notice our bodies, what's happening underneath the level of concept. We notice the vibratory energy. We notice the hardness, softness, coolness, heat, pressure, tension, tightness, burning, aching, stabbing, pulling, twisting, tearing—all of these physical sensations. We notice our emotions, our moods happening. We notice how those impact the body. We notice thoughts. All of these arising.

And as these arise, we often see that there's a tendency in our minds to want to understand *why* something is happening. This is something to watch for. The tendency to try to figure out "why is that happening?" tends to take us into story, tends to take us away from the present moment, the *what* is happening moment after moment.

We can construct all kinds of reasons why we're feeling a particular emotion. We can go back to the causes from our past, our history. We can reconstruct, "Well, of course I'm feeling this way. This is like when I was a kid on the playground. This is the way people teased me. This is kind of reminding me of that." We can think about that kind of thing. And yet that's taking us away from what's actually happening moment after moment.

The more we are willing to actually explore what's happening moment after moment, we start to see that all the information we need to understand the suffering of this moment—how the suffering is created in this moment—all the information we need is found right in the present moment.

is the best way to uncover what we could call the "why" of the present moment.

In a sense, the more continuous our mindfulness gets, the more natural this aspect of investigation becomes. The more continuous our mindfulness gets, the more it reveals these causes in the present moment. We see a thought. We see that we are reacting to that thought in the present moment. It's actually quite amazing.

In the earlier days of my practice—like that example of the play, where the thought of forgetting my line came up—at first it seemed like there was no distinction, no possibility of that memory arising without the embarrassment coming along with it. They seemed intimately connected, as if one came packaged with the other. But the more I observed, the more I was with the present moment experience, the more I could see that there was the arising of the thought, and that was just thought. And then there was a reaction to that thought—the embarrassment was recreated all over again. It wasn't that the thought came with embarrassment as part of the package. There was a little gap.

So the continuity of mindfulness begins to reveal these cause and effect relationships, begins to reveal how our minds get hooked into the patterns of suffering. This exploration of looking at what's happening in the present moment, as opposed to trying to figure out why things are happening—this is one of the ways we can get confused about investigation, about that word "investigation." So I simply want to encourage you to have the interest to explore, moment after moment, what is happening.

Another way we may try to figure things out—perhaps a habit that at least some of us have around our experience—is that as we do hang out with our experience, as we start looking at what's going on moment after moment, we begin to see that certain patterns, certain habits, certain familiar conditioned habits of suffering and struggle—we all have our own favorites; one of mine was self-hatred—we see that they're fairly complex, rather layered.

We may have a sense that there are so many layers to this that what we really need to do, in order to have the whole thing fall apart, is to get right into the middle of it and see what's at the root. This may prompt us to go digging for what's there.

For example, there might be a feeling of resistance, and that resistance may be covering up—just to give an example of how this works—there may be a feeling of resistance, and we have a sense that there's some anger there and we're resisting the anger. Maybe we've seen in the past that often our anger is related to fear. So we may have a sense of, "Well, there's resistance. Maybe I need to go find the fear." Not really respecting or acknowledging that what is actually being felt right now is resistance. Instead, we try to dive into the middle of it, try to figure out what's there, assuming what's in the middle based on history, on things we've seen in our experience before.

I've seen in my own practice that this approach is actually not often helpful, because if we go looking for something, we can usually find it. It's almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy. We say, "Okay, I'm feeling resistance, so there must be fear underneath." And then we're scanning, looking for the fear.

In investigation, our practice is to—I think of it this way: if we've got a big mess of whatever it is, a big mess of self-hatred, a big mess of confusion, a big mess of anxiety, it's like we put our arms around the whole thing and simply ask, can we take in what is obvious about this experience? Rather than trying to dig for what's in the middle, just what's obvious? Rather than assuming there's something underneath to be found, we allow our wide arms to take in the entirety of the experience and simply notice what's obvious.

In my own experience, my own practice of exploring in that way, investigating in that way, what I've seen is that there's a very natural, gentle revealing. As we are able to put our arms around it and be with the most obvious thing, just being with that most obvious thing, sometimes the underneath pieces begin to show themselves.

Being with resistance, hanging out with resistance—"There's resistance. This is what resistance feels like"—and then there's a little flare of anger. "Oh, anger's here now." Now we can look at anger because it's here, it's in the present moment, it's clear, it's obvious.

One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, offers an analogy for investigation—I think it may actually be for the meeting of experience, for the quality of mind that stays with experience. He talks about it being like rubbing a bowl with a soft cloth. That's a very different way of exploring experience than picking it apart, pulling it apart. It's more trusting that the mind's meeting of experience, the continuity of mindfulness being like that soft cloth, will reveal what needs to be known, what needs to be seen.

So it's helpful, I think, to not make assumptions about what lies underneath the outer layers. For instance, feeling a sense of depression arising, we might assume that a feeling of loneliness must underlie that depression.

I had a situation like this at one retreat. I was experiencing some low-grade depression, and I had some theories about what it might be connected to. I saw the depression arise when I was watching people walk together. So potentially, I thought, maybe it has to do with loneliness. But fortunately, at that point I was experienced enough to set that aside and say, "Well, maybe it has to do with loneliness." Rather than going and digging, saying, "Where's the loneliness?" I'm sure I could have constructed loneliness. But just

being with the depression, noticing the obviousness of what was there, I learned a lot about my mind. I learned a lot about how that depression came into being. In fact, it was rather surprising—I found it came into being when the mind was really calm.

For several weeks, this was one of my main patterns that kept re-arising. Just willing to meet it, be with it, notice it. Noticing when it's present, noticing when it's absent, noticing when I felt caught by it and struggling with it, noticing when it felt like, "Oh, it's just depression, it's fine, it's no problem." Just being with it over and over again. Feeling my heart expand, feeling my heart contract, just being with it.

And then one day in the exploration of this, I felt like the depression began to get really big. I thought, "Oh wow, look at this." And there was absolutely no resistance at this point. There were bodily sensations associated with this feeling of depression, and the bodily feelings—it felt like my body got really big as I was exploring the physical sensations of depression and the mental state of depression. It felt like it was just expanding, expanding, expanding. And at some point in that process, the experience felt like it turned inside out. And what was there in that moment was a beautiful, expanded feeling of mettā, of loving-kindness.

Now that was not what I expected to find in the middle of that state of depression. The very next thought that came up was telling about what was perhaps going on, because the very next thought that arose in my mind was, in the midst of this beautiful, expansive feeling of mettā: "This is stupid, this is sappy, this is corny." That gave me a little clue, perhaps, as to the depression potentially being around not being able to connect with that feeling of expanded mettā.

So holding assumptions lightly about what is in the middle, the willingness to just meet what is happening—that was the key for me in that exploration. And more times than I can probably even recall, I've been surprised by what I found when I've been willing to just settle back and let go of the assumptions, let go of the ideas I have about what my mind is about, and instead just observe, just notice what is happening.

This exploration of what is happening is like gathering data. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, whom Carol has referred to a couple of times, has used this analogy of data gathering. He used this example: Think about people—the early, early people, probably as far back as caveman people—going out and looking up at the stars. The first time you go out and look up at the stars, if you didn't have all the history of stargazing behind us, the first time you look up, it's like, "Wow, there's a pattern. There's some pattern up there." And then the next night you go out and you see the pattern. And the next night you go out and you see the pattern. And each night you see the pattern, and probably you see little shifts as you go. You see little shifts in terms of when

the stars are coming up. You may see shifts in terms of a few stars up there that don't seem to behave like all the others—they wander through the field of stars rather than being in fixed places.

So night after night, looking up at the stars, the understanding begins to grow of what is going on up there. It's similar here: we gather the data, particularly around patterns of experience, familiar patterns of experience. Each time something arises—like that depression, for instance—each time that arose was a new opportunity to gather some data. Each time we see it, we get a little new bit of perspective on the situation, and the mind begins to understand and put together the patterns. It can happen quite organically that the mind begins to understand the patterns just through the patient witnessing of our experience.

So one of the things we sometimes see when we observe our experience in this way, watching patterns over and over again, is a pattern vanishing.

On one retreat, I was feeling a lot of wanting when I was doing walking meditation—wanting to look at the people who were around me. Is that familiar? I had been keeping my eyes down, definitely looking at shoes, but I really wanted to look at faces. For the first few weeks of this three-month course, I was telling myself, "I'm not going to look." It was like I had blinders on. I was a good yogi. I was not going to look at people's faces.

After some weeks of this, finally it hit me upside the head: wanting is happening. Maybe I should look at wanting. I had not really been cognizant that wanting was happening. I had such an agenda of being a good yogi that I did not recognize or acknowledge the wanting itself.

So at some point I began being curious about wanting—wanting to look. I got really interested in the feeling. It actually felt like a magnet. When somebody was walking nearby, I was deciding not to act on the wanting, but to just feel into it. I would be there doing the walking meditation and someone would come into my field of vision and I'd feel this pull. And since I was not acting on it, I really got to feel that feeling of the pull—the unsatisfying feeling of wanting, the uncomfortable feeling that this isn't the way I want it to be. I want to be able to look. I got really familiar with that pull.

I also began to notice clearly when it arose. I had actually put myself outside away from people because I didn't want to be dealing with this all the time. So I was doing the walking meditation, and then somebody would pop into my peripheral vision. The wanting would spring right up. There it was. I'd feel that magnetic pull, like somebody

described as a tractor beam from Star Trek—this pull to look. The person would walk in front of me, right in front of me, really tempting to look up. And then they'd walk past, go up the stairs, through the door, and the wanting would vanish.

That was an interesting moment. It felt like being released from a vice grip.

This is something we can begin to see—the ending of our struggles, our suffering. We can begin to see through investigation what the causes are that put it together, what the causes are that have it fall apart. This is in the terrain of that aspect of wise attention: seeing the ending of suffering. I'm not saying that was Nibbāna. I'm not saying that seeing the ending of that wanting was Nibbāna. But it is in the terrain of realizing how suffering falls apart. We can witness this in our observing what's happening.

Now, that experience continued, and there was an interesting lesson here too. For a little while, I really got into watching this because I would watch the suffering appear and then kind of wait for it to disappear. It was fun—I got to watch it go away when the person disappeared. At some point I realized an interesting thing: I was actually holding on to the wanting in order to watch it disappear. And when that became seen, the whole thing fell apart. The pattern of wanting to look at people just ended.

There's a lot we can learn from looking at what is happening in the present moment. In that example, seeing something disappear kind of quickly—that doesn't happen often, at least in my experience. Particularly with some of these habits or patterns that are really familiar, these multi-layered patterns that are so sticky, often we have to look at them over and over again. A lot of patience is asked of us to keep exploring these patterns.

This is the gradual cultivation that Joseph was talking about last night—this gradual cultivation. And in my own practice, this gradual cultivation has been the main way that the path has unfolded. I've had a few of those really big insights, seeing something kind of mind-blowing. But most of the insights, many of the insights, much of the freeing that's happened, particularly around the personal dukkha—the dukkha around personality and who I am and how I was raised—that has been a more gradual wearing away.

The Buddha offered an analogy for our practice that I love because it so speaks to me. He said that much of our practice unfolds in a gradual way, and he uses this analogy of a shipwreck—of a ship that's been strewn around the beach, the parts of the ship kind of all over the beach. And he said that over the course of months, the sun, the sand, the wind, the water wear away at the parts of the ship. Day by day—and this is an extrapolation from my understanding of the analogy—you're not going to see much

change in any one part of the ship. A board sits there, you go look at it every day, you may even take a microscope to it, it's not going to look like it changes much day after day. But gradually, gradually, the wearing away is happening.

And imagine some of the rigging, the rope that holds the sails together. Day after day, you look at that piece of rope, it may not change at all. But a year later you go and you try to pick it up and it falls apart in your hand. Much of our practice unfolds in this gradual way. And sometimes I've seen that things fall apart without my knowing they fell apart—until kind of later.

So an example around this: there was a period of my practice where I was really exploring anger, anger at a particular person. And I began to notice at some point that my whole way of exploring the anger was kind of hooking me back into the pattern of anger. I recognized that the mind states and the thoughts were stronger than my ability to be mindful of them. And so I began bowing to my anger and saying, "I see you, and now is not the time to pay attention to you, but I'll pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger." So I kind of said "not now" to that anger, and then just turned my attention to something else.

This was a skillful setting aside of the pattern. I just turned my attention—I was often walking when this came up—I turned my attention to my feet on the ground, just letting the anger be. It's like, "You do your thing. I'm not going to try to stop you, but I'm not going to pay attention to you either."

And in this way, I noticed the anger come up over and over again. "Oh, I see you. Not now. I see you. Not now." And I did begin to notice—I think in retrospect a little bit—I began to notice that it wasn't as much of a problem. It used to come up a lot, coming up every day. And then maybe it started coming up every few days, and then maybe every week. The bouts of that mind state got farther and farther between, at least with respect to that particular person—the anger at that particular person.

I didn't particularly think about it too much. It's like, well, maybe that person isn't coming up in my mind so much. It just wasn't arising; this anger wasn't arising as frequently. And then one day, I was walking up to my front door and I realized, wow, I haven't felt that anger in a really long time. And even thinking about it—thinking about it brought the person that I had been angry with into my mind—and I still didn't feel the anger. I was kind of like, wow. Where did it go?

And I didn't actually trust that it was gone. But it never came back. It had ended without my seeing it end.

So this is another way that—I mean, I had met it each time, kind of like, "I see you, not now. I see you, not now." I had met it each time, put it aside without aversion, and it just lost its momentum.

I don't know if some of you have seen the film *What the Bleep?*

It talks about these neural networks. And what the Buddha said: what we frequently ponder becomes the inclination of our mind. That's kind of what this film was pointing to—that when we engage in a pattern over and over again, the neurons shore it up. It's like, "Oh yeah, that one must be important. Bring more neurons in to support that." It fires again. "Oh, that one must be important. Bring more in." So that's the way our brains work. Whatever we frequently ponder becomes the inclination. It's a very natural process.

The interesting piece about this from the perspective of neurobiology is that when a pattern stops being engaged with, the neurons begin to rewire. Like, "Oh, that one's not important." When they're not used in that pattern, they begin to put their tendrils out elsewhere. A pattern can kind of fall apart in that way.

Another area that's important to investigate—I've been looking at the difficulty, but it's also really important to investigate the wholesome. To investigate happiness, calm, peace, equanimity, concentration. The investigation here is really about being with.

There's something beautiful about the factor of mindfulness. It has this amazing quality that... I'm going to take a step back for a second. You know, we talk about the four right efforts: letting go of the unwholesome, abandoning those unwholesome states that have arisen, avoiding unwholesome states that have not yet arisen, cultivating wholesome states that have not yet arisen, and maintaining wholesome states that have arisen. Winnie talked about this the other night. And that sounds very much like a doing. And it can be. We can actively cultivate wholesome states of metta, for example, using the metta practice that we've been doing.

And there's another way to cultivate wholesome states and abandon unwholesome states, and that is through mindfulness. Mindfulness itself is, as my teacher Sayadaw U Pandita said—I'll say wise mindfulness—the most wholesome mind state. And so cultivating wise mindfulness, we are cultivating a wholesome state. When it's not present, we're planting the seeds for it to be present, so we are cultivating that state of mindfulness.

And mindfulness has this beautiful capacity, this beautiful quality, that when we have that wise mindfulness, wise awareness of unwholesome, unskillful states, mindfulness of those tends to create the conditions for them to appear less frequently in our

experience. And when we bring our mindful attention to wholesome states—to joy, to happiness, to love, to compassion—when we bring our mindful attention to those states, it creates the conditions for them to appear more frequently in our experience. And so the cultivation of mindfulness contains the four right efforts.

One of the most beautiful ways to encourage wholesome states is to be mindful of them when they have arisen. Be with them, recognize them. It's so easy to get lost in those beautiful states, to kind of bliss out or just be in the experience rather than really with it, aware of it. The awareness of those wholesome states—we can look at as being this other aspect of wise attention, the aspect of recognizing the path. Because these wholesome states are the path. They're pointing the way. Recognizing, cultivating the path. This is the path leading to the end of suffering.

This is one of the things about wise attention. Essentially, any experience that we're having in this moment can be seen through one of these lenses of the Four Noble Truths. Either what's happening in the moment is suffering, the cause of suffering, the ending of suffering, or—maybe these qualities, these beautiful wholesome qualities—the path leading to the end of suffering. So cultivating the path in this way, mindful of these qualities, these beautiful qualities of mind.

We do have a tendency to cling to some of these states. I'm sure you've noticed that. And so one of the helpful tools for us in observing these wholesome states of mind is to recognize our relationship to them. Not just settle back and kind of go into the bliss and think, "Oh yeah, this is really good." I mean, if you're noting, it's like, "Oh yeah, bliss, bliss." Okay, that note is going to give you a clue, right?

You know, a little bit of attachment going on. So noticing our relationship to these states—not to beat ourselves up about it, but to disentangle ourselves from the craving around these experiences.

Actually, in my own experience, when I'm feeling joy or happiness and wanting it to continue, having that kind of holding around it, it really doesn't allow the feeling and that state to flower fully. The clinging seems to dampen it down a little bit. I'm sure you've seen this with concentration. It's kind of a classic thing that happens: you're paying attention to the breath and noticing the experiences that are happening, and it's starting to feel really good. "Oh yeah, wow, this feels really good"—and then it's gone. That sense of "ooh, more of that, I want more of that" kind of gets in the way for us.

Sometimes the clinging to these wholesome states can be really subtle. It's kind of amazing how subtle it can be. I was at Shwe Oo Min, Sayadaw U Tejaniya's monastery, and at one point I had a state of mind that was quite peaceful—very spacious, very

quiet, very tranquil. As far as I could tell, it was pretty pure. But I did think to ask, "What's my relationship to this experience?" And there was a very subtle leaning in, trying to make that state continue. Very subtle. When that was seen, the trying fell away. And then there was immediately wanting it to continue because I was no longer actively engaged in making it continue. "Oh no, wait, no, I want it to continue." There was fear it wouldn't continue. So boom, boom, boom—the mind saw these ways of clinging to this state. And the next thing that happened was that all this joy arose because the mind had seen the clinging. I think Joseph mentioned that: sometimes in the midst of seeing the clinging, the mind can get really happy because it is seeing things being released.

So sometimes the clinging to wholesome states can be really subtle. This tool of checking our relationship to our wholesome experience is really supportive, really helpful.

We've said, I think, many times already: it really doesn't matter what is happening in your experience. We can bring mindfulness to pretty much anything. Self-hatred, depression, loneliness, confusion, bliss, joy, happiness, calm, peace, ease, boredom, confusion. What's important is to know what is happening, to observe what happens to it as you observe it. This process leads us through to the discovery of the impermanent nature of experience, the unreliable nature of experience, seeing how suffering is constructed, seeing how it falls apart. Moment after moment: What is happening? What is happening? This investigation is a crucial tool that leads us towards understanding, towards wisdom that frees the mind.

Let's sit for a few moments.

CHAPTER 91

Mettā Practice: Working with Difficulty

Andrea Fella · 58 min

In this practical dharma talk, Andrea Fella offers detailed guidance on navigating difficulties that commonly arise during mettā (loving-kindness) meditation. She emphasizes the importance of the four-part mettā practice, particularly the fourth step of checking back in with the heart after each phrase—a technique that transformed mettā from an abstract exercise into an embodied practice for her.

Andrea explores the near enemy of mettā (attached love with conditions or requirements) and the far enemy (aversion, ill will, or competitiveness), explaining that these arising states actually indicate the practice is working. She uses the powerful metaphor of mettā as a magnet that draws its opposite to the surface, and as soap in a washing machine that attracts dirt so it can be released. She also addresses the subtle belief that happiness is a zero-sum game—that wishing others well somehow diminishes our own happiness.

For practitioners struggling with difficulty, Andrea offers several skillful approaches: returning to easier categories like the benefactor or self, alternating between categories, switching to compassion practice (karuṇā) when suffering predominates, or dropping into mindfulness practice altogether. She clarifies the distinction between mettā and compassion—while both arise from the open heart, compassion is the natural response when that openness meets suffering. The talk concludes with a guided meditation and a question-and-answer session addressing topics including concentration practice with mettā, adapting phrases, and working with overwhelming experiences of beauty.

For the metta practice today, we'll continue with the dear friend that Guy introduced on Friday. Before we go into meditation, I'd like to expand on and reinforce some of what the others have said.

Guy talked on Friday about what he calls a four-part metta: starting with the image and connecting with the sense of caring about the being, saying the phrase, and understanding the meaning of the phrase. The fourth part is to check back in, in the area of the heart, and see how it has been for you to make that wish.

For me, that fourth part was what really allowed the metta practice to begin to make sense to me. When we express the wish of metta—may you be happy—it's an intention, an expression of something that we may or may not be feeling. But intentions have an

impact; they rebound on us. What I found is that if I'm willing to express that wish and come back and check in—how was that to make that wish?—it begins to allow the metta practice to become an embodied practice.

An example for myself: on one retreat I was doing metta for a month. Metta was the only practice I was doing for the month, and it went in and out of feeling juicy and able to connect with the experience of metta. I remember at one point I was in the dining room and it felt so dry. I reminded myself, well, all I really have to do here is say the phrase and understand the meaning of the phrase, then check back in. How did that land? How did that land in the heart to say the phrase and understand the meaning?

What I discovered was that the first time I made that wish and checked back in, there was just a subtle shift in the heart—a subtle shift of maybe a little bit of friendliness, the subtlest little shift. Then the next wish, and I felt back into the heart. I found that this practice of checking back in allowed the feeling to be nourished. It was almost as if the feeling in the heart was a little ember, and each phrase was like a gentle wind encouraging that ember to grow. So I really encourage that part of the practice that Guy described. For me, it was a huge shift to have metta begin to feel like an embodied practice.

Another piece I'll mention is that in moving to the dear friend in particular, we can start to have maybe a little bit of reactivity around wishing our dear friend metta. It can slip into what's called the near enemy, which I believe Guy talked about on Friday. The near enemy is a kind of love with a requirement—attachment, an attached kind of love. I'll love you if you'll do this for me, or I'll love you if you love me back. That kind of exchange feeling about metta. It's very natural for metta to a dear friend to have that kind of quality.

The reason it's called the near enemy is because it's an experience or a state of mind that could be confused with the quality of metta. It's similar, it's close. There's a sense of connectivity, but it's got some skew to it, a little bit of skew.

The far enemy of metta is a state of mind that is so different than metta that you're not going to confuse it with metta. The far enemy, which can come up as we're doing the practice, is aversion, ill will, even a sense perhaps of hatred, a sense of competitiveness, of not enough for me, perhaps.

When I first was doing the metta practice, it kind of surprised me, in doing metta for a dear friend, that these states would come up. I thought, well, I'm wishing my good friend to be happy and healthy and well. And what comes up in my mind instead of those wishes is, yeah, but they did that thing. The very bringing into the mind this wish—it's like it brings out the opposite.

Another thing that Guy sometimes says, and maybe he said it on Friday, is that the metta practice is like running a metta magnet over your heart. What a magnet does is pull its opposite to it. So the practice is working when these things come to the surface. It's not that we're not supposed to have these things come—the near enemy of metta, that attached love, the far enemy of metta. Having them come into consciousness essentially means the practice is working.

Another form of reactivity around the dear friend, which I think is probably the far enemy for me, was a sense of fear in wishing my dear friend metta—a fear that if I'm wishing her metta, it means I'm wishing myself unhappiness. Somehow my mind had believed that happiness was a zero-sum game: if my friend was happier, it would correspondingly mean that I was less happy. This belief is just an idea that there's only so much happiness to go around.

I think it may come a little bit from the material world. We associate happiness sometimes with material possessions, with having things, and maybe there are only so many things to go around. But states of mind are very different. It was quite a shift for me to recognize that actually, when I could take happiness in my friend's happiness, something opened.

It's like happiness can multiply—there's no limit to happiness.

So the fact that these states come up for us in our metta practice, again, it's not a mistake. And working with these difficulties, the first exploration would be simply allowing them. We can think of the metta practice as being like washing clothes. The metta is the soap. You're putting the soap into the washing machine. If you're washing clothes, the soap attracts the dirt. The soap pulls the dirt out of the clothes into the water, and then the water gets rinsed away.

So we don't have to have an adversarial relationship with these difficulties that come up. It can simply be, "Oh, okay, there's the near enemy. May it be washed away with this metta practice. Oh, there's the far enemy. May it be washed away with this metta practice." The first way to work with difficulty is simply to recognize that these other states are coming up along with the metta, and to just keep going, if that's possible.

For myself, when it gets difficult, at least for me, sometimes it feels like the heart begins to squeeze. If the near or far enemy is a little too strong, each phrase feels like it's adding a squeeze to the heart, and it gets harder and harder.

If it gets too difficult, there are some fallbacks. Perhaps the first fallback would be to shift to a person, to shift to one of the categories that's easier. Back to your benefactor, back to yourself if that's easier for you. Unlike vipassana practice, where we're meeting suffering and working with that, with metta practice we are encouraging finding where it's easiest. So it's not cheating. If it feels easier to go back to where the heart feels more open, where you can connect with another person, that's perfectly fine. Use another person for a while and then perhaps try to bring in your dear friend again.

And being playful around the categories—we don't have to say, "Okay, I'm on dear friend now, that's all I do." We can have it be a little more fluid. Maybe one or two phrases to your benefactor, then one round to your dear friend, then one round to your benefactor and one round to your dear friend. Alternating in this way and seeing if you can allow some of those near and far enemies to come into the wash and be released by alternating other people with your dear friend.

If that still feels difficult, there are a couple of different approaches you could use. For me, metta was not an easy practice. It took quite a while before I could really feel like I could connect with it and not just be torqued into pain. On one daylong retreat where I was doing metta, it was going okay for the morning, but by the afternoon it didn't matter which category I was trying to send metta to, which person I was choosing—every phrase brought so much pain in the heart that I couldn't even remember the metta phrases. It felt like this constriction, this steel band around my chest. It was so painful to even try to think of the phrases that I couldn't think of the phrases.

The teacher on that retreat suggested, "Try compassion practice for yourself." That was doable, because suffering was what was happening for me. The quality of compassion is the quality of the heart that can meet suffering. And so when I could express the wish, "May I be free from this suffering," that I could remember. I could connect with that wish.

So that's an option also—if it feels too painful, if the practice is bringing up so much constriction or tightness that it feels very difficult to continue with the metta practice, you could try switching to compassion practice. Compassion practice is really simple: one phrase, "May I (or you) be free from this suffering."

I don't know if Guy mentioned this about the dear friend, but it is helpful when doing the metta practice to pick a dear friend who is not undergoing a lot of challenge at this moment. Because when your dear friend is struggling with something in their life, as you recall them you'll probably recall that struggle, and it evokes more the sense of suffering. That evokes the quality of compassion. The quality of metta is the quality of the open heart, the connectedness, the free-flowing connectedness. When that open heart meets suffering, it shifts to compassion.

So in general, when picking a dear friend, pick someone who is generally feeling okay in their life at this point. And if you have a strong wish to bring a person who is suffering into the room for the metta practice, you may from time to time find using that compassion phrase to be more resonant with what's actually happening for you. The phrase "May you be free from this suffering" is the expression of the open heart meeting suffering.

And then, if none of those things is resonating for you in terms of working with the difficulty, you can always drop the metta practice and use mindfulness.

Just shift to mindfulness practice to work with whatever has come up in your own heart and mind in that moment. Simply be with it, allowing, accepting—this is what has arisen. Can I be with that? The same tools that we've been using.

So let's explore the practice. I'll do a little bit of guiding at the beginning, in a very light way. Use your own phrases. I'll suggest some phrases, very simple phrases to begin, but you don't need to feel like you have to use my phrases for yourself. We'll stay with benefactor or self—I'm going to suggest you just start where it's easiest. Then we'll switch to friend. At some point in the guided meditation I'll suggest a timing for switching, but if it feels productive and appropriate for you to stay with wherever it's easiest, just stay there.

Guided Meditation

Allowing yourself to be as comfortable as possible. Allowing the mind and body to settle. And allowing the attention to just take in, connect with whatever's happening in the area of your heart. No right or wrong there. Just how is your heart in this moment?

Allowing yourself to call to mind whoever's easiest—whether it's yourself or your benefactor—bringing that person to mind or bringing yourself into your heart. And allowing yourself to recollect some qualities that you appreciate about yourself or the benefactor. It's said that the proximate cause for metta is seeing the beautiful. Allow yourself to connect with the beautiful of yourself or the benefactor.

And begin expressing the wishes of kindness, of friendliness, of caring. May I or you be happy. May I or you be healthy. May I or you be safe. May I or you live with ease.

Continuing to express the wish of metta for yourself or your benefactor. With each phrase, checking in—how does it land in your heart to make that wish? Feel free to play with flowing between self and benefactor as it feels appropriate for you.

Bringing your dear friend into your mind. Allowing yourself to recollect some qualities you appreciate about your friend. Beginning to offer the phrases of goodwill to your friend.

Bringing up an image of your friend, if that's accessible. If not, perhaps a sense of being with your friend. Saying the phrase, understanding the meaning, and touching back in—how does the heart feel having made that wish?—with each phrase.

If difficulty arises while doing the metta, knowing it's a very natural part of the practice. If it's okay to keep going, just continue. And also knowing it's fine to change to another person, switch to compassion practice, or use mindfulness with whatever is arising.

End of Guided Meditation

Do you have any questions about your metta practice?

A practitioner shares about noticing attachment arising when practicing with their sister—wanting her happiness to look a certain way.

Yes, that is near enemy, I think, because it is that sense of really wanting something specific. In effect, it sounds like it's in the terrain of compassion, because compassion comes with that wish to help. So it sounds like your sister's perhaps in a little bit of struggle.

The practitioner clarifies: "Not right now, but I want her to be accepted. I want her happiness to look a certain way."

I see. Yes, so just notice that. Notice that it's not just wishing her happiness—it's happiness with an agenda. Yes, that is near enemy.

So yes, just notice that and allow that, but see if you can release the agenda in a way.

When you get into a state of concentration, do you continue with the words, or do you stay with something else? There are different ways to explore it. When I've done metta as a concentration practice, I have continued with the words. In fact, it felt like I

got concentrated on the intention towards metta more than the feeling of metta. If you have more of the feeling of metta going, then you can let go of the words. But the words are kind of the engine that keeps it going.

It depends on how deep the concentration gets—at a certain point the words will fall away. But generally, you can keep going with the phrases. It actually supports the concentration to deepen, to keep going with the phrases.

A question about metta practice and compassion practice—are they different? And referring to the story I told about changing to compassion practice for myself on that daylong where it got so difficult to do the metta.

In compassion practice, there is a difference. In metta practice we're connecting with the quality of connectivity, of the open heart, friendliness, caring—those kinds of qualities. With compassion practice we're highlighting suffering. It's a similar quality of heart, and that quality of the open heart, when it meets suffering, resonates with compassion. So it's a different quality, and we may actually do some compassion practice later in the retreat.

In that case what we do is we actively bring suffering into our minds to cultivate that quality of compassion—the heart that can stay open in the face of suffering. And so when I did that for myself in that daylong retreat, what was coming up for me was suffering. It was much more natural for me to use the compassion phrase, which is very simple: may I be free from this suffering. That resonated. I did wish to be free from that suffering. It was a very natural wish, and it made the practice doable. So it felt different to me. It is a different practice because with compassion practice we're actively trying to meet suffering.

A question about pace, about staying with a category—the moving between benefactor and friend in a qualitative way. Sometimes if you go into concentration, it moves a lot more slowly.

I can speak from my own experience around this. There are probably many different ways. One thing I really appreciate about practice is that there are so many different doorways and so many different ways it works for different people. So the first thing I'd suggest is to notice what works for you. Trust your experience. If you find it's supportive to just stay with one category and that helps deepen the concentration, that's great—do that. If you find it's more helpful to switch categories, if you find the metta stays more lively when you're switching, play with that.

For myself, I've seen with concentration practice that it stabilizes—at least for me—to stay with one person for a while. The person becomes much more clear. The experience of directing metta towards that person is more clear.

About going more towards the pervading—we haven't really gotten to that yet in these instructions, but I have been playing with it in my own practice and actually find it fairly natural. When the feeling is present, you let go of the person, let go of the object, and allow the feeling to spread. That's also a possibility, especially for concentration. It does feel very natural to do that.

So I really would encourage you to discover what works for you, but those are just a few thoughts around that question.

For me, when I did that month-long metta practice, I stayed with self and benefactor for two weeks. I didn't even switch categories. I really allowed it to stabilize there, and that allowed the concentration to deepen.

It depends partly on whether you're using it as a concentration practice or not. When I'm not using metta as a concentration practice, and I'm more looking at just allowing the heart to vibrate and resonate in sympathy with people, I kind of just let whoever pops up, pop up. I'm not so concerned about stabilizing the mind with one particular person. So it partly depends on your purpose. Are you using it for concentration? And if you are, then I think staying with one person over sittings, over days, is helpful.

Someone mentioned adapting the phrases for themselves to very specific issues that were coming up in the retreat, moving far away from the standard phrases, and then when moving on to friend or benefactor, returning to the more traditional ones.

Again, the answer is different depending on whether you're doing it as a concentration practice or you're more interested in cultivating the quality of metta just for itself. Generally, I find if I'm just cultivating the quality of metta for itself, I explore what works. That may be different phrases for different people. It might be switching categories more quickly, allowing different people to pop in, being really creative, envisioning people in different situations that reflect what they're doing.

When you're exploring it as a concentration practice, generally simplifying the phrases is helpful. And then over time, when I was doing it as a concentration practice, even the whole phrase "may I be happy, may you be happy" began to feel like too much. And it was just, "Oh, happy." Just using that simple word. Having the phrases be able to collapse down to a simple word was helpful. But again, it depends.

Someone shared that what was coming up with these metta practices felt like beauty, overwhelming at times, with the body kind of contorting.

So what I'm hearing is that when you're doing the metta, something comes up that feels like beauty—a beautiful state of mind—and it's strong, it's overwhelming. This sometimes happens. I found for myself, in my early years of practice, aversive states of mind were really comfortable for me. I could be angry and know I was angry, and this was not too difficult. But joy, happiness, love—those were really hard. They felt overwhelming to connect with, so unfamiliar in a way.

What I'd suggest perhaps, if it feels overwhelming, is to switch to mindfulness rather than continuing with the metta practice. Switch to mindfulness and see if you can allow the feeling. For myself, the little bit of wisdom that was helpful when beautiful states would arise and I couldn't deal with them, when they were overwhelming, was this: "It's okay, this will pass." And that was actually really great, you know.

What would seem to happen was that the resistance to that state would let go, and then the state would get strong. It would even get more intense, but then it would be like a wave that flowed out. And then on the other side of it, it was much more tranquil. So that little bit of wisdom—it's okay, this will pass—allowed it to do its natural movement.

I would encourage mindfulness of that experience. Let go of the metta phrases for a while and just explore: how is it to allow this beauty? You may notice some contraction, some resistance, some fear, some confusion. Allow all of that, and perhaps this reminder: it's okay, it will pass.

So we need to stop. Thank you for your metta practice. It's such a beautiful thing to sit in a room where this is what's happening.

What great karma.

CHAPTER 92

Awareness of Awareness

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella offers a profound exploration of mindfulness as an object of investigation rather than simply a tool we employ. Drawing on the Abhidhamma distinction between prompted and unprompted mindfulness, she encourages practitioners to notice the spontaneous re-arising of awareness—those moments when mindfulness returns without effort—as doorways to understanding both the nature of awareness and the not-self (anattā) characteristic of mental formations.

Fella shares personal stories from intensive retreat practice to illustrate how curiosity about where and how mindfulness gets lost can reveal deep patterns of mind. Whether losing awareness in specific activities, states of body like pain, or challenging mind states, she emphasizes investigation over judgment. The talk includes practical guidance on recognizing when the mind needs rest, when to redirect attention from overwhelming states, and how settling practice can open doors to subtler experience.

The teaching also addresses common assumptions about what meditation "should" feel like, pointing out that awareness can function in many ways—broad and panoramic, picking up individual experiences like popcorn, feeling separate from objects or intimate with them. Rather than constructing a particular meditative state, practitioners are encouraged to check: "Am I aware? What am I aware of?" This curious, non-judgmental approach to understanding one's own mind supports the development of wisdom that naturally leads to freedom.

Tonight I'd like to explore another area of experience, one that we've been talking about a lot and yet perhaps not talking about in terms of investigating, and that is investigating mindfulness itself.

I think it can be interesting to explore and get curious about the comings and goings of mindfulness. We're here practicing mindfulness, and sometimes in doing a mindfulness practice, we get a little bit identified with the mindfulness as being something that we're doing, and we don't necessarily think about it as something to investigate. When does mindfulness arise? How does mindfulness arise? Where does mindfulness get lost? Investigating it as a phenomenon can help us to loosen some of that attachment we have to the doing of mindfulness.

There's a lot to learn in this exploration, a lot to learn about how our minds get caught, how our minds do what they do. And so really, I like to encourage a sense of investigation and curiosity rather than judgment. In looking at the coming and going of mindfulness, we can get judgmental about our practice—aren't I supposed to be doing the mindfulness? But we can actually investigate this coming and going.

One thing I want to say here at the beginning of the talk is that I'm going to use the terms mindfulness and awareness kind of synonymously. We all, I think as teachers, use the word awareness somewhat loosely and perhaps differently. So I just wanted to clarify that from the outset.

The first thing I'd like to explore is recognizing mindfulness itself, recognizing what it is, how it feels. The Abhidhamma talks about two ways mindfulness happens for us, and they're called prompted mindfulness and unprompted mindfulness. Prompted mindfulness is what we typically think that we're doing, what we're typically engaged in during our mindfulness practice. Prompted mindfulness is when mindfulness is present, encouraging more mindfulness. We are mindful, and in being mindful, we can encourage ourselves: be aware, pay attention. And so that's prompted mindfulness.

The recognition of the experience of mindfulness itself, in my own exploration of this, I found coming in the exploration of what's called unprompted mindfulness, which is the spontaneous re-arising of mindfulness—something we're all really familiar with. We've been watching this for two weeks now. Mindfulness comes back. It comes back spontaneously.

Typically what we do in that moment is we start doing something with what we have become aware of, especially in our daily lives. These moments of unprompted mindfulness actually happen to us a lot more than we realize. This moment of mindfulness returning, the recognition of what's happening in the present moment, being aware of what's happening in the present moment—that returns actually quite a lot. But often what happens in that moment is that we get attached to or identified with or kind of stuck to the thing that we've become aware of, and we start doing something with it or thinking about it or trying to figure out what we're supposed to do about that. And so we rarely actually notice that mindfulness has returned, that this faculty of mindfulness has arisen. We're more attuned to recognizing what mindfulness has become aware of, and then often from that, getting lost.

Cultivating this recognition of mindfulness, this recognition of the spontaneous arising of mindfulness, I found to be a very helpful tool for getting familiar with what mindfulness feels like, what the experience of mindfulness is. Partly because there's some contrast in that moment of mindfulness coming back—a little bit of contrast in

what the mind feels like now when it's present, aware, connected with experience, and what it felt like a few moments ago when it was not connected with experience, not aware. In that moment of mindfulness arising, there's an opportunity for us to begin to clearly notice the distinction between what it's like to be mindful and what it's like to not be mindful. There can be a lingering memory of the flavor of the mind lost in thought, confused, spinning, in that moment that mindfulness returns.

For me, when I realized this—that this was a great place to begin to get familiar with the distinction between being mindful and not mindful—I stopped judging myself for my wandering mind. If my mind wanders a hundred times in a sitting, that gives me a hundred opportunities to recognize what it's like to be mindful. It's a great tool to shift our perspective about waking up into mindfulness again. Curiosity: what's it like? What's it like to now be aware?

I would encourage this not to be a big project, but just in a light way, seeing if you can take some curiosity, some interest in that experience of awareness. What is it like to be aware?

We can also explore this when we are already mindful. I found that moment of awakening, of waking up, to be a beautiful place to explore it. And we can also explore it when we're already aware. Here, in this place, comes the question or recognition: awareness is here, I'm aware, awareness is present. There is awareness present. Now we may not be able to consciously tap into what that experience is, but we know it at some intuitive level right now. Do you know that you're aware? Usually the answer is yes.

What we are experiencing is another question entirely. Developing familiarity with that experience—awareness itself as distinct from what we are aware of—is part of this exploration. How do we begin to recognize awareness itself as distinct from what we are aware of?

Mostly in our early practice, we are more familiar with noticing what we are aware of and less familiar with noticing the awareness itself. And so this is really the whole subject of the talk today.

So back to this moment of waking up. One of the beautiful things about that moment of unprompted mindfulness, when we can begin to tap into that arising, is that we see it is a moment of awareness that didn't take any effort. It just happened. It begins to give us the sense, a flavor, of what it might mean to have that relaxed, non-striving mindfulness—that moment when mindfulness arises. Did you do that? Did you have to do anything to make that happen? It happens spontaneously.

Appreciating the quality in this moment of arising of awareness itself, and also the effortless nature of it, the spontaneous arising of it, is actually a pointer to the not-self nature of our experience. Mindfulness arises. Did you do that? It happened. It happened as a result of conditions. Causes and conditions came together for mindfulness to re-arise. There was no one who said, "I'm going to be mindful now." It just happened.

So this exploration of the coming and going of mindfulness begins to point us to this truth of not-self.

In that moment of recognizing mindfulness returning, first of all, just in a light way, recognize that you're now aware. Notice what's obvious. Wake up into what is already happening. There's no need to come back to anything because the mind is already present.

Now depending on what practice you're doing, what tools you're working with, you may in that moment—after you've become aware and recognized awareness and noticed what you are aware of—because awareness comes with an object. There's always the arising of awareness with something that it is aware of. So waking up to what's already happening. And then if you're practicing concentration, because awareness is back, you have the choice. You can now choose. And this is where prompted awareness comes in. We choose what to pay attention to. Or we choose to simply settle back and allow the next thing and the next thing and the next thing.

So this side of exploring awareness—noticing what it feels like to be aware. What does it feel like to be aware? And again, one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says don't look too hard for it. You know, if you know that you're aware, that's actually enough. Over time, the feeling of awareness or the experience of awareness, the experience of what it means to be aware, becomes more of a felt sense or it becomes more clear. But initially, at least for me, it was not obvious.

It's actually, in some ways, such a familiar experience. Being aware is such a familiar experience that it's like the air we breathe. We don't really notice it. It's the water we're swimming in. The fish swimming in water doesn't really know it's in water. The experience of awareness, of recognizing awareness, is kind of like that. It's so close to us that it's not obvious, even though we know that we're aware.

So it's kind of almost a koan for us to have that curiosity: What is awareness? What is this experience of awareness?

The next side of this that I'd like to explore is how do we lose awareness? Where and how do we lose awareness? Again, the comings and goings of mindfulness teach us a lot about our minds and inform us, give us some support for our mindfulness practice.

This side of exploring where we lose mindfulness really supports the practice of continuity, because as we get familiar with where we lose awareness—where awareness wanders out, where mindfulness wanders out the door into thought—as we get familiar with those places, those activities, those mind states, those times that mindfulness leaves, we can add a little bit of interest to those times and perhaps begin to watch the mind lose interest, begin to leave the object that it's noticing.

This exploration of noticing where the mind wanders out isn't intended to be a judgment.

It's more, again, curiosity to learn about our minds.

Now again, anattā, not-self. We are actually, moment by moment, all day long, presented with evidence for this truth of not-self. And we just don't recognize it.

One of the ways the Buddha talked about not-self in the famous discourse on the characteristic of not-self: he talked about our mind and body processes not being under our control as being evidence for not-self. He talked about this in respect to the five aggregates that Guy spoke about the other day. Body is out of our control. Body is not self. Feelings are not self. Perceptions are not self. Mental formations are not self. Consciousness is not self.

And mindfulness, the factor of mindfulness, is a mental formation. It is an arising, like concentration, like anger, like confusion, like all the various states of mind. It is a mental formation. It is created by causes and conditions and has some intentionality to it.

And of mental formations, along with all the other aggregates, the Buddha says: "Volitional formations are non-self. For if volitional formations were self, volitional formations would not lead to affliction. And it would be possible to determine of mental formations: 'Let my mental formations be thus. Let my mental formations not be thus.'"

Would you do that if you could? "May my mind be filled with bliss." And boom, the mind is filled with bliss. "May mindfulness be perfectly continuous." Boom, mindfulness is perfectly continuous. Would you do that? Can we do that? No.

And as the Buddha says, "Because volitional formations are non-self, volitional formations lead to affliction, and it is not possible to determine of volitional formations: 'Let my volitional formations be thus. Let my volitional formations not be thus.'"

So mindfulness leaves. If we had control over mindfulness, if mindfulness were under control of self, if there were a self that could control it, we would do that. So this fact that the mind wanders out—let's not judge it, let's explore it. Let's look at this phenomenon of mindfulness leaving.

We might lose awareness in specific activities in our day: washing dishes, going into our rooms. Investigate for yourself. What are the times that seem to be the mindfulness black holes? Doing your yogi job, maybe taking a walk on the loop. What are the activities that you tend to lose mindfulness in?

Now, I'm not suggesting that you stop doing those activities. Often we can't. We lose mindfulness going into our dorm rooms. That seems to be a place where it's like, "Oh, the door's closed. I can do anything I want. I don't have to be mindful here." But we have to go into our rooms to go to bed, to get our things, whatever. So this is not saying to avoid the activities where we lose mindfulness, but to be curious about the process by which we lose it.

When we become aware that we're losing mindfulness in certain activities, one of my teachers says it's like we can add a little salt to that activity. Be curious. Be interested. How does it happen that mindfulness gets lost when I go into my room?

How does it happen that mindfulness gets lost when I do my yogi job? Be curious about that.

At one point on a retreat, I began to realize that I got lost going into the bathroom. And at some point I realized that one of the key places I was getting lost was staring at myself in the mirror. I would wake up staring at myself in the mirror and think, "Wow, didn't notice that was in the field." I clearly was just waking up and finding myself staring at myself in the mirror.

So I began to get curious about this—just to explore what was happening that I wasn't able to be present in the bathroom. I started exploring, and it was kind of like I'd go into the bathroom thinking, "Okay, probably going to lose awareness here. Let's see if I can catch it this time." And it was a long time—this was on a month-long retreat—and it would be, "Ah, lost it again." I'd wake up staring at myself, and I hadn't caught it. "Ah, next time maybe." So rather than beating myself up about it, it was more like, "Ah well, I'll just keep trying. I'll just try next time."

And at some point, when I was washing my hands, I noticed the intention to look up. Guy was talking about intention the other day. Just being more continuously mindful while washing my hands, I noticed the intention to look up. It was kind of a habit to look at myself in the mirror while washing my hands. It wasn't some deep emotional thing of needing to be mirrored or see myself—it was simply a habit of mind. The curiosity began to reveal that habit, and it began to allow me to be conscious in a place where I had habitually gotten lost, because I got interested, because I got curious about it.

We also might lose awareness in states of body—with pain, or even with really pleasant physical sensations, which can come particularly as the mind gets more concentrated. That can be a doorway out of which the mind wanders. So again, investigating this, being curious about it.

I'll tell a story around my own exploration of this, around pain—getting lost in pain. One of the ways, one of the many ways that I got lost in pain... I found several different strategies my mind used to avoid pain by getting lost in various other states. And one of the states my mind got lost in when there was pain was singing. I would wake up seeing that I was singing a song in my head.

So I began exploring this. Rather than trying to double down, to be with the pain, to try to avoid the singing, I got curious. It was kind of like settling back: "Okay, I see that the mind is kind of leaving from this place of pain. Can I get curious about how this happens?" And in waking up into the singing, what I noticed was that when the mind moved to singing, it lost some of its grip on the pain. I recognized that the singing was actually a strategy the mind had to let go of the pain.

This is something to be curious about with our own relationship to pain in particular. The mind has strategies that it uses. It has ways it has figured out to let go of pain, or ignore pain, or not have to deal with pain. Often we have that capacity in our minds—it just clicks into some other state, maybe spacing out, or singing in this case.

What I noticed in that waking up is that the mind had lost its grip on the pain. And in the waking up and seeing that the mind had lost the grip, there were a few moments I could experience the pain without being so tight around it. That began to give the mind an education in the possibility: "Oh, it's actually possible to be with pain without this tightening and squeezing and bearing down."

The mind would then go into the gripping again. That was my habit around pain—when I wasn't checked out, I would kind of bear down on it, squeeze into it, force the mind into it. But because I had that opportunity in waking up into the experience of

singing and seeing that the mind had let go of that grip, getting the sense or the experience of not being in the grip of pain while present for the pain, I could then begin to see the grip arise. Seeing that arising of the bearing down, the mind began to understand how it was involved in that gripping. And the gripping intensified the pain. It was very clear that that fastening to the pain intensified it.

The mind began to understand, on its own in effect. Without my having to try to stop what the mind was doing, the mind began to understand that when it grips down on pain, the pain is worse. And the mind began to learn how to not do that without using the strategy of singing. It began to be able to stay present for the pain without either the gripping happening or the ejecting into another state of mind.

So again, curiosity—curiosity about where we lose awareness and interest in exploring what's happening there. We might lose awareness in states of mind: boredom, confusion, thoughts of work, planning, fantasy. Here, often we notice what we have gotten lost in almost in retrospect, like in the description of losing awareness in places, in things we're doing. Often we notice after the fact. Like in the bathroom—I noticed after the fact that I had been lost in thought.

Likewise with states of mind, we may wake up and realize, "Wow, I've been gone for a while. The last thing I remember was that boredom was present." We may know in the waking up, recognize, "Oh, okay, I was trying to hang out with boredom and that's where the mind got lost." Recognizing what we wake up into can help us in that moment of waking up, that noticing we're aware and what we're aware of. In that moment of waking up, if we wake up into fantasy or boredom or confusion, the simple recognizing—"Oh, okay, I'm aware, this awareness is back, and the state of mind is confusion or boredom"—the familiarity with what we've become aware of begins to help us recognize the state more quickly.

An example of this from my own practice around anger. This was actually my very first meditation practice in daily life. Anger was kind of out of control in my mind, and I vowed to myself, "I'll wake up when anger happens." Just that commitment, because I had recognized anger was a big issue. I would just get lost in anger. And so that commitment to recognizing "anger is present" began to have an impact. Just that orientation—"I want to remember, I want to wake up when that mind state is happening"—began to change things. And I began to wake up in it.

The first few times I woke up into it, I was in a rage. I could notice, "Yep, well, this is anger." Unpleasant. It was pretty early in my meditation practice, and it was kind of like, "What do I do with this? I have no idea." At that point it was, "Well, I don't know what to do with this. I guess I go back to work." In retrospect, I saw that actually just

that simple recognition gave me some space. It allowed me to go back to work. Before, I had been frozen at my keyboard—I was working on the computer, frozen, not able to do anything. The recognition—"Oh, anger, this is anger, this is rage"—allowed me to go back to work.

But this practice, over the course of several months, began to show something remarkable. I began to notice that the mindfulness woke up into the pattern of anger earlier and earlier and earlier in the process. There was much more of a kind of normal anger arising, much less challenging to be with, the more I practiced with this. And then, really beginning to be able to see the arising of anger—huge insights into the mind that kind of actually wanted to get angry. That was an eye-opening thing, to see a thought arise in my mind and sense the inclination of the mind to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry.

And in that moment of seeing that, having spent all of those months paying attention to anger arising, being present for anger in the moment, having spent all of that time paying attention to anger, the mind knew deeply that anger was suffering, anger was dukkha. And so when the mind saw itself headed towards anger, when the mind realized it was headed in that direction, the mind simply said, "I don't think so. That way lies suffering. Let's not do that." And I didn't have to do that, actually. That happened because of the awareness. Wisdom made that choice. Wisdom made the choice to not follow that intention, to jump on that thought and think more thoughts to get angry.

So this is the power of being curious about where we get lost. Now also, in terms of where we get lost in states of mind, there's sometimes—and we've talked about this, so I'll just drop this in to complete this area.

There are times when we get lost in certain states of mind where the state of mind has a gravitational pull on us. Someone used the word quicksand. Others often use the phrase "going down the rabbit hole" of that mind state. It's like there's no traction for mindfulness. And so that's another way we get lost, that mindfulness gets lost.

It's really helpful to know for yourself when you're entering that gravitational pull—like the black hole of that state of mind. The notion of a black hole is that when light gets to a certain closeness to that gravitational pull, it won't be possible for light to escape. It's kind of like that with certain mind states: if we try to bring mindfulness to them, the mindfulness just gets sucked into the black hole.

Recognizing that—recognizing the rabbit hole, the quicksand of the state of mind—means knowing when it's appropriate and helpful to say "not now." Just not even try to be mindful of that. With myself, I would kind of bow to that state of mind and say, "I see

you. I see you, and I can't be mindful of you right now. I'll be mindful of you when my mindfulness is stronger, but you do your thing and I'm just going to pay attention to my feet right now." So just to redirect the attention rather than get sucked into that gravitational pull.

Another very interesting place that we lose awareness—and I think Carol mentioned this the other night—is as practice deepens, when the mind begins to get more stable. There's a kind of cycle that happens on retreat. We have a period of time where the mindfulness seems pretty stable and clear, and then suddenly it's like—it's crazy. There's a purification cycle that can happen. After a period of time of having a more continuous mindfulness, with the mind being in a more open state, sometimes what happens is that something that's been repressed or pushed down by the normal habits and structures of our mind—it's kind of like that thing goes, "Oh good, there's space. Let me out." And anger erupts, or confusion erupts, or whatever. So there's that possibility that as the mind settles, we go through these purification cycles.

Another way the mind gets lost as it settles—and this happens more frequently than I had realized when I first began recognizing it as a pattern—is this: when I've had a period of time when the mindfulness is pretty stable, and then suddenly I start to notice a lot of wandering mind, I get interested in what's happening. What seems to occur sometimes with the settling of the mind and the continuity of mindfulness is that as mindfulness becomes more continuous, it begins to gravitate toward somewhat more subtle experience. With our usual agendas—paying attention to this, noticing that aspect of experience—sometimes we don't notice that mindfulness is actually attuning to a subtler level of experience. And in not noticing that, that's a doorway for the mind to start wandering.

An example from my practice: I was sitting the three-month course and the awareness had gotten pretty settled, pretty stable. I could be pretty clear with the breathing, pretty much for an entire sitting. It was just right there. And then one morning I sat down and the mind was just all over the place. I thought, "Wow, what happened to my mindfulness?" I had developed enough curiosity to rather than doubling down with "I'm going to just stay with the breath," I got curious about where the mind was leaving, where it was wandering.

What I discovered was that within one or two breaths, when I actually got much more attentive to what the mindfulness was connecting with, as I observed the in-breath and the out-breath, within the space of one or two breaths, the sensations of

breath almost disappeared. And the mind wandered. That was where the mind was wandering. The sensations were getting so subtle that the mindfulness wasn't quite sure how to meet it. Or I wasn't quite sure how to meet it with mindfulness.

One time this was happening on a retreat in Burma. What I had decided on that retreat, because I wasn't as skilled or familiar with this practice, was to turn my attention to something more obvious—some more obvious experience, like the sensations of my butt—rather than seeing if I could be with the subtle experience. I reported this to Sayadaw U Pandita, and I said, "The sensations of the breath are getting so subtle that I turned my attention to something more obvious." He said, "You don't have to do that. Just notice the subtle breath." I thought, "Oh, that's possible?" And I began playing with that, almost using that as my note: "Subtle breath is happening. Subtle breath is happening." That allowed the mindfulness to begin to connect with the subtler level of experience.

The mind can also lose awareness in places or mind states that we think it's not possible to be mindful of. Sleepiness, for example. Dullness of mind. Spacing out. Spacing out seems to be the quintessential non-mindful activity, right? How would it be possible to be mindful of spacing out? One day I was noticing my mind spacing out over breakfast.

And rather than having — well, at first actually, it was kind of like, "Oh, spacing out, come back." You know, eating breakfast. Pay attention to the breakfast — lifting, tasting, chewing — and the mind would space out. Okay, come back. This bringing back, bringing back, bringing back. This notion of can't be mindful while spacing out, so bring it back to what you can be mindful of.

At some point, I began to just get curious about this. Where is the mind leaving breakfast? Where is it leaving the experience of eating breakfast? And what I experienced was that I was paying attention to the sensations of eating, and then I felt this letting go happen from the sensations of eating. What it felt like was that the mind kind of went and just hung out up here somewhere — above and to the right of my head — just in a zoned out experience. And to my surprise, I could be mindful of that.

Actually, what I recognized in that moment of being mindful of that spacing out was that the mind needed rest. It was tired, and it was taking its rest. Whether I had anything to say about it or not, it was going to take its rest. And when I allowed the mindfulness of it, I noticed it lasted for maybe thirty seconds, a minute. And then clarity of other experience began to arise.

Sometimes when the mind is leaving the present moment, it's letting go. What I understood in that experience was that I had been kind of harsh with myself — "stay here, stay here, stay here" — when the mind actually needed a rest. And I could allow it to do that mindfully. I think it actually allowed it to rest more deeply because of the mindfulness.

This points to beginning to recognize when mindfulness lets go of an object. On another retreat, I was exploring the breath, staying with the breath, and I began to get very attuned to the quality of the mindfulness of the breath. I could see the mindfulness of the breath pretty clearly, and I began to see the mind lose a little bit of interest in the breath. The awareness and the breath were like this — the mindfulness and the breath were touching, right near each other. And then I began to get the sense of what it meant for the mindfulness to lose a little interest, to go into that not-so-mindful-of-the-breath experience.

Initially I was recognizing that and coming back to the breath. Then it would leave the breath. Come back, leave, come back. At some point I got curious, because I realized I was aware while the mind was leaving the breath. I thought, well, where does it want to go? Let's see where it wants to go. And that was the beginning of a deepening into a whole different domain of experience. The mind moved into a very spacious, settled, quiet place — a place I hadn't actually touched into before.

So curiosity around mindfulness leaving the object — sometimes it takes us deeper. Sometimes it educates us in how our mind has strategies to deal with things like pain. In any case, making this kind of exploration begins to reveal new things about the mind.

This also points to the way we sometimes think the mind has to be in a particular state in order to meditate. I think this comes with some familiarity around what it feels like when it's clear. When mindfulness is really clear and we know just exactly moment by moment what's happening — that happens from time to time. Maybe it happens for a few moments, maybe a little bit longer. But we all enter into that place where it's so clear, and we think that's what we're going for. We try to find that. And we may find ourselves trying to put ourselves into certain states of mind in order to construct that. I certainly found myself doing that.

On one retreat I was practicing in Burma, doing walking meditation. As I ended my walking meditation, I was moving to the dorm where I was doing most of my meditation in my room. As I approached my dorm, I found myself trying to put my mind into

the meditative state. Seeing that, actually watching the mind do that — well, wait a minute, what's wrong with this state? Awareness is present. Does it need to be any other way?

What I recognized somewhat later, after feeling that happen a few times—that kind of movement toward what I thought the meditative state was—was that it was actually a subtle repression of thought. I was moving into a state where there was a kind of holding thought at bay.

There's no need to actually put yourself into a certain state to meditate. If you are aware, meditation can unfold. Checking back to that early part of the talk: Can you recognize that you're aware? Am I aware? And what am I aware of?

When I find myself trying to change the state of my mind in order to meditate, I ask myself if it's necessary. It may be. There are times when the mind needs a little bit more of a container, more of a sense of directing the attention, choosing the object, being with the breath, stabilizing the attention. There are times when that's necessary. Other times, check in to see that awareness is present. What is awareness aware of? It may be pointing to something new or unfamiliar. So try mindfulness first before assuming that you can't necessarily be mindful in a particular mind state.

There are also different ways that the mind observes. Again, if we have some idea of how it's supposed to be when I'm mindful, we may miss the fact that there are actually quite a lot of different ways that the mind pays attention.

One distinction I'd like to point to that we've talked about a little bit is a distinction between mindfulness and attention. Attention is a factor of mind that is essentially choosing an object or connecting with an object—choosing an object, let's say. Attention chooses what to pay attention to. And attention is an interesting factor of mind in that it is amenable to agency, to conscious choice around what we pay attention to. We can say, "I'm going to pay attention to the breath right now." We can choose where to direct attention. But attention is also happening in every moment, whether we're choosing it or not. If we're not consciously choosing it, generally our conditioning is choosing what attention is landing on. And this is the exploration of open awareness: What is the mind choosing to pay attention to?

Sometimes people have the sense, before they get familiar with open awareness, that if I'm not choosing an object, I'm not meditating. But we can be mindful of experience when we're directing attention or when we are allowing what we attend to be chosen by the mind itself.

So that's one difference in how we can pay attention. The mind can choose an object—there can be a conscious engagement with choosing an object—or the mind can be in a more open, receptive space. In that open, receptive space, there are also different ways that the mind can pay attention. It can be broad and panoramic, kind of like a wide-angle lens. The visual field or the auditory field can be an interesting way into recognizing the different ways the mind can pay attention. We can pay attention in the visual field by not focusing on anything, but just taking in a wide panorama. Likewise, in the auditory field, we can not land or settle down on any one sound, but just take in the whole symphony of sounds. That broad awareness, taking in the breadth of experience, is one way that the mind can be clearly aware.

Or the mind might pick up on individual experience. It might notice this, and then that, and then that, and then that in that open awareness. It might very clearly land on a sound, a body sensation, an emotion, a thought, a body sensation, a breath—just very clearly, like popcorn almost, the mind picking up on individual experience. It might feel like the awareness is jumping from thing to thing. It might feel like it's flowing from experience to experience. So many different ways that mindfulness can function. And to have any idea that it's supposed to feel a particular way may obscure the understanding of something new. This is something I have really begun to appreciate.

Sometimes the awareness feels like we're separate from the object. There's a distance between the knowing, the observing, and the thing observed. And it can be very clear that the mind is balanced and at ease in that time. Other times it feels like the awareness and the thing observed are just right there together. It's like the awareness is rising up right into the middle of the experience. Both, in my experience, seem to have that quality of ease, relaxation.

I reported this to Sayadaw U Tejaniya at one point. I said, "I recognize that there are these different ways that the mind can feel at ease when observing. Sometimes it feels like there's a separation with the object."

And sometimes it feels like the mindfulness is right in the middle of the object. His response was that these are two different perspectives on the same experience. In one case, the awareness is actually highlighting the difference between the object and the knowing. In the other case, the awareness is highlighting the fact that they're happening together. Neither one is right, neither one is better. They are simply different ways that mindfulness can meet experience.

Notice how it is. Notice how it is for you.

That is my main hope from this exploration with you this evening—that you will get curious about your mind. Get curious about what it pays attention to, how it gets lost, what it feels like to be mindful. This exploration I sometimes call "Your Mind 101." Get familiar with what your mind does. Rather than having some agenda for it to be doing something, simply ask: what is it doing? Know the skillful means of when it's helpful to ground the attention, to choose an object.

This exploration also opens us into a doorway of some of the fundamental processes of the mind, of beginning to see how the mind does what it does. It starts to illuminate feeling, perception, consciousness, mental formation. It starts to illuminate the processes of the mind and supports our understanding of them as processes—not something I'm in control of, but something that can be known and understood.

And that wisdom brings freedom.

Let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 93

Mindfulness of Feeling: Vedanā

Andrea Fella · 1h02

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella offers an in-depth exploration of vedanā—the feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant that accompanies every moment of experience. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and the Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving (MN 38), she explains why the Buddha devoted an entire foundation of mindfulness to this often-overlooked aspect of experience.*
>
> *Fella illuminates how vedanā serves as the critical junction point in paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination) where, in the presence of ignorance, feeling leads to craving, clinging, and ultimately suffering. She distinguishes between worldly feelings (sāmisa vedanā) connected to sense pleasure and unworldly feelings (nirāmisa vedanā) arising from concentration and insight practice. Through vivid personal examples—from eating apples with bean dip to investigating aversion during walking meditation—she demonstrates how much of what we perceive as physical pleasure or pain is actually mediated through mental processes and conditioned associations.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance for investigating feeling tone in both formal practice and daily life, including how to work skillfully with neutral experience and recognize habitual reactive patterns. Fella emphasizes that the path to liberation lies not in avoiding certain feelings but in comprehending their impermanent, conditioned nature—abandoning what she calls 'the path of agreeing and disagreeing' with experience as it arises.*

Tonight I'd like to explore in some depth the topic of vedanā, of exploring our experience through this perspective of pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

This experience of feeling tone is common to every experience that we have. Every single sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, every single arising in our mind comes with this flavor of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It's a natural arising based on just contact with our sense experience. In fact, our brains seem designed to operate with this valence in a way to protect ourselves from the unpleasant and to guide us towards the pleasant.

It's an aspect of experience that can be easy to overlook. The actual experience of feeling tone can be easy to overlook because we're so busy responding to it. When something pleasant arises, we tend to automatically try to get more of it, to hold onto it.

When something unpleasant arises, we tend to automatically try to get rid of it. And so while we're very attuned to the experience of pleasant and unpleasant, we're not necessarily conscious of it. Our bodies, our minds tend to react automatically, but we don't really consciously experience this flavor.

The Buddha pointed to this flavor of experience as a very important aspect of our experience to pay attention to, just because it is the springboard from which we react. In some ways we think that we perhaps like certain things—like certain flavors, or like the way certain things look, or like certain configurations of experience. But the Buddha points to something deeper: it's not necessarily the things themselves. For instance, I like chocolate ice cream. To me, chocolate ice cream is pleasant. And the Buddha says that's what we actually like—the pleasant. Our minds think we like the chocolate ice cream.

So the Buddha, in pointing to this, says this is the place from which our reactivity springs. Bonnie mentioned the other night this process of dependent origination and the way feeling leads to reactivity, which is very clearly laid out in this teaching. We'll probably talk about this more at a later time, this cycle of dependent origination. Tonight I'm just going to briefly go over the way feeling is embedded into this cycle.

Basically, as I just mentioned, every single experience that we have, every contact with our sense bases creates, produces this feeling tone. When ignorance is present—the whole cycle of dependent origination begins with ignorance and is predicated on ignorance arising—when ignorance, that is the not-seeing of how suffering is created, when ignorance arises with feeling, it leads to craving. From craving follows clinging, from clinging follows becoming, identification, selfing, and then suffering.

The key point I see in how feeling leads to craving is that it's not an automatic leap from feeling to craving. It seems pretty automatic in a way. When we're just going through our lives, we kind of automatically move toward the pleasant, automatically move away from the unpleasant. But this is happening in concert with ignorance arising in the mind, with not being clearly aware, with not understanding how suffering arises in the mind. When we are not seeing clearly, feeling leads on to craving, leads on to clinging, leads on to suffering.

It's a very familiar process and seems automatic in a way, but it's not fixed. It's not hardwired. This is why the Buddha highlights the importance of noticing feeling tone. Because with mindfulness and wisdom brought to that very experience, it can short-circuit the typical movement towards craving and actually lead in another direction entirely—towards freedom, towards liberation.

This highlights the importance of meeting feeling with mindfulness and wisdom. The second foundation of mindfulness is devoted to feeling. Out of four foundations of mindfulness, one is the body, attending to the experience of the body. The second foundation is devoted to this exploration of pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It was that important for the Buddha to highlight it in a foundation of mindfulness.

I'm going to read you the first part of this, which many of you are probably familiar with: "And how does one abide contemplating feelings as feelings? Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel an unpleasant feeling.' When feeling a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling.'"

It's really quite a simple instruction, although not necessarily so easy to effect, to accomplish. Feeling tone can be quite subtle. And when it's not subtle, as I said a few minutes ago, it's often overlooked because we're kind of automatically reacting to it. So it can take some time to begin to attune ourselves to this quality, to begin to get familiar with feeling tones.

This pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality to experience is associated both with our physical experience and our mental experience. Every contact with the body, with all the bodily senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—there's the aspect of feeling that goes along with that. Every contact with the mind, every thought, every emotion, every idea, belief, opinion comes with a feeling tone.

Even physical experience, physical pleasure and pain, is mediated through the mind.

So we have the feeling tones associated with physical sensation, and we have feeling tones associated with mental experiences—emotions, for example. Anger is usually experienced as unpleasant. Happiness is pleasant. Grief is unpleasant. Equanimity, perhaps, as neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Although there is one place where the Buddha describes whatever is not felt as painful as felt as pleasurable, and in some ways describes the experience of equanimity, the absence of pain, as being pleasurable.

Getting familiar with feeling tone is, I think, one of the helpful explorations of our practice. Because as we get familiar with it, we can bring mindfulness and wisdom to it, beginning to short-circuit the kind of automatic movement towards reactivity.

The easiest place, actually, I think, is in exploring our physical sensations, physical contact. The touch sense of our skin is very attuned to pleasant and unpleasant. The nerve endings are quite attuned to pleasant and unpleasant. And so it's an easy place to

really begin to sense and feel into this quality. We can explore the unpleasantness of an itch, the unpleasantness of a painful experience in the body from sitting. We can explore the pleasant experience of the smoothness of breathing.

Just beginning to attune to that experience right now—what's the most obvious experience that you have? Can you tune in to whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant?

In daily activities, exploring this quality of pleasant and unpleasant can be really fun. I found exploring it in eating to be a really enjoyable experience. Just watching how the flow of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral happens, and how long it lasts. You put something in your mouth, like a bit of orange, and start chewing it. At the beginning, there's the burst of perhaps liquid and juice, tartness and sweetness coming together—this burst of sensation in your mouth.

For some of you, that may be pleasant. For some of you, it may be unpleasant. But just recognizing that experience, noticing: is it pleasant for you? Is it unpleasant for you? How long does the pleasant last? It's actually pretty short, how long it lasts.

You sit here before lunch just envisioning the pleasure of lunch. This is a way you can begin to explore the impact of thoughts and how they affect feeling tone. You've got the thought of lunch. It makes you feel good to think about lunch. You envision how great it's going to be to eat, and the anticipation feels pretty good. But when we actually get to lunch and start eating it, we get these little tiny bursts. If you're actually paying attention, the actual physical experience of pleasure comes and goes pretty rapidly.

I found in exploring feeling tone while eating that it was a very interesting place to see the conditioned nature of feeling. I was here, I think it was maybe my first or second three-month course, and for tea one evening they served apples and bean dip. That was our evening meal. It was just about this time of year, early October, late September. So the apples were quite hard and quite crispy. I put a bite of apple in my mouth and I was almost overwhelmed with pleasant. It was pretty easy for me to tell that it was pleasant—a pleasant physical experience in my mouth that also produced delight. It produced delight in my mind, which created a kind of lovely bubbly sense throughout the whole body. Pleasant bodily experience, pleasant mental experience, both coming together.

Then I put the bean dip in my mouth, and that had a completely different texture and flavor. It was interesting. I mean, it was pretty good. And then I put the apple in my mouth again, and that second bite of apple after the bean dip was even more pleasant.

Something about the conditions on the tongue of having had something kind of pungent and smooth contrasted with the tartness and juiciness of the apple really highlighted the pleasantness of the apple for me.

So I kind of got into this alternating—bean dip, apple—noticing the pleasantness, eating several bites of apple, noticing it wasn't quite as pleasant. Just playing with it, exploring the experience. And the more I ate, the more diminished the pleasure became. I found that interesting too, perhaps getting acclimated to the food. But it really showed me that the pleasantness wasn't inherent in the apple or even the combination of bean dip and apple. It came as a result of various conditions coming together. And by the end of the meal, it was just kind of an apple. Just a more ordinary experience.

The mental feeling tone, which I've talked about just briefly, comes with every experience of our mind: ideas, thoughts, emotions. Sadness, perhaps, is usually unpleasant. Happiness is pleasant. Ideas, thoughts, views, and opinions also have a feeling tone, although I think most thoughts—the bare thought—at least in my exploration of this, and I can't say it's exhaustive by any means, but the bare thought itself, just the arising of a thought, seems to be pretty neutral. It's the associations that follow, the ideas, the opinions, the associations that come with it that may be pleasant or unpleasant, that seem to create the feeling tone around a thought.

So you may think of a friend that you dearly love. The thought of the friend itself, the initial thought, may be kind of neutral. But then the mind starts contemplating associations, starts remembering things. Perhaps sometimes, depending on your mood, the things you remember may be the things that you enjoy about that person, and a pleasant feeling tone arises. Other times, depending on your mood or state of mind, you may be inclined to remember, "Oh, but they did that thing. Why did they do that thing?" And then an unpleasant feeling tone arises.

So often I think thoughts and feelings will produce a kind of emotion that then has a feeling tone to it. I actually think thoughts, ideas, and associations are a kind of leading cause of our perception of feeling in our physical experience. Much of what we think we experience as pleasant or unpleasant actually comes because we have ideas about it.

There's actually a teaching in the Abhidhamma that refers to this somewhat, especially for the non-physical senses. The Abhidhamma says that the physical sense of touch

has pleasant, unpleasant quality to it. In fact, that's pretty much the way our nerves are designed—to produce pleasant and unpleasant in our physical contact.

But the Abhidhamma proposes, and I'm just going to put this out there because I don't know that I completely believe this, but I found it to be an interesting exploration in my own practice. The Abhidhamma proposes that the feeling tone of contact with eye, ear, nose, and tongue—the bare contact—is neutral. Any time we experience pleasant or unpleasant sight, sound, smell, or taste, it's because there's a mental association, a mental process going on.

Now again, I don't know that I completely believe this. In fact, the suttas talk about there being pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral associated with all of the senses. So it's interesting that the Abhidhamma brings this up. But in any case, I've explored it myself a little bit, and I found it to be a very interesting tool for exploring feeling tone.

For instance, one evening I was having difficulty sleeping. When I have difficulty sleeping—it's the middle of the night, I woke up with difficulty sleeping—I just got up to meditate. That's what I tend to do if I'm having insomnia in the middle of the night. So I got up to meditate. This was not on retreat; it was at home.

While I was sitting there meditating, I heard this very quiet tapping noise, just a subtle tapping that seemed to be coming from my wall somewhere. My experience was that the tapping noise was unpleasant. It would come and go, and I would notice the tapping and just recognize, "Well, unpleasant. Unpleasant sound is happening."

As I kept sitting, this tapping noise kept coming and going. At some point I recognized that when the tapping started, there was a contraction that happened in the body. The contraction was unpleasant. The physical contraction—tightening, tensing in the body—that was unpleasant also. So I was noticing that. I was noticing the unpleasantness in the body as well as what I perceived to be the unpleasantness in the sound.

At some point when the tapping came back, because it would disappear for a while and I would just be meditating in the quiet, I noticed a flash of fear—just the subtlest flash of fear as the tapping started. The fear was clearly unpleasant. And as I continued to observe, having seen the fear and the unpleasantness of the fear, I could see that the tapping sound was actually pretty neutral. I even experienced it as slightly pleasant, that quiet tapping sound.

So that was a real learning for me, to see how the fear had colored the perception of feeling. I think this happens to us a lot. I think it happens to us a lot that we're in a particular state of aversion, or as this example from the researcher said, expecting a strongly unpleasant feeling and being presented with a less unpleasant feeling, the mind interprets experience in a different way based on the climate of our mind, based on what we're expecting, what our predispositions are.

In terms of exploring feeling, it can be very interesting to actually begin to find or look: What is it that we're actually reacting to? What is it that we are feeling as unpleasant or pleasant? I think much of our reactivity actually leaps off of mental feeling rather than the actual physical feeling.

On another retreat I had a strong physical experience in the body which seemed to be pretty unpleasant. I was just exploring: What is the unpleasantness here? What is unpleasant about this strong experience in the body? And it came to me in a flash: It's out of control. I don't have control over this. That was really unpleasant—that idea, that mental climate of feeling out of control. And when I could see that that was what I was really reacting to, I could tell that the physical experience, well, there was a strong experience there, but it was more the mind that was being reacted to, not the body.

This kind of exploration can be very interesting. The Buddha pointed to this in his famous story of the dart. He talked about how when an ordinary person is struck by an unpleasant physical sensation, they beat their breasts, they bewail, they moan. "Why me? Why am I having this unpleasant experience?" Thus adding a mental unpleasant experience to the physical unpleasant experience. And I'd actually say multiplying the physical unpleasant experience by the mental unpleasant experience.

So it can be a very interesting exploration if there's a persistent reactivity present for you. Check in and see if you can find what is being reacted to. What is it that the mind is either moving towards or trying to get rid of?

On another retreat, it might have been my second three-month retreat, I was doing walking meditation. I think I told a walking meditation story here earlier—this is a different one. I experienced so much aversion while walking that I really got to explore my aversion. I seemed to be averse to how close people walked to me. I was averse to the fact that other people were even there. I was just averse. But I used it. I used it as exploration.

I was doing walking meditation in the walking room right behind us, and I was pretty comfortable with the walking. People were spaced comfortably apart. Then somebody else came in and slipped in right next to me. Immediate aversion. Okay, there's aversion. What is it? I asked myself, what is it that I'm finding unpleasant here?

I went through all the senses. The person didn't appear unpleasant in their body or face or clothes, so sight wasn't unpleasant. They didn't smell bad, so smell wasn't the problem. I wasn't bumping up against them, so it wasn't touch. Taste was out of the question. I went through all the physical senses, and it was like—it must be in the mind.

So I was just doing walking, curious about what was going on in the mind. I really hadn't seen anything; it wasn't obvious to me what I was reacting to. I was walking back and forth, thinking there must be some thought in there, something. And suddenly this thought popped into my mind: "He's weird."

Well, that's a thought. I still didn't quite get it. A little bit later, two or three passes later, I saw that my mind had constructed "he's weird" out of the fact that it was December, freezing cold, and the person had bare feet. Seeing that—just the ludicrousness of it—the whole unpleasantness, the whole aversion fell apart. And in the next pass of walking, spontaneous mettā was arising.

It can be fun to explore this.

It can also be really interesting to explore neutral. I've been talking mostly about pleasant and unpleasant. One thing I want to mention: after I gave the instructions on neutral, Joseph pointed me to something in the Abhidhamma where neutral experience is described as such a subtle experience that often it's recognized in terms of the absence of pleasant and the absence of unpleasant. In my own experience, I have seen the felt sense of neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but it is rare actually to see that. I thought it was interesting that in the Abhidhamma they point to neutral as being recognized by inference—recognized in the absence of pleasant and the absence of unpleasant.

But in any case, as the practice deepens, we may find ourselves in periods where there is more neutral experience. I think this happens because our mental reactivity diminishes. As I was saying, much of the pleasant and unpleasant quality in our physical realm comes because we have ideas, opinions, views, judgments—underlying tendencies towards aversion and greed. As those begin to fall away, our experience becomes much more neutral.

But we're not simply unreactive to neutral. We have our own ways of responding to it. On one retreat at Spirit Rock, I was in a place where neutral was coming up frequently, so I was getting to spend time just noting, noticing—neutral is happening, neutral experience is happening. And I noticed that quite often, actually, when neutral experience would arise, the mind would get a little dull or lose interest in the neutrality. It would slip off into indifference or boredom.

So I could see that this was one kind of tendency of mind when there was neutral experience—just to disconnect, just to lose touch with the neutrality.

Another very interesting response I saw to neutral was this: I had heard in dharma talks that when things get more settled, experience becomes more neutral. So when neutral arose, I thought, "Oh, neutral! Maybe something good is going to happen." There

was a little bit of leaning in—"Neutral... is something good going to happen? Is something good going to happen?" And when nothing good happened, my mind produced one of its most habitual tendencies: "You're a failure. You've messed up. You're no good as a meditator."

Out of neutral experience, my mind created one of its most habitual patterns—this kind of self-negativity, a kind of self-flagellation. Out of neutral experience.

Fortunately, on this retreat, I was seeing it. I could watch it go there, and I could smile at it. "Oh, look at that. Look what the mind is doing. Out of nothing, out of neutral experience, it creates this pattern."

I think neutral experience, as the mind starts moving towards it, can be a place where some of our most habitual tendencies kick in. Watch for yourself. What happens when experience is neutral?

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta continues. After going through the beginning—simply noticing pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant—it says: "When feeling a worldly pleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a worldly pleasant feeling.' When feeling a worldly unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a worldly unpleasant feeling.' When feeling a worldly neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a worldly neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling.' When feeling an unworldly pleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel an unworldly pleasant feeling.'" Likewise for unworldly unpleasant and unworldly neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The Pali term translated as "worldly" is *sāmisa*, which basically means something like "of the flesh." *Nirāmisa*, unworldly, means "not of the flesh." The basic distinction being pointed to here, as I understand it, is that the worldly feelings are the normal everyday feelings that come with our senses—pleasant experience related to the taste of food, sights, physical contact—and also the pleasant or unpleasant experience related to ideas about those experiences. This worldly pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral arises at all six of the sense bases, not just the five physical ones. So it's not simply a mental-physical distinction being made here.

The unworldly feelings, sometimes translated as spiritual feelings—Bhikkhu Anālayo says these are feelings associated with the path of practice. The unworldly, spiritual, pleasant feelings are, for instance, the feelings that come as the mind gets concentrated. They're not dependent on things of the world. The unworldly pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences are described in one text as related not only to the deepening of the mind in concentration, but also to the feelings that arise based on insight.

In the deep recognition of the impermanent nature of experience, there can be different feelings associated with that. Sometimes impermanence is experienced with very clear seeing—clearly seeing the arising and passing of experience—and that can bring a sense of joy, felt as pleasant. That would be an unworldly pleasant feeling.

Sometimes the experience of clearly seeing the arising and passing lands in a way that's almost like "enough already." Is all of this impingement never going to stop? And it can generate a sense of longing for freedom. This longing is understood to be an unworldly unpleasant feeling—not an unwholesome unpleasant feeling, but a longing for liberation that comes as part of the path.

Sometimes the clear seeing of impermanence generates a feeling of balance of mind, of equanimity, experienced as neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Again, a sign of the path deepening.

Bhikkhu Anālayo says that this distinction between worldly feeling and unworldly feeling points to an ethical dimension of feeling, where "ethical" refers to what leads us towards freedom, what's connected with the path, and what is not. The worldly feelings are not connected with the path—they simply arise, they happen. The unworldly feelings arise connected with the deepening of practice.

And so they can serve as guidance for us on the path.

Now I want to insert something right here, before you start thinking it's bad to have the regular kind of feeling. The Satipatthana Sutta says that whatever feeling is arising, it can be known clearly and serve as a vehicle for liberation. I think this distinction between unworldly and worldly feeling is pointing to the way that with worldly feeling, we tend to be caught in a cycle around it.

As I was describing earlier, with our feelings of reactivity in the mind, we can tend to orient towards seeing things as pleasant or unpleasant. If we're experiencing aversion in the mind—maybe you've noticed this—many things your mind lands on tend to be unpleasant. Out of that ground of aversion grows unpleasant experience.

There's a teaching that we have deep in our psyche these underlying tendencies to greed, aversion, and delusion. Even if they're not active in a moment, they are still in the mind in a way, waiting to connect, waiting for delusion to bring them to the surface. We talked briefly about personality types—some of us tend towards an aversive personality type, some towards a greedy personality type, some towards more of a delusive personality type. For me, I clearly see how that underlying tendency, that orientation towards aversion that this mind has, informs how I meet the world.

At one point, in my early experiences of choiceless awareness, I was doing a guided meditation with my teacher. He was asking me to just notice every experience—just notice the next most obvious experience, whatever it was, as we've done with some of you in meetings. What's the most obvious thing right now? Right now? Right now? The thing that stood out for me most at the end of that very first exercise was this: he said, "Well, that's choiceless awareness." And I said, "How can it be choiceless? It was all unpleasant." In my mind, I thought if it was completely choiceless, it would be a mix. Well, it was choiceless in that the habit of mind was choosing—and choosing unpleasant because of that orientation, that underlying tendency.

So the worldly feelings tend to be connected to those underlying tendencies and also tend to cycle back to them. If an unpleasant experience arises and it's not seen, it will tend to lead to aversion. If a pleasant experience arises and it's not seen with wisdom, it will tend to lead to greed. The worldly feelings cycle around with these underlying tendencies, feeding them and being fed by them.

Regarding the unworldly feelings, there's one teaching where a nun is talking to her ex-husband, and he's asking her detailed questions about feeling. Let me read this section to you. He asks: Does the underlying tendency to greed have to be abandoned in regard to all pleasant feeling? Does the underlying tendency to aversion have to be abandoned in regard to all unpleasant feeling? Does the underlying tendency to ignorance have to be abandoned in regard to all neither painful nor pleasant feeling?

And she basically says no. She points to this: When secluded from sense pleasure, one enters a state of jhana. This is accompanied by pleasure, and one does not have to abandon lust—the tendency to lust does not underlie that pleasant experience. One considers, "When shall I enter and abide in that base that the noble ones now enter and abide in?" In one who generates a longing for supreme liberation, grief arises with that longing as a condition. With that, one abandons aversion, and the underlying tendency to aversion does not underlie that.

So again, this points to the distinction between worldly pleasant, worldly painful, worldly neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and unworldly. This ethical distinction points to something important the Buddha recognized in his own journey. An important discovery was that not all pleasure was to be avoided. Pleasure naturally arises as we deepen in the path.

Some ways that it arises: the happiness and joy of giving, the happiness and joy of ethical conduct. There is also a kind of happiness that comes in the very simple meeting of sense experience. Taking a walk and seeing the light on the leaves, and just experien-

cing the joy of really seeing that—that's a joy that comes with being present. It's connected with the path, that kind of joy. The pleasure of concentration, the pleasure of insight.

The Buddha suggests: Relying on this, abandon that. Relying on the pleasure of practice, relying on the pleasure of concentration and insight, abandon the pleasure of seeking happiness through sense pleasure. In a way, this is how the practice can unfold. Our minds, our whole organism, is seeking happiness.

We're oriented in our very organism to find well-being. Only our minds are so confused about how that well-being is to be found. They're deluded. The delusion, the ignorance that covers our minds has us believe that having the next hit of some pleasant sense experience is where happiness lies.

As we begin to see more clearly, the mind begins to understand that that happiness is all bound up with wanting and aversion, and that wanting and aversion is not the way towards well-being. It begins to understand the happiness of concentration, the happiness of insight, and through that can begin to let go of our dependence, our neediness for that kind of short-sighted happiness that we've lived so much of our lives running around trying to create. We begin to see that the pleasure of the sense realm pales in comparison to the pleasure that's available through letting go.

And it's helpful, of course, to recognize that we can cling to that unworldly pleasure too. We have a good sitting. It's just clear and settled and the mind is at ease. And then the next sitting it's, "How can I get that back? How can I get that back?" Steve Armstrong has a famous quote: "There's nothing like a good sit to ruin your day."

This usually happens after the fact. We have that sitting that's really clear, and then afterward we remember it. It's a thought arising in our mind: "That felt good. I remember that felt good." What we're actually clinging to is not the actual experience of that sitting, which is long gone, but the idea of it. I've seen myself cling to the idea of being able to tell somebody I had a good sitting, even though I wasn't having good sittings—I mean, what I was thinking of as good sittings. I was having some image of how great it was going to be when I could go into that interview room and describe all the impermanence I was seeing. I had no idea what I was looking for.

So what we are clinging to often around this unworldly pleasure is the idea, an identity that we've created around it—the identity rather than the experience itself.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta suggests simply: recognize feeling is happening. Recognize what kind of feeling is happening and that it is happening. It doesn't say one feels a worldly feeling and then tries to get rid of it. It says one feels the worldly feeling and knows they feel a worldly feeling. It is the comprehension of that which is the important part—understanding feeling's nature.

I'm going to read you two quotes to finish that both point to how this exploration of feeling leads right to freedom.

The first one is from the Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving, Majjhima 38, and it goes through all of the sense bases. I'll just read it with respect to the eye: "On seeing a form with the eye, one does not become greedy for pleasant forms or averse to disagreeable forms. One abides with mindfulness of the body established and with an immeasurable mind. Having abandoned the path of agreeing and disagreeing, one experiences whatever feeling arises, pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, just as it is."

I like that: having abandoned the path of agreeing and disagreeing. It's a very simple thing that we do around feeling—having abandoned the path of agreeing and disagreeing. One experiences whatever feeling arises just as it is. One is not delighted or pleased with those feelings and one does not appropriate them. Interest in those feelings ceases.

Now my understanding about what that means—"interest in those feelings ceases"—is that the interest in having certain feelings, the interest in "more of that please, less of that please," that's the interest that ceases. My understanding is that the interest becomes connected with interest in the impermanent nature of the feeling. So it's not saying don't be interested in your experience. I think it's pointing to a specific thing here: interest in having certain feelings ceases. With the cessation of interest, clinging ceases.

And then there is the famous teaching, which I think has come up several times, that the path in a nutshell is: nothing is to be clung to. That encapsulates the teachings. In a passage from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Buddha elaborates on what this means.

He's talking to Moggallana: "Here, Moggallana, one has learnt thus: nothing is fit to be clung to. If one has learned that nothing is fit to be clung to, one directly knows everything—directly knows all experience. By directly knowing everything, one fully understands everything. When one fully understands everything, whatever feeling is experienced, be it pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, in regard to those same feelings, one dwells contemplating impermanence, contemplating dispassion, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. When one thus abides

contemplating impermanence, dispassion, cessation, and relinquishment in regard to those feelings, one does not cling to anything in the world. Without clinging, one is not agitated. Being unagitated, one personally obtains Nibbana, freedom."

Understanding feelings' nature brings wisdom into the unfolding flow of our experience, leading the typical pattern of dependent origination to fall apart—freedom from suffering.

CHAPTER 94

Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)

Andrea Fella · 1h01

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella unpacks paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), which she describes as a detailed exposition of the second noble truth—the cause of suffering. She begins by referencing the Buddha's conversation with Ānanda from the suttas, where the Buddha cautioned against underestimating this teaching's profundity, stating that it is through not understanding dependent origination that beings remain "tangled like a ball of string."

Fella walks through all twelve links of the chain—from ignorance (avijjā) through mental formations (saṅkhāra), consciousness (viññāṇa), mentality-materiality (nāma-rūpa), the six sense bases (saḷāyatana), contact (phassa), feeling (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), clinging (upādāna), becoming (bhava), birth (jāti), and aging and death (jarā-maraṇa). Rather than treating this as an abstract doctrine about past and future lives, she emphasizes its moment-to-moment relevance, using the example of "wanting to be a good yogi" to illustrate how identities form, solidify, and inevitably lead to suffering when they crumble.

The talk offers profound encouragement through a teaching from the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta (MN 9), which states that wherever mindfulness and wisdom arise in this chain, freedom is possible right there. Fella shares her own transformative experience with self-hatred, where simply noting "contact, unpleasant" allowed a deep insight to arise, revealing the pattern as an impersonal process rather than a fixed self. The essential message is that we need not wait for difficult experiences to end—wisdom and freedom can arise in the midst of any experience we're willing to meet with mindful awareness.

The subject of this talk is dependent origination, one of the most complex teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha himself spoke to this complexity in a conversation with Ananda. Ananda was expressing his joy, his love of the Dharma, and in particular the joy and beauty of dependent origination. He said, "It is wonderful, it is marvelous how profound this dependent origination is, how profound it appears. And yet it appears to me as clear as clear."

The Buddha responded, "Do not say that, Ananda. Do not say that. This dependent origination is profound and appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine, that this generation has come to be like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe."

Clearly the Buddha both acknowledged its profundity, its complexity, and its importance to us. He states that it is by not understanding this that we are stuck. Several of you in our meetings have talked about feeling all tangled up, tangled like a ball of string—just as he mentioned to Ananda, it is through not understanding this that we are tangled.

I understand the teaching of dependent origination to be a detailed exposition of the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. It goes into depth about what the process is by which suffering is created in our minds. I understand dependent origination to be a teaching as opposed to a practice. We don't practice dependent origination, but it is very helpful, very practical for us to understand how this process works in our minds, how suffering is created. It is eminently practical because it is through this understanding that our mind begins to comprehend how to let go of the causes of suffering.

This chain of dependent origination is described as a set of causal links explaining what causes suffering to come into being. Through understanding the causes, we see that it is not lockstep, not automatic—it is causal. There is a way in which when the causes are reversed, the whole process of suffering simply falls apart.

I hope to make this talk both clear and practical. It is a teaching that for me has been very supportive in understanding my moment-to-moment experience, understanding how suffering is created. I hope to share with you some of the ways this has supported me in my understanding and exploration of experience.

As the Buddha pointed to, it is through not understanding this that we stay caught in suffering. In that very statement, to some extent the Buddha is equating an understanding of dependent origination with full liberation. So we are probably not going to get there tonight. But I find the teachings work in a really iterative way. We hear about something, we massage it, we reflect on it, we may begin to explore it in our direct experience, and then we hear about it again so that we deepen progressively in our understanding.

Some motivation perhaps for understanding this: the key motivation for me is that it describes so clearly how suffering comes to be and that it describes it as a causal process. Through understanding this teaching of dependent origination, we begin to see how experience conditions experience.

Dependent origination could be most succinctly summarized as the statement: when this is, that is. When this arises, that arises. When this ceases, that ceases.

We begin to understand our suffering as conditioned—not as either random or foreordained. This is helpful for us to notice and recognize. We begin to see our suffering as the unfolding of an impersonal set of conditionality rather than either something that somebody else is doing to us or something that we have absolute control over. We begin to see suffering as caused by this unfolding chain.

The links in this chain are all related to processes in the mind and body. This is another piece I think is really helpful in terms of this teaching: it points to the arising of suffering being related to processes in our own minds. The other piece is that largely the impulsion through this chain of conditions relates to choice, to intention in our mind.

Essentially, we could say that when we are not mindful, when we are not present, when wisdom is not operating with mindfulness, our habits and conditioning are making our choices for us. And those choices tend to lead us down the garden path of suffering. When mindfulness arises, when wisdom arises, when we see it happening, the choice can be made to bring mindfulness and wisdom to our experience, which tends to lead us towards freedom, towards happiness, away from this chain, out of this chain.

So the other piece around this chain is that it begins to point for us to ways to redirect, to let go.

There are twelve links in this chain, and we will talk about all of them.

Let me name them all right now, put them out there, and then go back through them.

The chain begins, classically, with ignorance. With ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. With mental formations as condition, consciousness comes to be. With consciousness as condition, mentality-materiality—mental and physical processes—come to be. With mental and physical processes as condition, the six sense bases come to be. With the six sense bases as condition, contact. With contact as condition, feeling. With feeling as condition, craving. With craving as condition, clinging. With clinging as condition, becoming. With becoming as condition, birth. With birth as condition, old age and death—or as the Buddha puts it, the entire mass of suffering comes to be.

One piece to point to here: the chain starts with ignorance and moves through to suffering in those twelve links. Yet it is understood that suffering, that last link of the chain, the arising of the mass of suffering, tends to feed back into ignorance, and thus the cycle perpetuates itself. So it is not simply a one-way chain. It is a cycle—a cycle of dependent origination.

Classical teachings from the commentaries break down this cycle into three stages, three parts essentially, talking about a former life, the present life, and a future life. They assign specific links to these various lives, basically saying that the ignorance and mental formations from our previous life will feed forward into this life and influence our experience here. The links of the chain in this life are laid out from consciousness through mentality-materiality, the six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and becoming. These are discussed in terms of suffering in this life, and that's a place where we can really see this process at work.

The understanding is that the ignorance and mental formations from a previous life have the capacity, the property, the forward motion essentially, to land and re-arise. The momentum of those can re-arise in this life and influence how we are here and now. Likewise, how we are in this life is said to feed forward into a next life—birth, aging, and death in the next life. The literal phrasing of the links supports this understanding. In particular, the phrasing around birth is understood to mean the literal birth of a being, so it seems fairly clear that it's talking about moving from one life into another.

There is also an understanding in the Pali Canon that this chain of dependent origination refers to the moment-to-moment arising of suffering—how in the present moment, ignorance feeds into our consciousness, conditions our consciousness, and impels us forward in this cycle. It seems pretty clear when we actually look into our experience that it's not just about previous lives. Whether or not you have a sense of previous lives, it seems pretty clear that ignorance in this life is influencing us in this life. And so we can explore the entirety of this chain here and now, which is how I plan to explore it this evening.

This is my own personal way of resonating most with this teaching. I have no personal experience or sense of former lives, so I can't connect that to my direct experience. Yet I think one of the powers of that teaching about a former life influencing this life is that we see how ignorance can go underground and operate in funny ways. You may have some kind of intention that was formed a long time ago, and suddenly that intention bears fruit in this moment. You might see this as the arising of a thought from long ago—an old habit or an old pattern produces a thought here and now, and then there's reactivity here and now. Part of what this points to is how conditioning works across time. Thanissaro Bhikkhu sometimes talks about the way this conditioning operates. We often think of conditioning as one moment to the next to the next. He indicates that the conditioning can also come in over time.

In this talk, I am going to mostly look at it from the perspective of this life. From this perspective, the term "birth" would refer to the arising of a sense of self, taking birth into an identity. We feel this. We feel this birth into "I am the one who has to be right," or "I am the one who owns this or controls this." There's a palpable sense of something arising into being, a sense of being born into an identity. And the term "aging and death" refers to the fading and passing away of all experience, essentially—that everything that arises falls apart.

I'd like to explore the chain in some depth here with you, and I'm going to start in a somewhat unconventional way.

As I said, the chain begins with ignorance, but I'm going to start in a somewhat unconventional way—right in the middle of the chain. I'm going to start where we are, with our senses.

One of the middle links of the chain is our sense bases. Let's start there. That's a pretty easy place to connect with our experience. We have these sense bases: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and skin, and our mind. Based on our sense bases, and because consciousness is present, we experience contact. Consciousness has to be present for us to experience contact, of course. If consciousness is not present—if we're lying there knocked out in surgery—we're not going to experience contact. So consciousness has to be present and the senses operating. Based on that, contact will happen. We will experience sight, sound, smells, taste, touch, and experiences in the mind: thoughts, emotions, moods.

Every single one of those sense impressions has a feeling tone to it. This is the next link. So we have the sense bases conditioning contact. Now we have contact conditioning feeling. Every contact has a feeling tone to it. Just the arising of that very simple aspect of whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—conditioned on contact.

Based on that feeling tone, craving tends to arise. In a very normal way, if something is pleasant, we like it and want it. If something is unpleasant, we don't like it and want to push it away. When things are neutral, sometimes we just don't even notice them. So in a very natural way, almost habitual, when feeling arises we respond by moving towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant. We want the pleasant; we don't want the unpleasant. This is craving. This is craving at work.

Usually when that craving begins, we automatically begin to act on it. It's almost hard not to once craving is set in motion—unless we're mindful. When we're mindful, we can explore craving. We can look at the feeling of wanting, feel that magnetic pull

towards some experience, and simply observe it. Usually, in much of our life—and certainly before we began practicing—that feeling of wanting would quite normally lead to clinging: taking action to get the thing, essentially following through on the craving.

Bhikkhu Bodhi gives a beautiful analogy to show the gradation between craving and clinging. He says that craving is like a thief in a house who is reaching out to take something. Clinging is when the thief has picked it up. It's that kind of gradation.

Once an object is clung to, once we've got it in our possession in some way, shape, or form, the next link arises: clinging conditions becoming. The clearest description of becoming I've heard comes from Thanissaro Bhikkhu. He talks about becoming as the arising of intentions and actions that rally in the service of that clinging. The clinging has happened, and once the object is clung to, our intentions and motivations begin to congeal around how to serve that clinging. How do I keep this thing? How do I control this thing? How do I produce this thing? How do I maintain this thing? A whole host of intentions arise around that clinging. This is becoming.

We like becoming. Becoming actually feels really good. It's that moment when you have the sense of, "Oh yeah, I'm in charge. I can do this. I can accomplish this. I can figure this out. I know how to make myself happy."

That's becoming. Following on from becoming is birth, which is actually a taking of identity, a real solidifying, a kind of solidification of that identity. I look at becoming and birth this way: becoming is like the intention towards an identity, and birth is the identity itself.

Following on from birth, the Buddha actually says that suffering becomes inevitable. We've taken birth, and inevitably either the thing that we are trying to control or fix or hold onto is going to disintegrate and go away, or something is going to happen to undermine it. If we've taken birth into an identity like "I'm the one who is always right," well, something will come along to prove, of course, that we're not always right, and our identity crumbles. The identity may crumble. An actual possession or ownership of something may be taken away from us. Once we've moved into birth, the Buddha says, suffering will be inevitable.

I want to go back and touch into something around becoming being pleasant. The pleasantness of becoming is one way in which the cycle reinforces itself. This chain of dependent origination is sometimes called the wheel of becoming, and the pleasantness of becoming has a potency to it for us.

If we look at the links of the chain starting from feeling, we've felt something and wanted to get something, and that moves us into craving. When we think about or feel into the craving, we see that craving is actually an unpleasant experience. Often that unpleasantness is masked because we're focused outward on the thing and imagining in our minds how great it's going to be when we get it. We're not really noticing the suffering, the unpleasant quality of the wanting itself. Wanting has automatically—when we want something—a sense of lack. Something feels off. So wanting is unpleasant.

When we move to becoming and we have that sense of being in control, partly there's the appreciation of having gotten that thing now. The wanting has produced the result: we've gotten what we wanted. So we get a little hit of pleasantness from having gotten what we wanted. And not only that, we get the hit of the pleasantness of becoming, which I think largely has to do with the fact that it feels like we have control over our wanting, that we can affect and accomplish and get what we want.

A large part of the happiness that arises when we get what we want is actually the fact that the suffering goes away. This, I think, is a piece of why becoming feels good to us.

As we're going along in this cycle, we take birth, we suffer over the loss of something or the loss of an identity. And we think back, "Well, what was the last time I felt really good? Oh, it's when I had that control. That's when I felt really good." It kind of propels us back through the cycle. So to some extent, the pleasantness of becoming is one of the propulsions through this cycle.

I want to give an example of this part of the chain—just to talk about how this works in our experience. I'd like to do this through a more complicated example in a way. It's about a state of being rather than the simplicity of just something pleasant that we like and want to hold onto. I would like to explore how this works because many of the ways we suffer have to do with identities that we have.

Take, for instance, wanting to be a good yogi. We have this sense of what happens in our mind. Perhaps an idea comes into our mind—maybe this wanting to be a good yogi is born by thinking about describing some insight to a teacher or something like that. This contact with this idea. A thought arises in the mind about describing some insight to a teacher, and in that fantasy, that's a pleasant fantasy perhaps. You're getting some kind of affirmation from the teacher in the fantasy. So there's pleasure in that fantasy. The mind has created this fantasy and is delighting in it.

Then there's the desire—because of that pleasant feeling, there's a desire to have that fantasy become a reality. That's the wanting, that's the craving. The clinging is about a fixed attitude that being a good yogi is actually an important thing. We've created this idea, "Oh, I want to be a good yogi." So again, that movement from craving to clinging is a gradation. I want to be a good yogi, and that's really important. That's the craving and clinging pieces of it.

And then the becoming is all of the intentions that arrive to try to put that clinging into effect. You may have some ideas, some intentions around how you need to behave to be a good yogi. What does it mean? How do you need to pay attention? The mind gathers itself around what it thinks would be the intentions, the actions to create that into a reality. Perhaps sitting long hours in the hall, or moving really slowly—whatever it is that you've got, thinking about what it might be to be a good yogi.

So for simplicity, just assume that for at least a few moments you've gotten the sense that you are a good yogi. Birth. There's a distinct feeling: "Yes, I'm a good yogi." I'm familiar with this, as well as the opposite, which I'm getting ready to describe. The sense, for just a few moments: "Ah, I can do this. I am a good yogi. I know how to practice." There's that birth, that taking birth into "this is what I am."

In that birth, there tends to be an augmentation of the distinction between self and other. If I'm a good yogi, it often means there's some kind of comparison going on. It probably means I'm a better yogi than somebody else. There's that augmentation of self-other that happens in this process of birth, this taking birth into an identity.

The aging and death of this could happen in so many ways. In my own experience, often the aging and death of the sense of being a good yogi was a crash and burn. There would be something that would prove either that somebody else was a better yogi than I was, or that I would suddenly sit down and my mind didn't have control—I couldn't just choose to say "stay with the breath" and have it stay with the breath.

Sometimes these identities get born when conditions come together and we sit down and suddenly the breath is right there, there's an ease with it, and it's pretty easy to stay stable with the breath. All of this is conditions coming together to make this happen, and then we take ownership of it. "I did that. I'm making that happen." We take birth into that identity, and then two or three sittings later, we discover we can't do that. Actually, we can't control the mind at all—it's all over the place. In a way, what happens in that moment is that we take birth into "I'm a bad yogi." The ending of one identity, the arising of another.

Suffering happens here. The actual crash and burn of the good yogi is suffering. Sometimes we can have a sense of fear that arises around identities—a sense of somehow needing to continually prove that we're a good yogi, continually pushing ourselves harder and harder, suffering in that. Suffering both from the fear of "what happens if I can't keep this up?" I remember sitting down on some occasions and the mind would be seeing things changing so rapidly. Then I'd sit down the next sitting and think, "I can't do that. How do I do that?" A lot of fear came up because I couldn't figure out how to do what the mind had been doing before.

We suffer around these identities. This is the process, how identities lead us into suffering.

So that gives you a little bit of a flavor for some of the basic processes at work in dependent origination. Now I want to come back to the early links in the chain, the ones I haven't talked about yet.

This chain, as I said earlier, describes a cyclic pattern. The arising of suffering conditions the arising of ignorance. The Buddha said that suffering will condition or lead to bewilderment or search. Very often it leads to confusion, bewilderment. "Why me? Why is this happening to me? How do I fix this? How do I change this?"

So suffering, when not understood, leads to ignorance—the perpetuation of this cycle. And in fact, the main definition of ignorance is understood as not understanding suffering. The Buddha's definition of ignorance in this context is not about not understanding some random set of facts; it's about not understanding suffering. He says, "Not knowing about suffering, not knowing about the origin of suffering, not knowing about the cessation of suffering, not knowing about the way leading to the cessation of suffering—this is called ignorance."

So the basic condition for suffering to lead to ignorance is for suffering to be not understood. This is the usual way that so much of our lives unfold. In ignorance, we think we know what will lead to happiness. We think that getting what we want will lead to happiness. And this is a form of delusion—this belief that if I just get what I want, then I'll be happy. Well, we see how long that lasts, right? It maybe lasts for a few moments, a feeling of happiness. And when that dissipates, it's like, "Well, where's the next one? How can I get the next one?"

Acting on ignorance, not understanding suffering, and acting on the ignorance further deepens this cycle of suffering. If suffering is met with wisdom—with mindfulness and wisdom—it begins to lead in another direction. And this is the first noble truth. The

Buddha suggested: understand suffering. So the first noble truth is essentially the practice that supports one way to get out of this cycle of suffering. Understand it—not intellectually, but how is it created? What is the process of suffering?

We're doing this. This is what we're encouraging you to do. You observe in your experience the arising of anger. You feel it in the body. You see how it shifts and changes. You notice there are thoughts; perhaps you can let the thoughts go and just stay with the experience. And you notice that the experience dissipates. We see how thoughts condition our body, how our body conditions thoughts. We see this back and forth process. In all of the work that we're doing here, we are exploring this.

With ignorance as a condition, the next link is mental formations. With ignorance as a condition, mental formations come to be. Based on ignorant patterns in our mind, based on not understanding suffering, we make decisions, we choose things, we decide things based on this misinformed idea that getting what we want will make us happy. Out of ignorance, we act in a very short-sighted way. Our minds are pretty short-sighted about happiness. It's like, "Yeah, just the next thing. If I can get that, that'll make me happy." And then when we see that that happiness is kind of short-lived, it's like, "Well, what's the next thing? What's the next thing I can get?"

We may not actually believe that having what we want will be ultimate happiness, but we do believe that we should be able to chain together a whole bunch of those moments and have no periods of not having what we want in there at all. And we think that would be happiness. There's a way in which our whole habits and patterns and choices are coming out of this misunderstanding.

Out of ignorance, we usually take the most obvious choice to get what we want, get rid of what we don't want. And habits and patterns form around this. These habits and patterns are mental formations conditioned on ignorance. We think we're acting to alleviate or end our dissatisfaction by getting what we want, but we're actually cementing—re-cementing—this process of wanting, getting, having, identifying, crash and burn. "When was the last time I was happy? When I had what I want. Let me find something to want." And we go through again.

So these are the mental formations conditioned on ignorance—the mental formations to choose to act based on this deluded understanding about happiness, about how happiness comes to be.

The next link: with mental formation as a condition, consciousness comes to be. Based on our views, our beliefs about where happiness comes to be, our mind picks certain things out of the environment and doesn't pick other things out of the environment.

This is consciousness arising based on our proclivities, our mental proclivities. We've talked about this in terms of filters, for instance. If anger is arising, we may, seeing through that filter of anger, pick out of the environment things that confirm why we should be angry. We selectively—it's not we doing it, it's not intentional in a way—it's the process. It's the process of our mind. There's that filter of anger, and the filter itself filters certain things in and not other things. So we see certain things, we hear certain things; we don't see, we don't hear other things.

This is a very powerful process in our minds, this filtering mechanism, how this works in our mind. It seems pretty potent and deeply embedded. It is possible to see through it, but I'd like to tell you a story about just how deeply embedded it is, because it's quite amazing.

Some of you may have heard about this study. It's on a factor of mind called selective attention—I think that's what it's called—something like that in psychology. They were researching selective attention, how the mind chooses to pay attention to things and not pay attention to other things. In this study, they gave a group of people a task, a pretty simple task: watch this video and count the number of times a basketball passes between people in a white shirt. So you watch this video. People are passing a basketball around, and you're counting the number of times people are passing the basketball. Simple agenda. People did it. By and large, people could answer the question: this is how many times the basketball passed between people in the white shirt.

A few people afterwards would say something like, "Was there like a gorilla in that video?" And there indeed had been—a guy in a gorilla suit that walked through the middle of the basketball game and actually stood there, really obviously stood there, and then walked off. The vast majority of people did not see the gorilla.

Now, that's one thing, right? The fact that, wow, that agenda—there was an agenda in the mind, do this task. That agenda kind of collapsed down the awareness such that the gorilla was not seen. That's one thing to recognize: okay, didn't see that. But the scary part—the scary part about the way this works—is that when people were shown the video, most of them said, "That has to be a different video. I would have seen the gorilla." The scary part is that we believe our senses to be an accurate, camera-like recording of experience. And it is just not that way.

Consciousness is influenced by mental formations. In this case, the mental formation of an agenda. This happens all the time. We really cannot say that we are seeing everything. Consciousness is present in some experiences, not in others. Mental formations condition consciousness.

With consciousness as a condition, mental and physical processes come to be. This is mentality-materiality. Based on the state of our consciousness, the state of our mind, this influences the other processes of our mind and body. Essentially, mentality-materiality—a simple definition—if we think about the five aggregates that Guy talked about the other night, consciousness is one of the five aggregates. And here we have consciousness conditioning mentality-materiality. Mentality-materiality is understood to be the other four of the aggregates. That's one way of understanding mentality-materiality: mind and body processes.

So consciousness conditions, the state of our consciousness conditions the mind and body processes. Having the mental formations influence our consciousness—seeing the gorilla or not seeing the gorilla—this informs the other mind and body processes. For instance, if anger is present in the mind, influencing how we perceive and feel experience, experience may tend to be unpleasant. We may tend to perceive things that confirm the anger, confirm our rightness in a situation. Our body may be impacted. There may be a kind of contracted expression on our face, or tightness, tension inside the body as a result of this anger.

So here we are, back at the place where we began—with mentality-materiality, and mentality-materiality influencing our sense bases. We're back where we began: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind, taking in experience.

And yet what we see now, coming back through it in this cycle, is quite different from when we started. Perhaps when we began, it sounded just like, "Well, of course we're taking things in." But now you see that coming back to this place, we are not taking things in in a neutral way. They're already coming in with a spin. We may not even be seeing certain things. Agendas may be pulling certain things out of the environment while leaving other things unnoticed.

The whole process tends to reinforce our attitudes, our beliefs, our views, because our filters will tend to confirm our views. And so this cycle reinforces itself.

That sounds perhaps rather hopeless. But fortunately, it's not hopeless. Because this chain describes conditionality rather than determinism, it's possible that with changed conditions, the cycle can be broken. The main supports for altering the habitual way this cycle unfolds are mindfulness, wisdom, concentration, and energy.

There's a beautiful teaching around dependent origination—one of my favorite teachings. It's found in the Majjhima Nikaya in a sutta called "Right View." In this sutta, the Buddha points to the possibility that wherever mindfulness and wisdom come into being, right there, we can have freedom.

For every single link of the chain of dependent origination, he says—and I'll read just one example, for clinging: "When one has understood clinging, the origin of clinging, the cessation of clinging, and the way leading to the cessation of clinging, one here and now makes an end of suffering."

Now you may notice that pattern is familiar. It's repeated: "When one has understood feeling, the origin of feeling, the cessation of feeling, and the way leading to the cessation of feeling, one here and now makes an end to suffering. When one understands ignorance, the origin of ignorance," and so on.

This pattern is repeated for every single link in this chain. No matter where you are, no matter where you wake up, bringing the practice of mindfulness to bear on whatever it is you wake up to, the possibility of freedom is right there.

It's often taught that there are weak links in this chain. People often say, "I have to break the chain of dependent origination at feeling. I have to see the feeling and then not have it lead to craving." But this teaching points to something more expansive: wherever you wake up, if you wake up in the midst of rage—that's a mental formation—the Buddha says you can understand the origin of mental formation. Understand the mental formation, the origin of mental formation, the cessation of mental formation, the path leading to cessation of mental formation, and here and now make an end to suffering.

This framing—essentially using the understanding of the Four Noble Truths with each link of the chain—connects to what I said earlier, that the Four Noble Truths are basically the opposite of ignorance. To me, what this sutta is saying is that ignorance is what we are working with in this chain. Ignorance is where we can get some traction.

We get traction by bringing mindfulness and wisdom to our experience—mindfulness and the understanding that happiness doesn't come from getting what I want. Happiness comes from letting go; the letting go is where happiness can be found. That understanding begins to undermine the ignorance present in any moment of experience.

It doesn't matter where you wake up. Mindfulness and wisdom can free us in this very moment.

Now, we may not necessarily experience this as full freedom in that moment. We may feel it as a shift, a sense of a little bit of letting go. Instead of "Wow, I'm really angry," there's "Oh, it's just anger arising." Just anger. That shift allows us to be more at ease with experience. That may be how wisdom is being experienced in the moment—and that is undermining ignorance in that moment.

So anywhere that we wake up, any experience we wake up to can be the place of freedom.

This gives me a lot of inspiration, a lot of confidence, faith, and joy actually. At certain points in my practice, I had this idea: "Okay, this is my self-hatred retreat. I guess I get to look at self-hatred."

And at some point, when the self-hatred is done, then I'll get to work with insight." That kind of belief was operating.

But being willing to meet the pattern of self-hatred, being willing to watch it in just this very way—self-hatred is arising—and in fact, using the links of contact and feeling. In this exploration of self-hatred, I had just heard one evening... I had been working with self-hatred for weeks on this particular retreat, and one evening Joseph did a question and answer session. He said, "If something's particularly sticky, try meeting it with a double note: contact when the experience hits, and then the feeling tone."

So this is highlighting those two links—contact and feeling. The contact of the experience of self-hatred arising. I was just noticing, okay, here's self-hatred. The movement of self-hatred, the movement of thought towards "you're no good, you're a failure"—being aware: oh, contact. And then noticing the unpleasantness. Contact, unpleasant. Contact, unpleasant.

And in a moment, in a split second, seeing that arising of self-hatred is just an arising at a very fundamental level. Seeing it just as some pattern arising in the mind. It's like watching some tree grow—there's the tree of self-hatred. Just seeing it in a completely impersonal way. In a split second, the pattern fell apart. And replacing that sense of self-hatred was bliss.

Then the next moment was something along the lines of, "Never again will I feel self-hatred." And the next moment was a little more wisdom. It's like, no, this is just this moment. And in that moment, there was just this kind of balance or equanimity of: it's like this right now.

That particular recognition into self-hatred actually was very potent in my life, in that it seemed to have the power to really cut through the delusion of that pattern. That pattern was seen for being just a self-creation. The pattern of self-hatred was seen as a fake. Essentially, my understanding is that it cut the belief in that pattern.

So right in the midst of being willing to be present for self-hatred, a very deep insight arose. Anything, anytime, anywhere—it's possible. If you're having a dukkha retreat, wisdom can arise in the midst of dukkha. Freedom in the midst of dukkha. It's not necessary to have it all end. That dukkha doesn't have to all go away before freedom, before the sense of understanding arises. Right in the midst of your experience, whatever is happening—meet it.

Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 95

The Path Reflects the Goal

Andrea Fella · 58 min

In this profound talk from a three-month retreat, Andrea Fella examines the Four Noble Truths as the Buddha's central teaching on dukkha—suffering, dissatisfaction, and struggle—and its cessation. She illuminates how the first two Noble Truths describe our usual entanglement in the cycle of suffering and craving, while the third and fourth proclaim the possibility of freedom through the Eightfold Path.

Fella offers a particularly illuminating perspective on the tasks associated with each Noble Truth: suffering is to be understood, craving is to be abandoned, cessation is to be realized, and the path is to be cultivated. She demonstrates how these tasks unfold sequentially—when suffering is fully understood through mindfulness and wisdom, craving naturally falls away, revealing the cessation of suffering. Drawing on Stephen Batchelor's insights and canonical sources, she explores the intriguing question of what it means for path cultivation to be the culmination of the Four Noble Truths.

The talk takes a beautiful turn when Fella shares passages from the Aṭṭhakavagga, one of the earliest Buddhist texts, which describes the awakened person in remarkably accessible, this-worldly terms—not frightened, not angered, not boastful, finding solitude amidst sense contacts. She reveals that the training instructions mirror this description of freedom, suggesting that the path reflects the goal. The Eightfold Path is not merely a set of practices but a description of how a noble life is naturally lived, both as we cultivate freedom and as we embody it.

Tonight I'd like to talk about the path and frame it within the context of the Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths are a central teaching that the Buddha offered. I think of it as really encapsulating the wisdom, the understanding that he came to on the night of his awakening. As he said, "It is only suffering that I teach and its end. Both formerly and now, it is only suffering I teach and its end."

It's no real surprise that because this question of suffering was what motivated the Buddha on his search, the framing of one of his core teachings is really centered around dukkha, this question of dukkha. Dukkha, of course, is usually translated as suffering, but has such a broader and deeper connotation than that word usually conveys

to us. Some other translations help convey the depth and breadth of its meaning: dissatisfaction, unease, stress, struggle. Dukkha comprises the subtlest little sense that something's off, as well as the biggest struggles of our lives.

The Buddha looked out at the world and saw, with a kind of poignant seeing, that we are all struggling, and within that struggle, the very things we do to try to release ourselves from it just keep us enmeshed in it.

And so his framing of the Four Noble Truths—the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the end of suffering—frames his understanding both of the struggle we get caught in and the way out. The first two Noble Truths I think of as our usual relationship with the world, the struggle, the cycle of suffering and craving. The first noble truth is the truth of suffering. The second noble truth is the truth of the cause of suffering, the craving. We usually live our lives in this cycle, the cycle of dependent origination, how suffering is created in our experience. Not the struggle of the pain of our circumstances, but the struggle of our reactivity to those circumstances—essentially what we're adding to our circumstances. This is what the Buddha saw that we could be free of: what we add to our situation.

So the first two noble truths really describe how we are usually caught in our lives. We've talked about this over and over, so I'm not going to talk about it much right now.

The third and fourth noble truths really proclaim the possibility of freedom: the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the ending of suffering. First he proclaims the possibility of freedom, of the ending of suffering, the ending of our inner holding, our inner struggle. Then he offers the path leading to that ending. The practice is the Eightfold Path, the practices that we engage with to lead us to the end of suffering.

The Four Noble Truths are framed in terms of cause and effect, and this is a central aspect of the wisdom that the Buddha offers us. There is a cause to suffering: the craving in our minds, wanting things to be other than they are. Again, that wanting things to be other than they are is not the same as the wish to rid the world of injustice. But it is the inner railing, the inner sense that the mind cannot be at ease unless the world is different.

This is what the Buddha saw. He saw it's possible for the mind to be at ease even while the world is caught in its worldly winds. This blending between the ultimate and relative takes us to the place where we wish to alleviate suffering, wish to extend ourselves in the relative world to make change, and yet not be caught up in anger, aversion, greed, and delusion while we do that.

The possibility of that freedom is proclaimed in the second half of the Four Noble Truths. The Fourth Noble Truth, the truth of the path leading to the end of suffering, is the cause of freedom from suffering. In this framing, the Second Noble Truth identifies craving as the cause of our suffering. The way out is understood to be following the path, engaging with the practices of the Eightfold Path, which will lead us, step by step, to the ending of suffering.

The Buddha used, in a way, the medical model of his day in framing the Four Noble Truths. The first thing you state is what the illness is, what's the disease. The illness is suffering. Then you state the cause: what is the cause of that illness? The craving is the cause. And what's the prognosis? Is it possible to have a cure? Is it possible to be cured of this illness? He says emphatically, yes, it is possible to be cured of this illness. The Eightfold Path is the prescription, the medicine that we take, the activities that we do to free ourselves, to cure ourselves of this illness.

We are such a medical culture—we want pills for everything. Certainly if somebody came along and said, "Here's a pill, take this pill, you'll be done with suffering," most of us would do it. The Buddha is offering us the tools to do this, to free ourselves. And yet it is very difficult for us to pick up this path.

We do try. We let go. We try again. We let go.

So the path—the Eightfold Path—I'd just like to review it in very broad strokes: what this path is, this cure that the Buddha offers us, this prescription. The factors of the Eightfold Path are wise understanding, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. Really, they are all practices. Every one of them is an activity that we can engage in, and they work together.

I like the name "Eightfold Path" because it makes me think about folding. Imagine putting all the names of the Eightfold Path on a piece of paper and folding it all up—they all touch each other. If you're cultivating one aspect of the Eightfold Path, you're probably cultivating two or three of the others at the same time. It's not like you cultivate the first one and then move on to the second. As you're cultivating any one of them, you're engaged with the others.

So the path, in a sense, even though it is folded in this way with each of the parts connected to and touching all of the other factors, there is a kind of way we can look at it as being linear. And I'll talk about it in this way just briefly.

Wise understanding and wise intention, as the beginning of the path, point to the fact that we need to have some knowledge or wisdom of where we're going. We don't just start on a path, start on a journey, without some sense of what the journey is about. Our journey is about freeing the mind from suffering. And the very definition of wise understanding—one of the key definitions—is that someone who understands, understands the Four Noble Truths.

So this is kind of interesting because the Eightfold Path is the last element of the Four Noble Truths, and yet the Four Noble Truths is the first element of the Eightfold Path. There are cycles within cycles within cycles, all within the Buddhist teachings. Part of the way our path unfolds is through cycles.

We learn a little bit, and this is the way wisdom begins on the path. We start by hearing something, learning something. It's not a full-blown deep understanding when we step onto the path. Perhaps we've heard somebody say something, talk about something, and there's a little resonance for us. It's like, "Wow, that makes sense to me." I know for myself, when I kind of hit bottom in my life, the teachings of suffering began to make a lot of sense. And so there was a willingness to begin to listen.

We begin our path by hearing the teachings and reflecting on them. And then we begin to engage, if they make sense. If reflecting on them, these teachings begin to make sense—we hear something about suffering, we hear something about practice. For myself, the very first little bit of wisdom that I heard was: maybe it's helpful to, rather than act on your emotions, observe them. And that didn't make much sense to me when I first heard it. It made almost no sense to me. Anger was the main thing I was dealing with, and it's like, why would I want to pay attention to my anger? Why would I want to turn to that?

But as I said, I had kind of hit bottom, and so I was willing to try anything. And actually I pretty quickly saw the wisdom of turning to observe experience rather than acting out of it.

So we step on the path, we hear something, maybe even just a very small bit of wisdom. The wisdom of the Buddha, I see, is very dense. You just need a little bit of it—a little piece of that wisdom—and if it resonates with you, you can go a long way with just that. Because all the wisdom of the Buddha is so interpenetrating, so intertwined.

We hear the wisdom, we may start to act, engage. And this is wise intention, the second aspect of the Eightfold Path. We step onto the path with hearing some teachings and then begin to engage. Our intentions become oriented, aligned around those wisdom teachings. We start to be curious about what it might mean to engage with our reactivity in a different way.

So we have perhaps a little mental shift through the hearing of wise view, wise understanding, moving us towards a different way to engage in the world: wise intention. And one of the keys in wise intention is this—because our whole exploration is really around suffering and how suffering could end, one of the key explorations becomes: how can we not contribute to suffering in the world?

And so this points to the next three aspects of the Eightfold Path: wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood. The intention towards non-harming becomes a very beautiful and central part of our path, and that intention towards non-harming is expressed in these three factors.

Really, this aspect of the Eightfold Path is about harmonizing our relationships with the world, with other people—engaging in ways that don't create suffering, as best as we can. Living peacefully, cultivating this heart of non-harming. I think Joseph said it so beautifully last night, the quote from the Dalai Lama: as a practice, be kind whenever possible, and it's always possible. This really encapsulates the sense of the ethical component of the Eightfold Path.

The last three aspects of the Eightfold Path are about cultivating our minds. We can look at wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood as cleaning up our relationships with our fellow human beings. And the last three—wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—as cleaning up our relationship with our own mind, looking at how we purify and understand the ways our mind gets caught in itself.

Both internal and external events can create this suffering. We see this sitting here in the hall. It becomes easier to see the internal events that create suffering. There's not much going on here, and yet our minds—you sit in the hall and we see our minds create something. The mind picks up something that happened five years ago and starts chewing on it, and then we start feeling the frustration and the anger and confusion around that, and we're off in a storm. We see this over and over again.

One of my friends was one of the early practitioners at the Forest Refuge. She made the comment that the Forest Refuge is relentlessly perfect. It's just so perfect that you have no way to blame the environment. Now that may not be the case completely here, but we do get to see how we react to the things that are coming up in our minds. And

there are also things that happen externally that we react to. Mental development helps us to see both how we react to the internal and the external, and to see how greed, aversion, and delusion—the reactivity of our minds—compounds our struggles.

The factors of effort, mindfulness, and concentration really work together. I don't think we can truly tease them apart. When you're cultivating wise effort, taking the effort to cultivate what's wholesome and let go of the unwholesome, it takes mindfulness to do that. It takes mindfulness for us to engage in effort wisely. It takes effort to stay connected to our experience in the present moment. To cultivate the skillful and let go of the unskillful, to recognize the skillful and unskillful—that's where the mindfulness comes in.

Bringing mindfulness and effort together cultivates concentration. Again, I won't go into this in detail, but those two together create the continuity of mindfulness that allows concentration to come into being. Concentration results in the sustaining of mindfulness over time, which takes both mindfulness and effort together.

Mindfulness joined with concentration and effort—this is really what we've been doing day in and day out here on this retreat. And you have all seen the value of this. You have all seen the possibility of understanding that comes when we bring the perspective of witnessing how our minds react, observing it rather than acting on it. We see how the mind is contributing to its own struggles, and the mind begins to let go.

In a way it feels kind of magical to me, this power of mindfulness and wisdom together, which comes with concentration. The wisdom of the practice is really revealed in the continuity of mindfulness. And the wisdom frees. The mind sees through the mindfulness and the concentration; the mind sees its own contribution. It sees how it adds to our internal climate a state of mind that is not necessary. And the mind, in seeing that—seeing that it's contributing to its own unhappiness—actually begins to understand how to let go of that struggle.

It's not actually something we can figure out how to do. At least in my experience, I remember sitting in this hall, suffering greatly over something or other, feeling so caught by the mind. And the mind kind of screamed within itself: I would let go if I knew how. And I had no idea how to let go.

In that place, our practice is to meet the suffering. The meeting of that suffering, the meeting of that struggle, is what gives the mind its education in how to let go. This is the teaching that Joseph so clearly and beautifully articulates: that we tend to want insight into suffering without experiencing suffering. It doesn't happen that way.

We gain understanding by meeting the suffering—not by reacting to it, but by meeting it. And this is what those three aspects of the Eightfold Path—wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—give the mind the stability to do.

As this unfolds, what begins to happen is that we see clearly, so clearly, how the mind can let go of what it adds: the wanting things to be other than they are, the wanting to get rid of things, the confusion in our minds. The seeing of that letting go itself is often experienced as a release—a shift of perspective, an ease comes into being. Sometimes the experience that's there—the anger, the confusion, the frustration, the pain in the knee—maybe that doesn't change. But the mind lets go of its grip on having it need to be some other way. And that shift gives the mind the recognition, the understanding: there's another way. That shift is a shift of insight.

This is how the Eightfold Path is itself a cycle. Because that wisdom we started with—the wisdom of understanding suffering and understanding the cause of suffering, seeing how the cultivation of the path leads to letting go—that becomes a lived experience, not an intellectual one. The wisdom of our practice becomes lived and real to us, not hypothetical, not intellectual, not speculative. It becomes understood in our bones.

To me, this is resonant with what Guy talked about the other night, although perhaps in a different context. He talked about clarifying the view—I believe those were the words he used. And to me, the Eightfold Path is the practice we use to purify, to understand our minds, to understand the truth of what's initially intellectual understanding of wise view, wise understanding. The teachings of the Eightfold Path, the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, the teachings of dependent origination, the teachings around greed, aversion, and delusion, the teachings around what's skillful, what helps us move away from suffering, what helps us let go of these unskillful states of mind—we cultivate these in our practice and the understanding begins to dawn: they're not just a good idea, they're a way to live. And we live from that perspective.

So the practice of the Eightfold Path deepens our understanding of the Four Noble Truths, deepens our understanding of perhaps aspects of dependent origination, deepens our understanding of greed, aversion, and delusion and how they catch the mind, deepens our understanding of what's skillful, deepens our understanding of what's unskillful, what we should let go of. With that understanding now being a lived experience, it kind of spurs us on to keep going. And so the path is a cycle. We gain some lived understanding of that truth and it sends us back into wanting to keep looking, keep understanding.

We're actually living the Eightfold Path here on retreat, all the aspects of it. Wise understanding and wise intention are being lived through the exploration of our conversations in the practice discussions, through the question and answer in the morning, through the talks. There is that offering of some of the wisdom of the Buddha in this first way I talked about—the intellectual, reflective understanding of the teachings. Also, another way to understand wise intention and wise understanding is simply this: you are here. You've been here for nearly six weeks. If that's not an expression of wise intention, I don't know what is.

Wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood here on retreat are cultivated through our engagement with the precepts. Essentially, we are living wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood here on retreat. Moment by moment, we can understand these as being fulfilled. As one of my Burmese teachers, Sayadaw Ujanaka, said, you're fulfilling the ethical component of the Eightfold Path by abstaining from wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood. Your livelihood here on retreat is essentially being temporary monks and nuns. Your livelihood here is practice—the most beautiful livelihood.

Wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—of course you're living those day by day, moment by moment. The most obvious aspects of what we're practicing moment by moment here on retreat are those three. And then there are the moments of understanding, moments of wisdom, insight that reveal the truth.

The Four Noble Truths are, as I stated, often talked about in terms of this cause and effect relationship where the second noble truth causes the first noble truth, the truth of suffering. Craving causes the suffering. The fourth noble truth, the truth of the path—engaging with the path, cultivating the path—leads us towards realizing the ending of suffering.

There's another way to reflect on the Four Noble Truths, I think, a slightly different perspective. And that comes with looking at the actions that the Buddha associated with the Four Noble Truths. Each truth has a particular task that we are encouraged to engage with. The truth of suffering is meant to be understood. The truth of the cause of suffering—craving—is meant to be abandoned. The ending of craving, which is the cessation of suffering, is meant to be realized. And the path is meant to be cultivated.

The tasks associated with the Four Noble Truths I see as a kind of map laid on top of the Four Noble Truths to give us a way out. The first two Noble Truths—understand suffering and let go of the cause of suffering—give us a way from the perspective of our usual life, which is caught in suffering, caught in the struggle, driven in effect by the cause of suffering.

So starting from where we are, from that place, the Buddha suggests: understand suffering. The way we understand suffering is by bringing the Eightfold Path to our moment-to-moment experience. As we apply the Eightfold Path, the task of applying the Eightfold Path is really to understand suffering, this First Noble Truth.

Something that's really struck me so many times in my practice is that as I'm willing to meet the suffering—almost a surrender, you know, surrender to "this is the way it is, I guess I need to observe it, I guess I need to be with it, meet it, explore it, get to know it"—as I let go of the resistance to the struggle and bring the factors of wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration joined with the wisdom of wise understanding, what I see is that when suffering is fully understood, when the mind connects without resistance, with mindfulness and wisdom, with effort and mindfulness and concentration, the wisdom coming to bear on it—when suffering is fully understood, the cause of suffering is naturally abandoned. It happens. It's not something our sense of "me doing something" has to do.

And so in this way, we can see that the task of the First Noble Truth, the understanding of suffering, leads to the Second Noble Truth, the abandoning of the craving. The abandoning of the craving—as the craving is released, that right there is realizing the ending of suffering, the Third Noble Truth. So our practice begins where we are, right in the middle of our suffering, bringing the Eightfold Path to bear on understanding suffering, and the rest of the path unfolds from there. First Noble Truth: understand suffering. Second Noble Truth: abandon the craving. That happens. Abandoning is a fruit of our practice. Abandoning is a fruit of the understanding. The realization of the freedom is a fruit of the abandoning.

And so looked at in this way, the tasks associated with the Four Noble Truths put a different spin on the Four Noble Truths—kind of sequential, one step to the next. Understand suffering, abandon the cause, realize the ending. So those first three make sense to me in terms of this kind of step-by-step unfolding.

And I have to point to Stephen Batchelor here because he's the one who really gave me the interest in exploring the Four Noble Truths from this perspective. It led me to think—and Stephen Batchelor pointed out—that it struck him as very odd that the Four Noble Truths, being one of the central lists of Buddhism, wasn't structured like a list in the normal way that Buddhist lists are structured. Most of the lists that the Buddha offered, many of the lists at least, have a kind of directionality to them where the initial ones are the early things that we cultivate and learn, and then they build on each other.

The seven factors of awakening, for instance. We cultivate mindfulness and investigation and energy, and then the interest arises in the settling of the mind—calm and tranquility and concentration and equanimity. And in a way, the equanimity of the factors of awakening is a kind of—I wouldn't say it's the goal of the seven factors, but it is understood as being a kind of deeper quality. And so often the lists in the way the Buddha offered them head in this step-by-step way. At least they can be understood in that way.

And so Stephen Batchelor said, but this one, the Four Noble Truths—what would it mean for the Eightfold Path, cultivating the path, to be the ending of the path? The ending, or the kind of penultimate, the ultimate result of the Four Noble Truths?

And so I reflected on that some and explored, thought about this. The first three I can really see, based on these tasks associated with the Four Noble Truths, how they lead step by step from one to the next. But cultivating the path, that last one—that's a bit interesting to think about. And my reflection was: what can I learn from thinking about this in this way?

I'm going to point to something that Bhante mentioned the other night. He talked about how in the first stage of awakening called sotāpanna, stream entry, there was a place where the stream meant the Eightfold Path. I looked up that reference. It is the Buddha and Sāriputta discussing what sotāpanna means, what stream entry means. The Buddha is quizzing Sāriputta. The Buddha says, "What is the stream?" And Sāriputta responds, "The Noble Eightfold Path is the stream." And the Buddha then says, "And what is a stream enterer?" And Sāriputta responded, "One who possesses the Eightfold Path."

So in this teaching, in this framing of what awakening is, one who has entered the stream, one who is awakened to that degree, possesses the Eightfold Path. That's in a sense the definition of, or what the awakened person is like—living the Eightfold Path. And so the Eightfold Path, while it definitely is described as the way that we engage, how we practice, how we understand suffering through cultivating the factors of the Eightfold Path—and yet the Eightfold Path isn't simply gone with awakening.

My understanding of that teaching—that someone who has entered the stream possesses the Eightfold Path—is that they're living the Eightfold Path. It's a natural thing. It's not something they have to try to do. It's a natural unfolding that one lives the path when one has let go of suffering. And so from that perspective, the letting go, the releasing, the realizing of the ending of suffering puts us in a place of simply living the path.

This is also described in terms of full awakening, where there are a few more pieces to what one possesses. The Buddha was asked, essentially, what are the qualities of an awakened person? And he responded that an awakened person possesses the right view of one beyond training, the right intention of one beyond training, the right speech, action, and livelihood of one beyond training, the right effort, mindfulness, and concentration of one beyond training, and the right knowledge and right deliverance of one beyond training. Those last two—knowledge and deliverance—are translating the terms *jnana*, which essentially means the realized knowledge, the insight knowledge, and *vimutti*, which means release.

So one who is free, naturally—my understanding of this—is naturally living the Eightfold Path.

One interesting way to explore what cultivating the path means from this perspective: We obviously cultivate the path in our engagement with our struggles. We are cultivating wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration, strengthening those capacities. But for one who is free, naturally living the Eightfold Path, one way we can understand that person as cultivating the path is to think about what a path actually is—think about the image of a path. There are all these paths here in the woods, and those paths are created because people have walked on them. It is the very walking on the path that keeps it clear and available.

And so we can appreciate those who have gone before us, who have realized the ending of suffering, who have walked the path, who are continuing to walk the path, are keeping the path clear for us. They're continuing to cultivate the path for our benefit.

There's a text—one of my favorite texts—that also points to this notion of how the path we're walking is the path we will walk if we become awakened. It's not different. The text is called the Aṭṭhakavagga. It's an old text found in the Sutta Nipāta. Most Pāli scholars feel that it's one of the earliest—both early in the sense that it hasn't been altered too much over the years because the language is quite archaic, but also that it seems to be a teaching from fairly early in the Buddha's teaching career. They think this because it's one of the few texts actually referred to elsewhere in the suttas. People will talk and say, "Oh, have you memorized that text? Do you know the Aṭṭhakavagga? Can you quote that?" The Buddha praises someone who's able to speak that text. So it was an early text, and it has a different flavor to it.

This text is basically sixteen poems about clinging—that's the main theme: clinging and letting go of clinging. The way it approaches this is by describing what somebody is like who's living in the world suffering and clinging, describing what somebody is like living in the world without clinging, and then describing the path of how one might get from one to the other.

The first thing I'd like to share with you is a description of how an awakened person is described:

"Tell me about the Supreme Person," a questioner asks.

"A person who is free of wishes before the body's destruction, who's not tethered to the past, who cannot be reckoned in terms of the present, and for whom there are no yearnings for the future.

A person who is not angered, not frightened, not boastful, not fretful, who gives wise advice, who is calm, restrained in speech, who is indeed a sage.

A person who is not attached to the future, who does not sorrow over the past, who finds solitude amidst sense contacts, and is not guided by fixed views.

A person who is retiring, not deceitful, not covetous, not greedy, not impudent, not arousing contempt, who does not engage in malicious speech.

A person who does not relish pleasure, who is not arrogant, who is mild and of ready wit, who is not credulous, who by nothing is repelled.

A person who does not take on the training in hope of material gain, who is unperturbed if they get nothing, who is not hampered by wishes and not greedy for flavors.

A person who is even-tempered, ever attentive, who does not suppose that in the world they are equal, superior, or inferior, who is free of conceit.

A person for whom there are no tethers, who knowing the truth is not tethered in any way. This is someone I call peaceful."

To me, something that stands out about that description is that it's very—almost normal. I don't mean normal in the sense that you see people like that all the time, but it's a description you can understand. It's very this-worldly. The description of someone who is awakened is given in terms of how they are in the world.

Not frightened, not angered, not boastful, doesn't imagine themselves to be equal, superior, or inferior. It's a description of how somebody is in the world—a description of the training.

Here is a description of the training. The question posed is: speak about the path of practice. And the Buddha responds:

A person should not have covetous eyes. She should close her ears to ordinary chatter. She should not be greedy for flavors. She should not cherish anything in the world. In whatever way he is affected by sense contact, he should not lament over anything. He should not long for continued existence. He should not tremble amidst danger. She should be meditative, not footloose. She should desist from worry. She should not be indolent. She should live in lodgings where there is little noise. He should not sleep too much. He should be devoted to wakefulness and keen endeavor. He should abandon laziness, deception, merriment, various kinds of amusements. One should not be a boaster, should not speak scheming words, should not cultivate impudence, should not utter quarrelsome speech. One should not be drawn into telling lies, should not be deliberately treacherous, should not despise others for their way of life or wisdom or precepts and practices. If ascetics or ordinary people irritate her with their talkativeness, she should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate. Knowing the Buddha's teachings, an ever attentive person who investigates it should train in it. Knowing the extinguishing of the illusion of self as peace, one should not be negligent in applying Gautama's teachings. The unconquered conqueror realized the truth through his own insight, not through hearsay. So with regards to the sublime one's teaching, one who is diligent should constantly venerate it by following his example.

That, I think, is really the key: follow the example. Someone who is free is worthy of emulation.

The other line that I really resonate with is "should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate." If you want to be peaceful, behave peacefully. The path reflects the goal. How we are supports that movement in the direction of peace.

The Eightfold Path is not just a set of practices—it's really a description of how a noble life is lived. I find that very inspiring.

Last night, Joseph also pointed to something that I thought captures exactly the crux of the matter: the Buddha's teaching in brief, which Joseph likes to highlight, that the Buddha said over and over again—nothing should be clung to as I or mine. That could be a summary of the path. Nothing should be clung to as I or mine. The result of the path, the freedom, is the not clinging.

The path reflects the goal.

CHAPTER 96

Unpacking Right Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · 56 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella systematically unpacks the Buddha's definition of right mindfulness (sammā sati) as presented in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). She explores each element of the classic formulation: "One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."

Fella illuminates how ordinary awareness differs from wise mindfulness through the example of anger—we may know we're angry, but right mindfulness involves a crucial shift in perspective, turning toward the experience itself rather than its object. She examines key qualities: "abiding" as a restful, receptive presence; "contemplating the body as a body" as knowing experience directly rather than through concepts; "ardent" as wholehearted yet balanced effort; and "clearly comprehending" as understanding impermanence and the purpose of practice.

Particularly valuable is her teaching on effort, comparing mindfulness to gently tapping a rolling hoop—not one forceful push but persistent light touches that build momentum. She emphasizes that wise attitude means being at ease with whatever arises, including reactivity itself. This non-reactive container is where mindfulness works its transformative power, gradually freeing the mind from unwholesome states while strengthening wholesome ones. The talk offers both philosophical depth and practical guidance for understanding how mindfulness leads to liberation.

As I was leaving my house this evening to come over here, I met somebody coming in who said I might want to go the long way around because there was a fire truck blocking the road. So I went the long way around, and there were fire trucks blocking the other end too. I went back, checked it out, found a way to get through, and I apologize for being delayed this evening. It added some alertness to the system.

What I'd like to talk about this evening is mindfulness. From the perspective of what we're doing here, what we're practicing, mindfulness can be described quite simply as knowing what's happening while it's happening, or as being present, aware, or connected to experience. Often our language for mindfulness includes the language of seeing, as Joseph mentioned this morning. And yet it can be helpful to recognize that mindfulness also includes a feeling into experience, a connected nature of experience, a meeting of experience.

The mindfulness of our practice is based on or related to a very ordinary quality of mind—this simple capacity of our minds to know what's happening while it's happening, this capacity to be self-reflective, to know what's happening in the present moment. We can know that we know. As human beings, we have this ability, and yet we're often not really consciously aware of it, this knowing that we know, this function or capacity of our minds. We take it for granted. It seems so ordinary that we don't really notice it.

I think it was actually one of the aspects of the brilliancy of the Buddha to highlight this quality and recognize that it's an important quality, a really helpful quality, particularly when it's cultivated and explored in a particular way. In the Satipatthana Sutta, he framed mindfulness with particular qualities, other qualities that accompany it to make it right mindfulness.

If we were to ask someone who has never encountered mindfulness as a practice, somebody who's dealing with a reactive emotion or in a reactive state—somebody's angry and we ask them, "Do you know you're angry?"—they're going to look at us kind of funny. "Well, yeah, of course I know I'm angry." So it's not just the knowing of what we are experiencing that makes mindfulness right mindfulness.

Right mindfulness includes a perspective that, in the case of a reactive emotion such as anger, has us interested and curious about turning towards the experience of the emotion, rather than being interested in what we're angry about. It's recognizing what's happening as an experience in the present moment, knowing that it is an experience in the present moment, as opposed to believing something about it, believing something needs to happen about it.

In the case of anger, for instance, we recognize that anger is something happening in the mind. It's related to something happening in the world, probably, often related to something happening out there in our world of experience. But not necessarily dependent on that. By that I mean that the same thing could be happening and we might not be angry about it.

This is really one of the key turnings of the mind around suffering, one of the turnings of the mind around our practice—recognizing that what's happening in the world can't directly make us react in a certain way. There's stuff happening in the world and it comes in and it's processed through our minds and bodies. It's a process within our minds and bodies that creates the reactivity.

This is really good news, actually, because it means there can be some possibility of changing our experience. If it were entirely a locked-in fact that something happens in the world and we respond with reactivity, there would be no hope. But with the recog-

nition that it's not just what's out there—there's something happening out there and there's something happening inside that's creating the reactivity—as we turn towards the experience of anger, we start to learn this. We start to see the contribution that our own minds are making towards our inner experience, towards our reactivities.

Now, this doesn't mean that we're not discerning about taking action. Mindfulness, this turning towards our experience, doesn't mean that we simply don't do anything. Mindfulness brings along the qualities of discernment as well. This right mindfulness brings along the discernment that allows us to respond appropriately, from compassion, with metta, when circumstances require it in the world—when circumstances of injustice, for instance, or things happening that need intervention. There are definitely things in the world that need intervention, and yet we don't need to be angry there. In fact, we can turn towards compassion in that response.

The Buddha didn't just sit. He was very active in the world. At one point, there's a story that war was fomenting in the area where he lived, and he actually went and stood on the battlefield and told people, "Stop. What are you doing?" And while he was standing there, the war stopped. There is this place for compassionate action, and yet it comes because we know our own contribution.

And so, you know, simply being aware, simply knowing what our experience is—yes, I'm angry, yes, I'm reactive—is not quite enough. We need a shift of perspective that helps us to see more deeply, more clearly. My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya says awareness alone is not enough. By this he means that we need to have a particular perspective, a particular way of observing experience, for it to lead to freedom, for it to lead to wisdom.

And so the Buddha recommended that we cultivate right mindfulness, wise mindfulness. The key definition of wise mindfulness is the four establishments of mindfulness—the central sutta the Buddha taught around the practice of mindfulness. It includes four areas of establishing, exploring our experience to establish this quality of wise mindfulness: mindfulness of the body, of feelings, of mind states, and of dhammas—experience, relationship. That last one is complex to describe in a few words, so I won't try at this moment, and I'm sure we'll talk about it as we go through these weeks.

In that sutta, the Buddha actually lays out a definition of mindfulness. He repeats this definition for each of the foundations. Here it is from the foundation of the body: "How does one practice right mindfulness? One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."

That's a package of qualities, things that come together to make right mindfulness. I'd like to unpack this a little bit and explore with you some of these words and my own investigation of how these qualities support right mindfulness.

The first part: "One abides contemplating the body as a body." Those first two words —"one abides contemplating." The word "abides" I like; it has a very lovely, settled-back quality to it. As you sit here, just think about what it means to abide in the body, abide knowing the body as a body. How does that land? How does it resonate?

The quality for me that it connects with—or set of qualities it connects with—is resting, easeful, connected, a receptive quality of meeting or being with experience. I had a workshop with a few people and was exploring this word with them in a very interactive way. I said, "So what does this quality make you think of?" One person raised their hand and said, "The dude abides." Which is apparently from a movie, The Big Lebowski. But it kind of captures that sense—the dude abides. We can be the dude abiding in our experience. It does generate that quality of restfulness.

And so the Buddha brings in this quality from the beginning. It's the first word he brings in for wise mindfulness: abiding.

"Contemplating" has a meaning of observing, to look at repeatedly, to closely connect with experience. The commentaries apparently connect this with contemplating or observing experience from a particular perspective—the perspective of impermanent, unreliable, and not-self. This aspect of the definition also brings in some sense of what direction we're headed in terms of what we're looking at. Whatever we're exploring, whatever we're recognizing in experience, it will be impermanent. We can recognize that aspect of experience as an important aspect to highlight in what we understand and what we know.

These two words together—"abides contemplating"—to me bring a sense of relaxed, open, receptive, close meeting of experience. They bring together both a relaxation and an interest. "Contemplating" carries that quality of looking, being with, meeting, closely knowing experience. This is an important balance for us.

And what is it that we abide contemplating? We abide contemplating the body as a body—or, for the other foundations, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states, or dhammas, experience as experience.

This also, I think, brings in another aspect of wisdom into the definition. What makes mindfulness wise mindfulness is not only what we look at, but how we look at it. There's not only the what, but the how we are observing.

Observing the body as a body—what does that mean? I like that particular framing of the translation, "observing the body as a body." Sometimes it's translated as "observing the body in and of itself." The body as a body, to me, evokes the sense of knowing the body as simply a body. We connect with our experience of body very much personally. We connect to it as I, me, my body.

And this is pointing to a more simple recognition, just as the instruction from this morning: there is a body. There is a body. It's a framing, a different kind of framing of our meeting of experience than our usual way of meeting experience.

The commentaries—and I used that word a minute ago and didn't really explain what commentaries are—there's a whole collection of texts, words that were attributed primarily to the Buddha. There's a stack of those books. And then there's a whole other set of books that are people who have read those books, thought about them, and made a lot of notes about them. A particular set of those books, written early in the common era from the time of the death of the Buddha up until about 500 in the common era, is a collection of people who looked at the text and made comments on them. This is the collection of works called the commentaries.

So the commentaries, in looking at this phrase, also looked at this and said, "What the heck does this mean?" They explored and thought about it and looked at various places in the suttas that might help them understand it. And they came to the following understanding: that the repetition of "body as a body" indicates that there's a need to precisely determine the object of contemplation and isolate it from objects with which it might be confused. This is paraphrased from a translation of one of the commentaries.

So isolating the experience of the body, separating it from other experience that we might conflate or confuse with the experience of the body. I'll give you an example of how this might happen.

Right now, put your attention into your hand. Just let your attention rest in your hand and feel into the experience. Be with the experience of the hand. It can help to close your eyes with this. Just notice sensations. You might notice pulsing or tingling or vibration, stiffness, coolness or warmth.

And now, open your eyes and look at your hand and think about it as a hand and what hands do. They reach, they grab. What happens to the experience of hand? What happens to the experience? For me, at least, when I do that there's a distance from the immediacy of the actual experience that I was with just a moment ago. Some of you may have noticed something like that.

This is often how we relate to our bodies—through the ideas about them. With the hand, what our hands do, we look at our hand, we think about it, we have an idea of hand, and we relate to hand through that idea rather than through direct experience. This is a way that the experience of body is conflated or confused with an idea about body or a concept about body.

So this is a beginning to tease apart. We can start to drop below the level of concept into direct experience. Not to say that we get rid of concept—concept is actually an incredibly useful way to navigate the world. If I had to come in here every time and remember, "Right, these are people out there and those are mats and this is a floor and I walk on the floor and those are walls and I don't walk through walls"—if I had to think about that every time I walked into a room, it would take a lot of processing power. As it is, I walk in and I meet the world a lot through concepts.

And yet there's a big doorway there, when we are relating to the world through concept, for confusion to enter. Because we're not meeting direct experience; we're meeting our idea about what's happening. And that's where our reactivity can very often enter into the equation.

So meeting the body as a body helps us to connect with the actual experience of the body and begin to tease apart the actual experience of body from other experiences—feelings, thoughts, ideas. It's so easy for us to conflate or mix together various experiences and confuse them with each other. The practice of mindfulness helps us to tease them apart.

I think that this aspect of seeing the body as a body also brings in a sense of a non-interfering mindfulness. One knows this experience as an experience. This is a body. There is a body. I don't know if some of you were playing with that today, but it does have that power of kind of cutting through some of those ideas about the body. It's just: this is a body. There is a body. So it helps to bring in that non-interfering awareness.

The next word in this definition is *ardent*, sometimes translated as diligent. So one abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, with ardency. The word ardency in English brings in a sense of wholeheartedness.

I like that aspect of that word, wholeheartedness, because it brings our heart into the equation of mindfulness and not just our minds. Ardency has a quality of persistence, of effort, and yet with this wholeheartedness, it's not just about dragging our minds around. It's about bringing our whole being to this exploration of meeting experience. I think it brings a heartfelt interest and curiosity and connection to this practice of mindfulness.

So this is a place where balanced and sustained effort is included in the equation. This is some of what Joseph talked about this morning—this balance between relaxation and alertness. And I think there are several places where this comes into the definition. With ardency, we are including this quality of wholeheartedness, and yet remembering it's balanced by this abiding. We dwell ardently. We abide with our whole heart. Abiding with our whole heart. This is not the "more or less mindful" that Joseph talks about.

There is an art to this aspect of meditation—how we bring our effort is really the art of meditation. It's something we each have to explore. And it's never just one thing either. It's not like you get it and then forevermore have it, because it is an art. It's completely responsive to the state of your heart and mind, the state of what's happening in the world. It's a dance of how we bring our effort and meet experience. At times there's more of a sense of real commitment and meeting. And at other times it's more relaxed and settled back and just receiving.

I find in my own practice that this dance is really helped by a light touch of effort in the moment. The effort in mindfulness practice isn't about gripping or holding or trying or pushing. I think we sometimes, when we sit down or enter into a period of meditation—at least I know I, when I was early in my practice, I'd sit down for a forty-five-minute sitting and it would be like, "Okay, mindful for forty-five minutes." I'd pick up the whole forty-five minutes in the first second and try to generate the energy to be present for the entire sitting in that first moment of the meditation. But mindfulness doesn't work that way. The effort doesn't work that way. It's more of a light touch in this moment, which can be a light touch in this moment.

Right now—Joseph pointed to this this morning—right now, feel the sensation of your hand. Feel the sensation of your hips touching the chair or cushion or bench. Feel the sensation of your lips touching each other. How much effort does it take? How hard is it? As I name each experience, very often the mind is right there. It's not like it takes a dragging of the mind. It's not got that quality; it's much lighter of a touch. So the effort in mindfulness practice isn't so much about gripping or holding on, but it's that light touch again and again and again. That's where the effort is—to keep the light touch going. It's the persistence that really is the effort, a gentle persistence of light touch.

There's a game that people from all over the world, apparently as long back as we have records of people doing things, have played. Kids have played with hoops—round hoops rolled along with a stick. I think you all know what I'm talking about. You put a hoop on its end and then you tap on the hoop to keep it rolling. The game is to see how long can you keep it rolling.

If you were going to play this game, you wouldn't take the stick and give the hoop a big whack. You would lose the hoop, and there's very little control you have with that big whack. Instead, you give it a gentle tap, just enough so that you can keep up with it as you walk beside or run beside the hoop. And you can tune which direction it's going. If it's falling a little bit one way, you give it another gentle tap. With these gentle taps, a momentum gets going with the hoop.

Our mindfulness is very like that. As the momentum develops with the hoop, you might be able to run alongside or be right next to it and not give it a tap for a little while, just watch it roll because it's got some momentum. And then give it another little tap or two as it begins to wobble.

Again, as we practice with our mindfulness, we start with a gentle persistence. Moment after moment, light touch, light touch, light touch. And with that light touch, a momentum of mindfulness develops. Then we can kind of back off a little bit with the conscious doing of that effort and allow the momentum of mindfulness to simply receive experience, to know what's happening.

This exploration around effort—this light touch of effort and this gentle persistence—is going to be a lot of the practice. We will fall off on one side; we'll get a little bit tight around the effort, working a little too hard. We'll recognize that and back off a little. Then we'll go off on the other side, getting a little dazed and wandering off in spaced-out land. We'll realize that and add a little bit more intentionality.

I understand that with airplanes, when they're flying somewhere, there's a radar signal they're tracking. Apparently they're almost never right on that signal. They're always falling a little off to one side and then correcting back, a little off to the other side and then correcting back. Our practice is kind of like that too around effort. We don't just get it right. It's a continual dance of meeting the conditions and understanding an appropriate level of gentle persistence.

I find playfulness to be a really helpful quality around the practice as a whole. To not feel like it has to be done right. Be willing to experiment. Be willing to play. Play with how you're using effort. Sometimes I've sat in the hall feeling fairly present, and I thought, "Yeah, it feels pretty present. Let me see, am I making more effort than I need to?" So I explored whether I could let go of some effort. I noticed there could be some letting go and relaxing. "Oh wow, I wonder how much effort I can let go of." I could let go of an awful lot that I didn't even know was happening. And at some point the mind started to wander. "Okay, maybe that's a little too far. Let's come back, bring a little more intentionality." So be willing to play.

The next piece of the phrase—clearly comprehending, fully aware—has many different aspects, different ways it's described or defined in the Buddha's teachings. The one we're perhaps most familiar with is the section in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta sometimes called the domain of full awareness or clear comprehension. It talks about meeting experience—all experience. It describes being mindful while reaching and bending your arms, while going to and fro, while walking, while standing, while speaking, while remaining silent, while urinating, while defecating. All day long. That's one aspect of this quality of clear comprehension: the aspect of all the time. Mindfulness is all the time.

So that gentle persistence—we just keep with that. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says the practice is like running a marathon, so you need to pace yourself. That light touch of effort, moment after moment, is doable all day long. A squeezing down, a forcing into—the mind gets exhausted. Recognizing that is important. Continuity is a big aspect of wise mindfulness.

Another aspect of this word "clear comprehension" and what it brings into the definition of wise mindfulness is a clear comprehension of impermanence. There's a definition in one place in the suttas that says, "And how does one abide with clear comprehension? One understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, remain present, and pass away." So there's a clear connection of clear comprehension with the understanding of impermanence.

Now, that particular definition doesn't mention the body. It talks about being mindful of feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away. And yet in that text, it also brings in mindfulness of the body. What does it mean to have these two together? There's no clear definition in the text, but as I practice with it, the way I explore this is that it brings in a broader frame for our mindfulness practice. When we're observing the body, it allows us to have a broader context for our experience.

Like, as we're observing the body, we may be observing some particular experience—a pain, for instance. That pain will come with feelings, with thoughts and perceptions. This is again the teasing apart of bodily experience from mental experience. There's a pain in the knee, and there's an unpleasant experience, and there are thoughts about the pain in the knee, and there are probably perceptions about it—what it means, what we need to do about it. So while we are experiencing the body, I think part of this is exploring what our relationship to that experience actually is. Clearly recognizing not only the experience of the body but the related mental experience that comes along with it. And to know that too as impermanent. To recognize unpleasant experience as unpleasant experience arising, persisting, passing away. To recognize thoughts about that pain as thoughts arising in the mind.

This is another aspect of clear comprehension. I really think of clear comprehension as being a real exploration of how we bring wisdom to our practice of mindfulness. It makes our mindfulness wise mindfulness.

The commentaries bring in another angle. They say that when we are clearly comprehending our experience, we really understand the purpose for which we're doing something. We understand the purpose for our mindfulness while we are mindful. The main purpose that the Buddha put out for wise mindfulness is to understand suffering. And so this is part of our exploration—understanding dukkha, understanding suffering. This again brings in wisdom.

There's a factor, a quality called wise attention, that's said to be the support for wise mindfulness. Wise attention is defined in the texts with certain statements. It says: one understands this is suffering; one understands this is the cause of suffering; one understands this is the end of suffering; and one understands this is the way leading to the end of suffering.

When I first heard that or reflected on it, I didn't quite understand what it was. I thought it was just stating the Four Noble Truths, which is what those four things are related to. But then I read it a little more closely. What I see is that wise attention is directing us to a particular perspective on understanding our experience. Whatever we are experiencing in the present moment can be understood as either suffering, the origin of suffering, the end of suffering, or qualities and supports leading us to the end of suffering. It's a framework through which we can understand whatever is happening in our experience. I may give a talk in more detail on this later in the retreat. But again, it's pointing our mindfulness towards understanding our experience in terms of what suffering is, how it's caused, what the contribution is in our own hearts and minds towards the experience of suffering, and how it might come to an end. Wise mindfulness is pointing the way to the ending of suffering.

The next word is mindful. "One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world." And since I've talked about mindfulness earlier, I'll just move to "free from desires and discontent for the world."

You might think that's a funny thing. It's like, well, I'm doing this practice in order to free myself from desires and discontents. If I have to start there, is there any hope? How do I start there?

Well, fortunately, there are some aspects of the teachings that say you can set them aside temporarily. And there's another even more hopeful side to this. Bhikkhu Anālayo points out that the word translated from the Pali there can be understood in the active tense. So it might mean setting aside greed and distress for the world, freeing oneself from greed and distress for the world—essentially happening simultaneously with the whole process.

In my experience, that's very much what happens with mindfulness. We might be able at times to set aside our frustrations, our confusions, and just consciously put them to the side. And yet much of what we meet on this path is our reactivity. So to me, this brings in a sense of how we are meeting experience. Can we bring a non-judgmental, non-reactive mindfulness to reactivity? It's a step back, in a way.

There's that shift of perspective that we become familiar with as we practice. We're caught in something like anger, and we recognize: oh, this is just anger.

This is something that can be explored with mindfulness. And while the anger doesn't necessarily vanish in that moment, there is a way in which we can hold that anger in a larger container—a container that has some ease to it.

This brings a sense of how we are relating to what's happening. What's our relationship to our experience? In freeing ourselves from desires and discontent, can we bring in that perspective, recognizing that this is the direction we're headed? If we can bring in that sense—that anger can be observed like anything else—we're headed in the direction of freeing ourselves from reactivity, because we may no longer be quite so caught by that state.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya gives this definition for wise attitude: a way of observing experience that allows us to feel at ease with whatever is happening. And I'll add: including difficulty, including reactivity.

This perspective of wise attitude—as best we can, to be non-reactive to what's happening—this is the container in which mindfulness has its magic. Carol used that phrase last night, that mindfulness is like magic. It has the power, when we turn with attention to reactive states of mind, unwholesome states of mind, and are mindful of them with that non-reactive wise attitude, to create the conditions for those states to become less and less in our experience.

And when we turn with attention to our wholesome states—states of compassion, of love, of generosity, of mindfulness, of concentration, of ease, of peace—when we notice those with mindfulness, with this wise attention of knowing "this is peace," "this is generosity," it creates the conditions for those to appear more frequently.

This wise attitude is where the magic is. And we will see ourselves without wise attitude. Then can we recognize: can I be okay with that too?

This creates a staged process—this purification of the mind, this becoming free of desires and discontents. We see certain ways that we're caught, and we can step back from those. Hidden in that, there may be other ways that we're caught, and we step back from those. It happens in stages. It's not one big poof and you're suddenly enlightened. I used to think that's what was going to happen. I really thought that during my first few retreats. I kept waiting for some big lights and flashes or something, and after that I'd forever be happy. It's much more slow, much more gradual, and much more real than that. It's very much right in our lives that we wake up.

So: one abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world. This is right mindfulness.

It brings together both what we are experiencing—in this case, the body. The Four Foundations bring in the breadth of everything, of all experience. All experience that arises can be known with wise mindfulness. Nothing is outside the terrain of wise mindfulness, of what can be known with wise mindfulness. The body as a body, feelings as feelings, and so forth—what we pay attention to.

And very much, wise mindfulness includes *how* we pay attention: with a balanced effort, a light touch, an ease to our effort. Abiding. Resting. Meeting. Wholehearted, persistent, non-judgmental, non-reactive. Ease with experience—to see and understand our minds and our hearts. To recognize the impermanent nature, which has the power—the seeing of the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature—which is the power that mindfulness gives us: to see clearly.

Mindfulness has that power to help us see deeply into experience, into the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. And that seeing deeply releases holding in the mind, deeply frees us from the ways that we are caught and struggle.

Some of this may need to be taken on faith or trust. And yet you're all here for six weeks or three months, and you will all come to understand how this works for you. That's where the freedom comes—seeing it in your own minds.

There's a statement in the Dhammapada, one of the collections of poems of the Buddha, something along the lines of: you have to practice for yourself. The Buddhas simply point the way.

Wise mindfulness is the very heart of how we practice for ourselves.

CHAPTER 97

Body and Mind

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a practical exploration of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā) as living processes rather than abstract concepts. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), she guides practitioners through experiencing the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) as the actual language of bodily sensation, helping distinguish between what is truly physical and what is mental overlay.*
>
> *Fella illuminates how suffering arises through the interplay of these aggregates: physical sensation gives rise to feeling tone (vedanā), which conditions mental formations (saṅkhāra) like liking, not-liking, and emotional reactions. Through personal examples—including confusing rapture with anxiety while waiting for an interview, and discovering fear behind an unpleasant sound—she demonstrates how clearly seeing these processes as distinct yet interconnected reveals their conditioned nature. She explores how perception (saññā) serves as a subtle gateway through which confusion enters, as we mistake our concepts about experience for reality itself.*
>
> *The practical wisdom offered here is profound yet accessible: when we recognize body and mind as streams of cause and effect rather than a solid self directing the show, disidentification naturally arises. The mind, seeing its own contribution to suffering, begins to understand how to let go. This teaching provides meditators with concrete tools for examining experience at the elemental level, revealing that happiness comes not from grasping at external conditions but from releasing our confused relationship with these ever-changing processes.*

This morning in the hall there was a question about how to explore disidentification with pain. Bhante referred to recognizing that the body and mind are processes, that there are processes at work. He mentioned the five aggregates and said somebody would give a talk about that at some point. And that's tonight.

I'm not going to try to do a detailed talk on the five aggregates, but rather talk about them in terms of body and mind processes, and in particular how these processes come together to create suffering, to create our reactivity.

The five bodily and mental processes are form or body, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. I'm going to talk about these in a way that hopefully won't seem like they're just concepts, but rather how we can experience these or know

these as processes in our direct experience. Because that's where the freedom comes—from actually witnessing our body and mind as processes. This is how disidentification begins to happen. When the mind understands that things are process, it begins to naturally disidentify with them.

While I'm exploring this from the perspective of reactivity and how reactivity is created in the mind, I want to be really clear that these five processes are at work all the time in our experience, whether wholesome experience is happening or unwholesome experience is happening. The experience of being mindful, knowing what's happening in the moment, the creation of concentration—all of this is the five aggregates at work too. And yet we do often identify through the process of reactivity, so that's where I'd like to explore this topic tonight.

In particular, I'd also like to come at this from the perspective of seeing if we can start to tease apart processes of body from processes of mind. I mentioned on the first evening that one aspect of wise mindfulness is to begin to tease apart or tease away things that might be confused with each other, so that we're very clear about what we're looking at. Sometimes when we're exploring the experience of body, it seems like we're exploring the body, but actually it's all mixed up with whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, whether we like it or don't like it. We get it all confused, and beginning to tease apart what body is and what mind is can be a really helpful doorway to understanding these mental processes.

When I first heard about the five aggregates, it seemed like something totally abstract. And yet these processes are very observable. We can know them and experience them and begin to see our experience in terms of these processes.

So the place I'd like to begin is with a familiarity with what the body is. Familiarity with bodily experience can help us sort out when we're experiencing bodily sensations and when we are relating through mental processes.

We've covered this a couple of times now, and Bhante talked about it this morning—the actual bodily sensations. We often relate to our bodily experience through ideas about the body, through concepts like hand or foot or shoulder. And yet what's actually happening is a much more elemental level of sensation. In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha described this elemental level of experience in terms of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

Let me explore these sensations with you now, as a kind of guided meditation, to experience bodily sensations through these doorways of earth, air, fire, and water.

First, earth element. This is the aspect of experience that feels somewhat solid, that has a solidity to it. Sensations of earth are sensations like heaviness, density, hardness or softness. In your experience right now, you might notice hardness where your buttocks contacts your chair or cushion or bench. That's an aspect of earth element. You might have access to the sense of weight, just the sense of mass of the body—earth sitting on earth, that weightiness. There might be a sense of the solidity of the bones, the structure of the skeleton. In our direct experience, we can contact these sensations related to earth element.

Then there's air element, which involves sensations connected with movement—tingling, vibration, pulsing, movement, pulling, pushing, tension, expansion, contraction, any sensations associated with movement. As you breathe, feeling the movement of the chest or abdomen, that's air element. If you put your attention in your hands right now, you may have a sense of tingling or pulsing or vibration. You may be able to feel that more generally through the body as well. This quality of movement—sensations that have a quality of movement—is a manifestation of air element.

Then there's fire element: temperature, heat, coolness, everything all along that range. Just now, notice what is your sense of the temperature of your body. Sometimes it's interesting—by putting your hand on your cheek, you can get a difference in temperature. You might notice hands cooler and cheeks warmer, or vice versa. This aspect of our bodily experience, temperature, is fire element.

And then there's water element.

Any kind of moisture. This is most obvious perhaps in perspiration or in saliva. It can also be known in another way—you might blow into your hands and press them together. Blowing into your hands adds a little moisture. So press your hands together and then slowly let them pull apart, just really slowly. You may experience stickiness. That's an aspect of water element, that stickiness. If the moisture weren't there, the stickiness would not be there. So when you're walking, if you walk on bare feet and feel your foot stick to the floor, that's water element.

As we explore our bodily experience, the touch sensations of the body, we begin to notice this elemental level of experience. We're learning the language of the body in this way. This is how the body—one of the ways the body communicates with us—through this sensation level of experience.

As we get familiar with the sensation level of experience, we can start to, in counterpoint or in contrast to this actual sensation level, begin to distinguish and recognize that a lot of what's going on in our experience is mental. The physical and mental are so

interwoven they're sometimes hard to tell apart. But as we get really familiar with this very bare elemental level of experience, we can start to tease apart body and mind. Body process from mental process.

Why is it helpful to do that? Why would it be helpful? Partly because it shows us that our body and mind are processes. And as Bhante mentioned this morning, recognizing experience in its process nature helps us to see and recognize that there is just this unending flow of cause and effect, cause and effect.

Experience in the body is a cause that produces a result, an effect in the mind. We stub our toe—physical experience of throbbing and aching—and the mind responds to that in various ways. I'm sure you all have your own way of responding to something like that. So the experience of the body is a process and results in something happening in the mind. This happens all the time.

Processes in the mind result in physical experience in the body. It's not a one-way street. We experience an emotion—anger, joy—and the body experiences sensation. With anger, in my experience, anger has a feeling of pressure, of increasing pressure and heat. Joy has a quality of lightness and kind of uplifting, bubbling or vibrating sensations in the body. Experience in the mind produces result and effect in the body.

So we start to see this interwoven set of processes. We begin to understand, watching this, seeing it as process—we begin to understand that it is simply a process. There's no one here particularly running the show. No one here deciding which process to start and which process to respond with. It's kind of running itself.

And we also start to recognize just how the structure of reactivity is put into place through watching these processes of body and mind work together. That's the exploration I'd like to look at tonight—how reactivity is created through the interplay of these processes.

Having the grounding in recognizing body sensation, we can start to look at what our responses to body sensations are. The most obvious area of mental process that's the easiest to see is emotion. We have an experience in our body—we're chopping vegetables and cut ourselves with a knife. There's that experience of the body. There is actual sensation happening there. And then the mind may react. It may turn into a berating or an aversive energy. It may be curious.

I remember at one point I was doing a self-retreat at home and I cut my finger pretty badly. I was kind of far into the retreat, and so I was like, "Wow, that's interesting. Looks like... hmm, better find somebody to take me to the hospital." So I wrapped it up, put pressure on it. It was five, six o'clock in the morning, but I rang my neighbor's doorbell.

I said, "I cut my finger really badly. I think I need to go to the hospital." And she said, "Don't panic." I don't know whether she was joking or not. But it was just like, "Wow, that's interesting what she's doing."

So, you know, sometimes it could be that the mind is actually pretty calm when something like that happens. There is the body sensation and a response. The physical experience can result in a mental response, and these are two different things. It's really helpful to recognize them as different things.

Often an unpleasant or painful physical sensation will result in an aversive reaction in the mind. And that experience—the physical experience and the mental reaction—are different things. It's really helpful to recognize that.

And likewise with emotions, the other direction of the relationship between body and mind. Really helpful to know the difference between the emotion and the impact that emotion has on the body, to not conflate the physical experience in the body with the emotion itself.

This is actually a really helpful exploration. At one point on a retreat—it was a three-month course, and I don't remember exactly when, probably fairly far in, I think in the second half—I was waiting for an interview. I had noticed that very often waiting for interviews, I became anxious. Is this familiar? It's a pretty common response. You haven't spoken in three days, you've got fifteen minutes, and it feels like a high-pressure situation in that context.

So I was waiting for my interview and feeling this quivering in the body. I was using noting at that point, noting the experiences: anxiety, anxiety, anxiety is happening, anxiety. I sat there noting that, and the interview ahead of me went on for a really long time, so I got to hang out with this for quite a while—ten minutes or so.

What was curious to me was that usually by that point in the retreat, when I really met something with mindfulness, things started to shift and change. Something happened as I explored it; it didn't stay static. But this experience stayed kind of static. I just kept noting: okay, anxiety, anxiety, wow, anxiety, anxiety, okay, anxiety.

At some point, noticing that there wasn't much shifting happening, I got more curious about the actual sensations in the body. I started exploring: what are those sensations? Wow, there's quivering, and it's like rapid movement up the body, this shaking, quivering feeling moving rapidly, rising through the body.

As I touched into the actual physical experience, I recognized that what was happening was rapture, not anxiety. The mind had confused the physical sensations of quivering and the context I was in—waiting for an interview—and had decided anxiety was what was happening. Because I was recognizing it through the lens of interpreting it as anxiety, I think it wasn't allowing the experience to really move. When I got more interested in what the actual sensation was, then it became more clear to me what was actually going on.

This is a case of really starting to tease apart physical experience from mental experience. Many emotions, actually—very early in my practice, one teacher mentioned something, and I didn't quite understand what he was saying at the time, but he said, "I've noticed that lust and rage have very similar bodily sensations." If you're in a particular situation, it can be easy to confuse or misassign a particular bodily sensation to a given emotion because there are some similar experiences. Sometimes it's helpful to just recognize what actually is the body sensation. Heaviness around the heart—that's an experience. We lay something over it like, "Oh, that means I'm sad." Maybe, maybe not. Be willing to enter into and explore the actual physical sensations.

I want to just remind you at this point that this aspect of the mental processes of emotions is in the realm of what in the aggregates is mental formation. Emotions are found in the aggregate of mental formations. Emotions, particularly reactive emotions, are found in this category—anger, confusion, frustration, anxiety—all of those are found in this category of mental formations.

But this is not all that this aspect of mental formations is. In fact, there are states of mind or processes of mind, I should say, in that category of mental formation that we wouldn't even call emotions. Things like mindfulness is a mental formation. Concentration is a mental formation. Tranquility is a mental formation.

I just want to broaden the lens here. I'm not going to talk about mental formations in detail tonight, and I think somebody else will at some point offer a more detailed five aggregates talk. But just to remind you that the five aggregates are not simply about looking at reactivity. A subtler level of mental formation is liking and not liking. This is still in the realm of mental formations, and yet it's a bit subtler than the emotional realm.

And sometimes liking and not liking is a little more closely intertwined with the sensation level of experience, counterpointing bodily sensation and mental sensation. The experience itself—the physical experience—and whether we like it or don't like it are different things. We suffer around liking and not liking, sometimes precisely because they're subtler. They're not the big reactive emotions. They're not anger and aversion

and major wanting. It's more like, "Well, I like that. I don't like that." It's quiet enough that sometimes we don't actually recognize the liking and not liking as a separate thing happening in our experience. We may just brush by it. It might not even be clearly noticed. But it does cause suffering—particularly in my own experience, the not liking.

I was noticing this just yesterday. I was taking a walk and I noticed that I was walking and I didn't like to be walking. I was doing this for my exercise, so the walking was happening and not liking was happening. I've seen this before quite a bit, so it stuck out to me, and I began recognizing: okay, not liking is happening.

Before I began noticing that distinction—before I started recognizing, "Yes, walking's happening and not liking is happening"—I would be walking along in my neighborhood and notice a little subtle movement of mind when I realized I wasn't liking the walking. The next thing the mind did was, "Oh, but it's so nice out here. There are lovely trees. You can look at the sky. You can like walking." My mind tried to convince me to like the walking. What was actually going on was not liking, but the mind was trying to convince me I should like the walking.

I recognized that, and have seen in the past, that this is a trap. In some ways we think—and in mindfulness practice in particular we think—that in order to be doing something, we have to want to do it. We have to like doing it. So if we notice we're not liking something, like practicing for example, we might think we have to convert that not liking: "No, I really do like to practice."

What I've seen is that it's really, really helpful to just notice: not wanting to practice is happening. Not liking practice is happening right now. That's what's happening. It's really helpful to recognize that as a mind state.

What I noticed as I recognized, "Oh yeah, walking is happening and not liking is happening," was that when I stopped trying to convince myself that I should like to walk—when I stopped doing that and just watched the walking and the not liking—the not liking would fall away for a few moments. Then there'd just be walking, and there'd be such an ease as the not liking dissipated and fell apart. And then it would come back, and it would be, "Okay, not liking is happening," and then it would fall apart again. I was just watching this process of walking happening and liking or not liking appearing and disappearing. Knowing it when it was there and knowing it when it wasn't there. Just as the sutta described, recognizing the presence and the absence of that not liking. Very simple.

Another mental process at work, which I have tangentially referred to, is this process of feeling, feeling tone. I'll actually say a bit more about this tomorrow morning in the instructions. Feeling—the feeling tone, the aggregate of feeling—isn't about the emotional realm. It's about this much more basic realm of whether experience is recognized as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

This feeling tone, when related to bodily experience, can often be very conflated with the bodily experience itself. It's so close. If we're experiencing a stabbing or a burning or a tearing or a searing sensation, the unpleasantness of that is going to be right there. It's hard to understand that unpleasantness as a mental experience, as a mental phenomenon. Yet it is understood in the Buddha's teaching that pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral are mental phenomena, whether they relate to the pleasant or unpleasant sensations of our bodily experience or of our mental experience. All experience, whether mental or physical, has an aspect that relates to this feeling tone. All experience has a quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant—one of those.

And so it's easy to understand how something like happiness carries a pleasant feeling tone. It's easy to understand how a mental experience would have a mental feeling tone, but a little harder to understand how a physical feeling would have a mental feeling tone. I'll just point you back to what Bhante talked about this morning regarding phantom pain in the body. From what I understand, neurobiologists point to this place of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral as being located in the brainstem. That's where it's constructed. If you do something to that area of the brainstem, the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral goes away. That's my understanding from what I've heard about it.

Another way we become confused about feeling tone is that we often think the feeling tone—whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—is somehow inherent in the experience itself. But feeling tone is actually highly conditioned, based on the mental climate of our mind, on what expectations are present, on our culture, conditions in the world, and choices we've made in the past.

Here's a basic example. For me, comfort food would probably be mashed potatoes, something like that. As a child, it just seemed like the pleasantness of mashed potatoes was inherent in the mashed potatoes themselves. Then I got to go to the South Pacific. I was in the Peace Corps for two years on an island called Vanuatu. The comfort food there is something called lap-lap. It's created by mashing up an island yam, which is nothing like the yams we have here. It's very starchy, and when you grate it, it just oozes—this really gelatinous, oozy substance. They mash it all up, pat some fish into it,

lay it out on banana leaves, and let it cook for hours. It turns into this very dense, chewy substance, which to me was very unpleasant. It was hard for me to eat this. But it was their comfort food. That's what they grew up with, just as I grew up with mashed potatoes. I could see their mouths watering as the lap-lap came out of the ground. And I'm thinking, "Okay, I have to eat this," because they so wanted me to enjoy it. This is pleasant and unpleasant depending on conditions and culture. Expectations in the mind condition pleasant and unpleasant. State of mind can condition pleasant and unpleasant too.

Here's another experience I had. One evening, quite a while ago, probably early in my practice, I had developed a habit of getting up to meditate when I had insomnia instead of lying in bed trying to fall asleep. So I got up to meditate one night, and while I was meditating, I started hearing this sound—this quiet little tapping that seemed to be coming from the wall. It would start, tap for a little while, then stop and be quiet. Then it would tap again.

My initial experience was that the tapping was unpleasant. I recognized that, and I was using the noting practice. I noticed the sound and recognized: unpleasant. It wasn't hugely unpleasant. I kept observing, kept watching, and at some point I noticed that when the tapping started, there was a contraction in the body. That contracted feeling was also unpleasant. Okay, so there's sound—unpleasant. There's contraction—unpleasant. I was just observing that. Then at some point in all of this observation, I noticed that just as the tapping started, there was a flash of fear. That was really unpleasant, definitely unpleasant. It wasn't major fear, but the body got flooded with this sense of "something's in the wall, it's going to get me." Maybe a rat—I don't know what my mind created there, but it created the idea of something dangerous and scary on the other side of that wall making that tapping sound.

As soon as that fear was seen, the next time I heard the tapping, the sound itself was pretty neutral. The sound had been colored—the experience of the sound as unpleasant had been because the mind was seeing it through this fear. A lot of our pleasant and unpleasant experience comes out of the climate of our mind.

This is really helpful to notice, how these two aggregates interweave. The emotion of fear—a mental formation—laying like a filter over experience so that physical sensation, or sound in this case, was experienced as unpleasant. The feeling aggregate. Seeing how these interplayed, then recognizing clearly the fear, seeing the difference.

It's not the sound that's unpleasant. It's the fear that's unpleasant. Seeing how these interweave and are intertwined can be a very interesting exploration. Through coming back to the body, noticing what's actually happening, recognizing—okay, there's body, there's feeling, and there's emotion or reactivity.

As we understand this difference, the way these three fit together—the bodily experience, the pleasant or unpleasant quality, the liking or not liking, and the emotional response—we start to see this whole show. Watching that, seeing fear creating the conditions of experiencing something as unpleasant, that's beginning to understand disidentification. Seeing that the fear was a process that conditioned how something was felt.

We begin to recognize another way to explore this. We begin to see that our aversion to physical pain conditions how pain is felt. When the aversion falls away, when we can know, "Oh, this is aversion"—here's the physical side of it, here's the aversion, here's the mental side of it. The mental side is the aversion. The physical side is the sensation level—the tearing, the stabbing, the twisting, the burning. And then there's the unpleasantness, which is another aspect. Seeing all of these as processes interweaving, we see it's just process—the cause and effect relationship between these areas.

Another aspect of the aggregates, another area to explore, is the aggregate of perception. Perception is an even more subtle mental process than either mental formations or feeling. It's a process in the mind by which we recognize what's happening. It's a very natural process. We couldn't live without it, so we're definitely not trying to stop perception from happening.

Perception is the mind's capacity to recognize experience through repeated exposure. We hear a bell over and over again. The very first time we hear something like that, it might be, "Huh, what's that?" And we really take it in. Then we hear it over and over again, and it begins to just be, "Oh, that's the bell." We begin to experience sounds, smells, tastes, touches—all of our experience—this way. "That's the bell." The actual sound is pitch and tone and frequency. And then in our minds, the idea or the concept of "bell" happens.

It's a really useful process. It's how we can navigate the world easily without exhausting ourselves every day. You know why babies need to sleep so much? They're creating their concepts. I think that's part of why it's exhausting to meet things new, to do this pattern matching and recognize, "This is what this is, this is what this is, this is what this is." Perception is kind of a shortcut in a sense.

So it's not a process we're going to stop, and yet it's a very helpful process to recognize and be clearly aware of as a process in the mind, because it's a doorway through which confusion enters. When we don't clearly understand that we're perceiving something and seeing our experience through that perception, confusion arises.

Just think for a moment of looking out in a room and seeing people. Your ideas about people have been formed through your whole life. The idea of "people" in your mind comes with a lot of stuff. Some of that stuff may be related to how your parents treated you, or how your teachers in school treated you. When we relate to experience through concept and don't recognize that we are relating to experience through concept, a whole host of conditioned stuff can come along for the ride. We often mistake the concept that we're relating to for reality. It doesn't even occur to us that we're relating through the idea of "bell."

There's a very quick movement from an experience to the concept about the experience. And from that concept, because concept is so close to thought, thoughts can come in that avenue. So we're sitting here in the hall and we hear a sound. First there's just hearing, and then pretty quickly there's a recognition of what that sound is—it's the sound of a car driving down Pleasant Street. And that idea of a car driving down Pleasant Street may appear in the mind as an image of a car driving down Pleasant Street, or it might appear as a word: "car."

And we say "car" in our mind, as a label almost. This is the process of perception at work.

You might notice this actually. Hearing is, I think, one of the easiest doorways where we can see or experience this process of perception happening, because there is often a distinction between our usual ways of thinking and the experience of hearing. The sound of the car going down the street is one thing, and then the image of a car in our mind or saying the word "car" to ourselves is another thing.

You'll notice that this process reveals another place to see the automatic nature of experience. You're probably not going to be able to stop yourself from saying "car" or from seeing that image. It's just the process of perception doing its job. We hear something and the mind recognizes it and identifies it in its own particular way. Playing with sound can be a very fun way to explore this process of perception.

So we're back listening to the car, hearing the car drive down Pleasant Street. We've noticed there's a car. We've seen—you know, we probably haven't clearly recognized the perception of "car" when we start thinking about cars driving down Pleasant Street and where they're going. That car might be going to Berry. There's a Dunkin' Donuts in Berry and they have cappuccinos. I probably shouldn't have mentioned that.

The mind goes off into thought from not seeing this perception at work. We hear, there's the perception of "car," and then we start thinking about it. Maybe we do recognize or remember that there's a place to get cappuccinos in Berry, and then we start thinking—but we're not supposed to leave, and oh, I'm captive here, and oh, this is a prison, and I hate this prison... Reactivity is born from the sound, a perception and a thought not noticed.

This is one of the prime ways the mind wanders—through not seeing that we've perceived something. It's also a way that reactivity can come in, another avenue for reactivity. In that case, the sound of the car was not particularly unpleasant; it might just be kind of a wave. But then there was the recognition that it was a car, and the not really seeing that the mind started to think about cars and where it might go and what you might have if you could escape here. And then realizing: what you're reacting to in that experience is a construction of the mind. The thought "this is a prison, I can't get out of here, it's another three months or six weeks, oh my gosh!"—it's an idea in the mind to which we are reacting.

This process of perception, and watching perception happen when we can—it's a pretty subtle process. It's not something to try to do. In fact, one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says, "Nothing I tell you is anything to do. It's just information." Having talked about this, it may open you to seeing something new in your experience.

Many times I've had people come into interviews and say, "I can't stop labeling experience. I'm trying not to note, but I can't stop doing it." When I talk to them a little bit further, I recognize that what they're actually seeing is the process of perception at work. Their mind is noticing car, bird, movement, and it's recognizing it in this kind of word-forming way in the mind. Hearing about this can help you see that this too is just a process at work in your mind. It's not something to do, but it is something you might recognize, something you might notice.

The fifth aspect of the aggregates, the fifth aggregate, is consciousness. Consciousness is the knowing faculty of mind. Every experience that we have comes with this knowing process. A physical experience is known. A mental experience is known. It's like two sides of a coin. Every experience we have—there's the experience in the realm of the

physical: vibration, pulling, pulsing, tingling—and then there's knowing of it. There's the experience of breath, the dynamic changing sensations of breath, and the knowing of it.

The knowing is a pretty subtle experience, but it can be kind of clear once we start to recognize it. Like right now—do you know that your lips are touching? There's the sensations, and there is a knowing that that's happening. It's actually a pretty simple experience. One of the instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta around breathing: "Breathing in, know that you're breathing in." It can be that simple, actually—pointing to the knowing of experience.

Sometimes the sensations can be quite delicate and quiet, and we may find ourselves straining to perceive the sensation level of experience. Yet we can settle back and recognize that there's a knowing of breathing in. Just now, breathing in, breathing out. Do you know that you're breathing in? Do you know that you're breathing out? Don't look too deep for this. This is an ongoing process in the mind. Again, like with feeling, every experience comes with this knowing. Not something to look for, but you may at times recognize that the mind attunes to or notices that it knows something. Breathing in, knowing breathing in. Breathing out, knowing breathing out.

An exploration of these processes of body and mind can help us to disidentify, to not take these processes as I or me or mine. As we explore these experiences and see the cause and effect relationships, the interweaving of these experiences, we see there can't possibly be an "I" in there directing the show. There's not a "me." So it helps us to disidentify from what is happening.

Also helping the disidentification is seeing this simple process of reactivity—again, as a process. We see the process by which suffering is created. We see very clearly that we're clinging, we're holding on to something. Largely what we're holding on to is something created by the mind. And as the mind sees this, as the mind sees its own contribution to the reactivity, sees its own contribution to the suffering that we experience, the mind begins to figure out and understand how to let go.

Because the mind doesn't want to suffer. The mind doesn't want to suffer! It gets confused. The poor mind gets confused. It's tried for so long in certain ways to find happiness and thinks that it's got to be out there somewhere. And this exploration begins to reveal that the happiness comes from letting go.

So let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 98

Patience

Andrea Fella · 57 min

In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of patience (khantī) as a fundamental quality for meditation practice and the path to liberation. She begins by examining the different manifestations of impatience—the eager anticipation of future pleasant experiences and the aversion to present unpleasant ones—revealing how both patterns disconnect us from direct experience of the present moment.

Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu and others, Fella introduces the metaphor of the farmer's patience: understanding that results require time and sustained effort, not passive waiting. She emphasizes that patience is an active, engaged quality involving gentle persistence and willingness to meet experience moment after moment, like a naturalist observing the night sky without preconceptions. The analogy of fruit ripening on a tree illustrates how practice involves imperceptible sweetening—subtle shifts in understanding that eventually lead to release and insight.

Fella also addresses patience with difficult states and cycles of practice, noting that increased mindfulness naturally reveals more dukkha. She explores patience in the context of responding to injustice, drawing on Gandhi's philosophy and Martin Luther King Jr.'s teachings on meeting opposition with love rather than hatred. The talk culminates in discussing the deepest aspect of patience: radical acceptance of things as they already are in this moment, which paradoxically enables wise action. As the Burmese saying goes, 'Patience is the road to Nibbāna.'

I'm told that in the early days of IMS—been here 40 years now, that's pretty amazing, isn't it?—in the early days of IMS, they got mail addressed using that acronym in different ways. One of those was addressed to the Instant Meditation Society. That reflects the kind of culture we have. We expect instant gratification or, at least, results after two weeks. I mean, we've been here for two weeks and what do we have to show for it? Well, we've been sitting and walking.

So tonight I'd like to talk about the quality of patience.

One of the ways in to explore patience is to look at the different ways we get impatient. There are different ways we get impatient, and that can help us understand some of the different qualities of patience.

One of the ways we get impatient that I think is very familiar to us, perhaps from the time we were children, is that we get impatient waiting for something good to happen in the future. Birthdays, holidays, end of school. I remember being so excited about certain things coming. That quality of impatience is there from a very young age—that kind of expectation or anticipation of something good to happen in the future.

When we start to look at this, and this is what our practice asks of us—to look at these qualities, to look at what happens in our minds—think about how you feel when you get impatient in this way. There's often some excitement, some kind of leaning towards, a sense of how great it's going to be when that happens. That's how I was when I was a kid anyway. And that kind of mind state is believing—believing that something in the future is going to be better than something now. There's some future configuration of experience that will be so wonderful.

I just want to point you back to something Bhante said yesterday about how all that's happening is just these sixth sense experiences. That's all that's happening. And yet we are excited waiting for some configuration of sixth sense experience. That's what's happening when we get impatient like that.

So think about how you feel. There is the excitement, and if there's the kind of projection into the future, we're really in our thoughts thinking about how great it's going to be. We're anticipating future pleasantness, feeling happy about future pleasantness, and completely ignoring the fact that right now it's actually kind of agitating. There's a restlessness in experience when we have this kind of impatience. I could hardly sit still when I was a kid waiting for my birthday.

This kind of impatience for something good to happen comes into our practice. We get impatient for some good meditative experience. Perhaps we've had a taste of calm or ease or peace, and having had that taste, we want it back. We want more of it. There's an impatient quality. It's like, there's this experience happening now, but it's kind of like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know I'm supposed to be paying attention to aversion and stuff, but what's really important, where the action really is, is where it's really calm." And so we get impatient for that experience to come.

I think Steve Armstrong coined the phrase: there's nothing like a good sit to ruin your day. You have a good sit and then you spend the rest of the day wanting it back.

So what do we do here? What's a helpful thing to do in this kind of situation? Notice the impatience. This is actually a helpful strategy. If we want to cultivate a wholesome quality—whether patience or love or happiness or kindness—we can look at what gets in its way. To cultivate patience, we can get familiar with impatience.

So what does it mean to notice impatience? To notice in particular this kind of impatience of leaning into experience, of hoping for something good to happen? The first thing is just to check in: What's this? What is this experience of impatience? It probably has an experience in the body; there's probably some agitation. There's often a lot in the world of thoughts and mind states going on around impatience.

On one retreat—I think it was my first three-month course—I remember doing walking meditation and I kept having all these thoughts about talking to my teacher. Any of you had that experience? What I realized was that in those thoughts there was this impatience for something good to happen. I was having a wanting, an impatience, for insight into impermanence. And this was manifesting by imagining I was having conversations with my teacher, telling him—

that I was having all these amazing insights into impermanence. And as I explored this, as I looked at this whole process of what was going on there, I saw that what I really wanted was to tell somebody I had had these great experiences. Because I had no clue what an insight into impermanence actually looked like. I didn't even know what I wanted.

This is very interesting, actually—this happens to us in practice. When we're impatient for results, often we're impatient for some idea, because often we have no clue what it is that we want. What the result is, what we're hoping for. Freedom. Nibbana. We have no clue what that is. And yet we're impatient for it.

So when we look at that, when we look at the actual experience of impatience, we see it's an idea. And in this case what I saw was an idea about wanting to look good to my teacher.

So investigating—what is this experience of impatience?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu talks about patience, this kind of patience with something that we are expecting or hoping to happen in the future, as being the patience of a farmer. I'll read this little section to you from one of his books. One of his teachers, Ajahn Tante, talks about being patient like farmers. Those of you who've never lived on a farm, even you know that farmers don't have an easy life. They work hard, especially in Thailand where they don't have a lot of labor-saving devices. When the time comes to do what needs to be done, they have to do it quickly. In other words, when the rice grains are ready, you have to harvest them quickly before the mice get to them. You have to take care of them quickly, winnow the rice quickly before any late season rain comes to spoil

it. So it's not a matter of being slow or casual, this patience of a farmer. The patience of a farmer is the sort that knows you can't plant rice today and expect to have the grains ripen tomorrow. It's going to take time, and during that time it's going to require work.

So patience, using this story, this example, doesn't mean passivity or slowness. There's an active quality to patience. Actually, I think sometimes we think about patience as being kind of sitting back and not doing. That's an idea we sometimes have about what patience is—like, "yeah, whatever." But the patience of our practice is a patience that is engaged. It's got a persistence to it.

So this brings in one of the qualities of patience: this gentle, persistent connecting with experience. This aspect of patience points to perseverance, diligence, steadiness, steadfastness. And one of the keys with this aspect of patience is patience with results—continuing our practice even if it seems like nothing is happening.

Sometimes in practice things feel like they're just in a flat place or an even place and it doesn't seem like much is happening. In those times we can feel like, "What am I doing wrong?" Nothing seems particularly wrong, but our instant gratification kicks in—where's the result?

Sometimes results ripen slowly. Think about the way fruit ripens on a tree. The apples are coming into season right now, and the apples are hanging on the tree and they may look really ripe. They look nice and red on the outside. And yet there's an imperceptible sweetening that happens on the inside. Day by day you may not notice any change as you look at that apple. But you may reach and try to pull on it and it doesn't release from the tree very easily. And so you know it's not ready, it's not ripe. Day by day you don't see much change. But there is an imperceptible sweetening happening. And one day you reach and the apple releases easily in your hand.

The practice of patience can have this quality where it seems like nothing is happening, and yet no moment of mindfulness is wasted. There can be these subtle shifts, subtle meetings—these meetings of experience that gently allow the connection to become more and more clear. And at some point the mind releases and understands something it didn't understand. But it's not just about that one moment.

It's not just about the moment when the apple falls into your hand. It's also about all those many, many moments of sweetening. And so in our practice, often we need to cultivate this quality of patience with that imperceptible sweetening, the imperceptible sense of understanding that's growing, that will allow for release at some point.

Kamala Masters has a story from her own practice around this. She was in a place of just feeling like not much was happening, and she went and talked to her teacher about it. Munindraji used this analogy of the fruit. He said, "When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree." I heard her say that and just used it over and over again. It became a little mantra for me: when the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree. A reminder that I don't have control over when the ripening happens. All we can really do is meet experience moment after moment. And when the time is ripe, when the conditions are ripe, understanding will happen.

As we persist in our practice with this gentle persistence, sometimes it seems that little more than will keeps us coming back—that place where it feels like not much is happening. We need to apply that persistence, connect, just meet this moment and this moment and this moment. But over time we do start to experience benefits in small ways and in large ways. In our meetings, you've all talked about even small ways of seeing how the mind can meet something challenging and be okay about it. There's a little shift of perspective around our usual relationship to the hindrances. Or we actually recognize happiness and feel it and know it, instead of grasping after it.

This was one of my patterns actually. At one point I realized I talked myself out of happiness. Happiness arose and rather than allowing myself to feel it, I began telling myself things along the lines of, "Well, yes, I'm happy now, but this isn't going to last. Besides that, I know most of the time I'm miserable." Or if I was connecting with the happiness, I might get lost in a story about how to keep it, instead of really just opening to it here and now. Sometimes we need patience to open to beautiful things too.

I remember one time I was sitting at my table having a meal. It was not during a retreat but in daily life, perhaps soon after a retreat. Some wave of joy arose in my experience, and it was a little overwhelming. The first thing my mind said was, "Whoa, I can't handle this," and it tried to shut it down. Then some wisdom in my mind said, "It's okay, it's impermanent, it won't last." That actually let me feel it more fully. It crested and got very strong, and then on the other side there was just this pervading happiness. So even patience with wholesome states sometimes, allowing ourselves to truly open to these beautiful states—it's not just about patience with hindrances.

These little shifts over time begin to encourage us. They begin to encourage the persistence, partly because we are experiencing the benefit of the practice. We are experiencing how the practice works. This generates confidence, it generates faith, it sometimes can generate a sense of curiosity. All of these qualities then in turn support more patience, and so it becomes a positive feedback loop.

Sometimes in this place of not seeming like much is happening, another analogy can be helpful: our job here is to meet our experience as if we were a naturalist looking at something new in our environment. Sayadaw U Tejaniya used this example. He said, think about the first people that went out under the stars at night, our ancestors way long ago. The first ones that actually looked up and had a cognizance of the stars in the night sky. There wasn't anybody to tell them what was happening up there. They just would go out each night and look at the sky. Over time they began to see patterns. They noticed perhaps over a very long stretch of time that certain of those patterns were present in the spring and certain of them present in the fall, certain present at certain times of year and others present at other times. Just noticing the patterns. Nobody there to tell them about it. Now we've got all these books.

You know, you can go out now and find out which stars are up at certain times of the year, and which ones appear at other times. In the Northern Hemisphere, you can always find the North Star and orient yourself from there. We have people to tell us these things. Our ancestors didn't have that. What did they do? They went out and looked at the sky over and over and over again. They began to understand something about it through repeated observation, through the repeated meeting of experience.

Our practice is like that. We explore our experience as naturalists, with no need to overlay an idea about what is there, but rather with a curiosity about what is here. The patterns begin to reveal themselves. That's how insight works, in a way—the patterns of our minds begin to show themselves just through the willingness to meet experience over and over again.

Another kind of impatience that may be familiar to you is the impatience to get rid of, get over, or get past something unpleasant. This is an impatience connected to aversion toward what's happening in the present moment. For me, this was a big part of my life, this aspect of impatience.

One of the early places it really showed up was toward the end of my first three-month course, about two weeks before that retreat was over. There was so much impatience. I saw that transitions were very uncomfortable for me, and I was really impatient to have that transition over with. There was the unpleasantness of uncertainty about the transition, but also there was the idea of transition—and I didn't like that idea. Get me out of here. It was very painful for those last two weeks.

Actually, I got to have a little wake-up call, because I was so impatient to get home. Some of it was wondering how much I had changed—how great was it going to be when I got home? What would my friends think? So there was the impatience about the unpleasantness of the transition, but also an impatience to check out what I'd learned on retreat.

At some point in those last two weeks, I got a very sore throat. I looked in my throat and saw some very odd-looking things there. I realized I should go to the clinic, so I made an appointment and went. I sat at the clinic, and there was all this music playing and people bustling around. I looked around and thought: this is what I was impatient for. This is life outside. This is what I was waiting for. Reality check—this isn't so great. Again, it's just the six sense bases happening over and over again.

So we are impatient at times about something unpleasant in our present experience. We can see this kind of impatience in small ways too—like the impatience standing in the lunch line, waiting for the people ahead of you to make their salad or cut their fruit. Or the impatience as you're opening a drawer in your room and it sticks a little bit—just a little flash of irritation. Sometimes through these small moments, we can get familiar with this quality of impatience about unpleasantness.

At one point in my practice, I recognized that impatience was a big mind state for me. It happened a lot, and mostly what I saw were the big impatiences—the impatience about the end of a retreat, the impatience about a major life transition, the impatience to know something so I didn't have to be in this in-between ground. So I decided to make a study of impatience. I began noticing when impatience came up in my life, exploring patience by getting familiar with its opposite quality.

And it was everywhere. I was impatient when I was brushing my teeth. I was impatient when my shower ended—impatient to finish drying off and get on to the next thing. I began to see that it was very helpful not to just brush past those small impatiences. Sometimes when little impatiences flare up, little aversions, we think, "Oh, that's not a big deal." We kind of overlay something on top of it—as I was talking about the other day—like "Oh, it's so lovely taking a walk," instead of recognizing the impatience for the walk to be over, knowing the not wanting to be walking. We can overlay and not clearly recognize that in truth there is this little flash of impatience. This little flash.

So it can be really helpful to get familiar with those little flashes. The skill that you develop in meeting the small ones supports you in being able to meet the pattern when it gets large. Because the pattern in the small is very similar to the pattern in the large—

it's just not quite grown so much yet. And so there's a lot you can understand by looking at it in the small. It's not so hard to be with when it's small, so you can learn a great deal about that.

Sometimes in practice, small things can seem very large. We have a name for this phenomenon. We call it yogi mind. It seems to happen as we settle in retreat. We get more settled, more calm, and then small things become so huge. Like the way somebody uses their knife—it becomes disastrous.

The classic story of yogi mind comes from a retreat that happens in the desert in California each year. This must have happened in the 80s sometime, but somebody apparently left a note for the managers asking if they would mind calling the airport to get them to reroute the planes flying overhead. They obviously didn't know there was a retreat center happening there, and they could clearly reroute the planes so that they wouldn't disturb the yogis when the planes flew overhead. This is an example of yogi mind—something small becoming like, "This needs to be fixed now."

This is about the time in retreat when this kind of thing happens, so you might be noticing things like this, where it seems like the reaction is out of proportion to the actual event. If you're noticing something like that, it's very natural. It's part of the process. Just recognize: okay, yogi mind is happening. You don't need to believe the story that this is a major problem and we need to ask the managers to do something about it. Check in to what's actually happening. Sometimes there may be a bit of over-response, over-reactivity. Just remind yourself of yogi mind and see if you can be patient with the small things, partly by reminding yourself that they are small. But not repressing the response—that's not what this is about. There can be a big response. Know that response, but remind yourself of what's actually happening.

This kind of impatience—being impatient when something unpleasant is happening—we can also see in larger ways around issues of injustice, things that actually need to change in this society. There are two sides I'd like to explore around patience in this kind of scenario.

One aspect, when we think about this kind of patience, is that it points to qualities of forbearance, tolerance, patience under insult. How do we meet experience with a patient mind? And so one side of the exploration is to look at when it is skillful to act and when it is skillful to refrain from acting.

For instance, if there's a sense that something is wrong or off and there's real anger and aversion about it, a sense of hatred in the mind, it may be helpful to explore that in the mind and not allow the hatred to leak out into experience. Perhaps somebody says

something to you and you realize that it's not fair or it's an injustice, and you have a flaring up. Maybe there's a recognition of the aversion or ill will in the mind at that point, and so you settle back. This isn't about repressing the feeling. There may be an exploration of what it's like to fully allow that feeling—that's wrong, that person is behaving unskillfully and causing harm, and I'm really mad about that. To not repress all of that, but also to explore not letting it leak out into our actions. Perhaps taking a pause before responding. So that's one side of the exploration: looking at whether this is the time for action, or the time to explore inwardly what's happening.

Another side—and there are probably more sides to this than I'm bringing up right now—is that there are times when definitely action is called for. The practice of patience itself doesn't necessarily mean passivity. It doesn't mean non-action. Gandhi had a beautiful phrase for his philosophy of engagement with the repressive regime of British rule in India. He had a philosophy of non-passive, non-violent, non-cooperation.

In this case, my exploration or my understanding is that the tolerance or forbearance here isn't about saying that it's okay that this injustice is happening. It's about forbearance with the process of change. Taking action and understanding, knowing that sometimes action doesn't create change immediately.

Martin Luther King had a beautiful way of expressing this, and he called it a philosophy of love. This is from his famous 1963 speech:

"There's another thing about this philosophy, this philosophy of love, that says you can stand before an unjust system and resist it with all your might and yet maintain an attitude of active goodwill toward the perpetrators of that unjust system."

He goes on to say that the ethic of love can stand at the center of the nonviolent movement. "In many instances we've been able to stand before the most violent opponents and say in substance: We will meet your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. Throw us in jail and we will still love you. Threaten our children and bomb our homes and our churches, and as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at midnight hours and drag us onto some wayside road and beat us and leave us half dead, and as difficult as it is, we will still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win our freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory."

This bringing of the quality of love to action rather than hatred—in our practice, this soul force, this force of love to meet difficult experience, can be so helpful. We can cultivate patience with the difficulties of practice. And the more mindful we get, the more we see them. This is one of the ironies of our practice. It's not a mistake when you see mindfulness revealing more suffering. It's not that the suffering wasn't there. It's that the mindfulness is revealing it. I think it was Trungpa Rinpoche who said practice is one insult after another. That's what it feels like.

And so we can cultivate patience with our own minds. We've actually spent a lot of years cultivating our habits, our patterns of mind. We've practiced over and over again the ways that we react. And so it's not surprising that one three-month retreat, or two weeks of a retreat, or six weeks of retreat is not going to uproot a whole lifetime—if not multiple lifetimes—of habit. The first noble truth: understand dukkha. And for us in practice, this also means being patient with the cycles of practice.

Pretty much most of the people I've talked to have experienced some form of cycle in the practice where there have been periods of ease and peace followed by periods of chaos and confusion and hindrance attacks. This is part of the process. I think it was Sharon who talked about this using an analogy of firing a rocket. There's a lot of junk up in space—old satellites and parts of things. Apparently there's a big garbage dump up there. In order to fire a rocket, you need to know where all that stuff is, and then when there's a clear space, you can fire. It's kind of like that. The mind moves into a space where there's clearness perhaps, some ease, some peace. And parts of the psyche that haven't had their day in the sun yet are going, "Oh, my turn now!" Then you have some new thing arise, some kind of reactivity.

This is part of the process. One teacher, Michelle McDonald, called it the cycle of purity and purification. Purity and purification. It's a very natural part of this unfolding. And so it's not a mistake when, after a period of ease, it may feel more challenging or more difficult for a time. It's not a mistake. It's part of the natural unfolding of this process.

There are times when it's challenging to be with those difficult states. I appreciate one of Nyanaponika Thera's phrases—he was a German scholar and monastic who worked for the Buddhist Publication Society and wrote many beautiful things. One phrase he had that resonates with me, one of those mantras that comes back: "We aim for a peaceful penetration of the irrational regions of our mind." That's a good description of patience. A peaceful penetration of the irrational regions of our mind. We can think of Gandhi's non-passive, non-violent, non-cooperation with respect to working with these difficult states.

Non-passive in that we meet these hindrances, actively engage with what's happening when it's difficult. Non-violent in that we bring, or try to bring, a mind of kindness to that exploration. And non-cooperation in that we don't let the hindrance just run amok.

Running through the two kinds of impatience—impatience for pleasant things to happen, impatience for unpleasant things to go away—is a deeper pattern of non-acceptance with just how things are in the present moment. And this connects with another aspect of patience, which is a deep kind of acceptance. Acceptance for things as they are.

As we start to touch in and actually meet our experience, we see that what is here, what has arisen—here it is. It's here. It's already here. This anger, this frustration, this joy, this boredom. It's here already. You can't change that. It's already here. And so there's a patience with meeting what's here, and yet learning how to respond skillfully to shape the next moment of experience. This meeting of moment-to-moment experience really begins to show us this unfolding. When we taste this quality of acceptance, we really start to understand the depth of patience, what it's capable of for us in our minds and hearts.

Ajahn Sumedho says, "It's a great relief to accept things the way they are. Because the only real misery is wanting to see them in some other way." This is, again, pointing to this moment. This moment, what's already here. Accepting what is already here. And with wisdom, choosing to step forward.

It's again not about passivity, but about allowing, through the direct meeting of things as they are in this moment. As we meet things as they are, wisdom begins to emerge, and wisdom helps us act. Wisdom is not passive. Wisdom acts for the benefit of ourselves and others. So we can explore this aspect of acceptance. But we cannot rush the process of change. When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree.

Sometimes after we've had some kind of understanding or insight, we've seen into something clearly in a moment, and we have this little thought in our mind of, "Ah, figured that one out." I had that happen at one point on an early retreat when I was at Spirit Rock. I had a kind of shift of perspective around pain in my body. And that shift of perspective allowed me to be completely okay with quite unpleasant sensation. It was one of the first times—I think it maybe was the first time—I really had seen the way a shift of the mind could allow unpleasant physical sensation to be experienced with ease. And the thought that went through my mind—I laugh at this point—it's like, "Wow, I'm glad I don't have to go through that again." I actually thought that I'd figured it out.

And so sometimes—many times—we have an insight. That experience, that shift of perspective of being able to meet, of the mind being at ease with unpleasant experience—that's a moment of insight. It's an understanding in the mind. It's a letting go of something. It's a letting go of craving things to be some other way. An actual releasing of that in the mind in the moment.

Our insights aren't quite like knowledge that, once we've learned them, we can just decide to pick them up. "Oh yeah, I'm having pain right now. Let me pick up that insight I had three weeks ago and put that on." It doesn't work that way. And so sometimes we have to have patience after we've had insights, because insights are impermanent. Patience is actually needed at all points on the path, this quality of patience.

We may have had an insight into the way the mind clings and grasps around pain and seen it release. And yet at another sitting—I remember, I think I was sitting right about there—I was sitting with so much pain in the body, so much dukkha. And I could feel the clinging. I could feel the mind just squeezing down around the pain.

And my mind basically said, "I'd let go if I knew how. I'd let go if I knew what to let go of, how to let go of this." The mind was simply not in the place where it could do that in that moment.

And so we have to meet that experience. This is also not a mistake. This is part of the way the path works, the way the practice unfolds. At that point, the mind is learning about dukkha. It's not just something we say—it's actually true. As the mind really gets it, part of what has to happen is that it truly understands that craving equals dukkha. At very, very deep levels the mind has to understand this message over and over and over again. Some part of our mind just really wants there to be something—anything—out there that we can hold on to that will make us happy. And we have to learn this lesson over and over again.

Through patience with that process of meeting dukkha over and over again, the mind begins to understand. It's like the mind begins to understand how to let go. In that situation I described, I had no idea how to let go of that pain, and I could see that I had no idea. That's the beginning of the insight that this isn't about me doing it. It's about cultivating the conditions for the releasing to happen, for the wisdom to arise and the releasing to occur.

Sometimes we think if only we could get past all this dukkha and be in a state of ease or peace or bliss, that would be great. And so we do, perhaps at times, start to feel happiness or ease or peace—calm, wholesome, beautiful states of mind arising. And we also begin to see... well, we first might think, who would need patience with those? But

over time we might find that we start to wonder, "What's next? Is it just about being calm? Is that what this is about? Is that what I signed up for—a life of everything being calm?" Maybe we think, "Is that really what I want? Is that really it?"

The Buddha actually made one reflection once. He said—and this is a paraphrase, I don't have the actual quote—something along the lines of: "The way I found freedom was that I wasn't satisfied with simply experiencing wholesome mind states." It's not just about experiencing wholesome mind states.

And so sometimes we also need the patience to meet this: calm is happening, ease is happening, peace is happening. Without the mind going, "And where's—whatever it is that I'm expecting? Some kind of mind-blowing enlightenment? Where's that?" Calm is like this. Peace is like this. Ease is like this.

There's a saying in Burma: patience is the road to Nibbana. It is through this quality of patient willingness to meet experience—whatever that experience is—to meet pleasant experience, unpleasant experience, neutral experience, to meet change in many forms, to meet dukkha. This willingness to be patiently in the moment—and it is a patience that's right in this moment—that is the quality that allows the unfolding of the practice to lead to freedom.

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 99

Mettā Practice: Self, Benefactor and Friend

Andrea Fella · 44 min

> *In this guided meditation session, Andrea Fella offers practical instructions for cultivating mettā (loving-kindness) toward self, benefactor, and friend. She shares a key insight that transformed her own practice: treating mettā as an embodied experience rather than a purely mental exercise. The method involves saying each phrase, understanding its meaning, and then checking in with the heart area to notice how the wish resonates physically.*
>
> *Andrea addresses common challenges that arise during mettā practice, including dryness, hindrances, and the emergence of attachment or longing for loved ones. She explains that mettā is fundamentally a purification practice, using the analogy of a washing machine to illustrate how the practice naturally brings non-mettā qualities to the surface for healing. When attachment arises toward dear friends—what is called the 'near enemy' of mettā—practitioners can simply acknowledge it while continuing with the phrases.*
>
> *The talk also covers practical tools for working with difficulty: shifting to compassion phrases when suffering is predominant, returning to easier categories when one person feels too challenging, and the option to set aside mettā temporarily to investigate strong hindrances with mindfulness. Andrea offers guidance on when compassion phrases might be more appropriate than mettā phrases, particularly when a friend is experiencing suffering, and discusses how the context of concentration practice versus heart exploration might inform this choice.*

For the metta practice this evening, we'll continue exploring metta for self, benefactor, and friend. I think you've already had quite a bit of suggestions about how to work with the practice, so I'll just offer you one particular piece that was the turning point for me with respect to having the metta practice make sense—what the key instruction was for me and how that worked.

The metta practice is a practice of intention, and we're using words to evoke a quality. Saying the phrase, understanding the meaning of the phrase, is essentially pointing the mind in the direction of metta. The way this works, at least in my understanding, is that words are pretty powerful. You may have noticed this in your meditation—if a thought arises about something, how quickly an emotion can be born in relationship to that thought. What this practice is doing is using thought to evoke this beautiful, wholesome quality of loving-kindness, expressing wishes of kindness.

For me, the key was when I began with each phrase to say the phrase and understand its meaning, so that it's not just rote saying of the words, but really understanding what the meaning of the phrase is. This is just simple dictionary definition; it doesn't have to go any further than that. Just know what the words mean as you say them in your mind. And then take the time to check in: How did that wish, how did that thought, resonate in the heart? I would put my attention in the area of the heart and physically check in. Did that wish have any kind of resonance or impact?

As I explored this, I really began to see metta as an embodied practice and not just a mental practice. Before that, it had felt so much in my head. Coming in with each phrase, checking out—how is the heart right now? What's happening? This also slows down the process of practicing metta, taking the time with each phrase to check in.

At one point, on a month-long metta retreat, I was going through phases in metta, much as you do in the vipassana practice. There was a period where the metta got very dry; there wasn't much going on. I was sitting in the dining room at Spirit Rock, and it just felt so dry. I remembered: I can say the phrase, understand the meaning of the phrase, and just check in. How did that land? How was that in the heart, to express that wish?

As I did that—said the phrase, understood the meaning, checked in—it was as if with each phrase there was the tiniest little shift of warmth or openness or connection. Each time I said the phrase, it was like a gentle blowing on an ember. And the metta just grew. With that experience, I began understanding how the practice of metta can be an embodied practice. That's when it began to make sense for me.

In the guided practice today, we'll start with self, and then at various times I'll suggest that you might want to switch to the next category—to benefactor, to friend. But remember that the metta practice is really a very personal thing, and so the timing I suggest may not be where you are. It may be appropriate for you to either move on more quickly or to stay with one particular category for a while.

Also remember the tools for working when it gets difficult, when the metta is feeling challenging. Challenging doesn't necessarily mean just that it feels dry. If it feels like there's a struggle with working with a particular being, with a lot of hindrances coming up, it's okay to just keep going with that being and let the hindrance be to the side. That was another big aha for me with the metta practice—it was almost a relief not to have to turn and focus on every hindrance that came up. They can be there; just let them wash by. That's a possibility.

But also remember that it's always okay to go back to where it's easier. If it's particularly challenging with one particular person, you can go back to a person where it's easier. Shift back to self or benefactor.

At one point in my practice, I found that even any of the categories—it was just so painful to try to do the metta for my benefactor, for myself. It was as if every phrase put a tightened clamp around my heart. If that happens, one tool you can explore is shifting the phrase to a compassion phrase. For yourself, for instance: "May I be at ease with this suffering," or "May I be free from this suffering." It's fine to shift to compassion if the suffering is what's really strong in your experience.

And of course, if a hindrance is very strong, it's fine to set down the metta, explore the hindrance with mindfulness, and as the hindrance dissipates, come back to the metta.

And just a refresher, a review of the tools for working with difficulty.

Finding yourself in a comfortable posture, allowing the body to be as relaxed as possible. Let the attention settle, rest, take in the experience—the actual felt sense of what's happening in the area of the heart. This area is very sensitive, the seat of feeling in a way. And however you are, whatever feeling is present for you in this moment, that's okay. It's simply like checking in: How is this being right now?

Since we'll begin with metta to self, allow yourself to reflect on, recollect qualities that you appreciate about yourself. If this feels challenging for you, as it was for me, I will offer you this reflection: you are here with the intention to open your heart to suffering, to understand your hearts and minds. What you're doing here is a very rare and amazing thing. Let yourself take that in. Appreciate that you're here. And if you can't appreciate it for yourself, borrow my appreciation. I appreciate you for being here.

Begin connecting with yourself in some way, whether as an image of yourself or perhaps just the felt sense of yourself sitting here. And begin offering yourself the wishes of kindness.

May I be happy.

Remembering with each phrase to understand the meaning of the phrase and check in the area of the heart. Not looking for anything in particular, but just noticing—how is it for you, having made that wish?

May I be healthy.

May I be safe.

May I live with ease.

Continue for the next few minutes to offer yourself thoughts of goodwill, noticing with each thought how it resonates, vibrates in the heart. If you don't notice anything in particular, that's okay. Just keep checking.

Now, allowing yourself to bring your benefactor to mind if it feels appropriate to shift to your benefactor. An easy being. Allow yourself to connect with the benefactor, perhaps using an image, or maybe using your benefactor's name. Sometimes I found the felt sense of sitting with that being helpful—having them sitting here right with me. There's a different quality to the experience when imagining another being in your field.

Reflect for a few moments on things you appreciate about your benefactor—kind things they have done, qualities you appreciate. And begin offering the wishes of goodwill to this being.

Sometimes I found it helpful to play with the perception of where the thoughts come from. We often feel as though thoughts originate in our head, but that's a perception. Thoughts don't really have a location. So you can play with that perception and have a sense as if the thoughts are coming from your heart. Keep your attention in the area of your heart and allow your heart to wish thoughts of goodwill for your benefactor.

May you be happy.

Noticing how the heart responds to that wish.

May you be healthy.

May you be safe.

May you live with ease.

Continue for the next few minutes to wish lots of kindness and goodwill to this being.

Now, if it feels appropriate for you, allow yourself to connect with your dear friend in whatever way works for you—whether with an image, a felt sense of being with them, or using your friend's name to evoke your friend. Begin exploring, offering the wishes of goodwill to your dear friend.

Remember that metta is a purification practice. It's not a mistake if something that feels counter to metta arises as we practice it.

It's part of the process.

For the last minute of the sitting, let's allow our wish for metta to expand to all beings. May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be safe. May all beings live with ease. May all beings be free from suffering.

Do you have any questions about the metta practice?

One participant shared that she was experiencing very strong attachment and missing of the people she was practicing with. She wasn't quite sure how to work with that.

This experience of attachment and longing is related to what is sometimes called the near enemy of metta. The far enemy is what is so far from metta that you wouldn't confuse it for metta—anger, hostility, cruelty, that kind of state. The near enemy is more along the lines of attached love and stickiness, the expectation of "I'll love you if you love me," or that kind of thing. It's in that terrain of being close to the quality but having some clinging to it.

So it's a very natural outcome of the metta practice for that to arise. As we've said, metta being a purification practice will draw to the surface, will draw into consciousness, things that are not metta. The fact that it's coming up is not a problem, it's not a mistake—it's actually part of the way metta works, highlighting for us: "This isn't quite that completely open-hearted connection, that connection of love without any expectation or any need for anything in return." As we explore the metta practice, we begin to see the ways in which we are attached, the ways in which we are holding and clinging.

So first of all, it's not a mistake. And then you could explore it by simply knowing that it's there—continuing with the phrases while recognizing the stickiness that's happening.

Sometimes I use an analogy about the purification practice being like a washing machine. If you put clothes that are really dirty into a washing machine with soap and water, the agitation of the machine forces the water to go into the clothes. The way soap works is that it chemically binds with the dirt and pulls it out of the clothes and into the water. The water gets all dirty, but that's part of the process of how the cleaning happens.

It's kind of like what's happening here with metta. You're bringing up the phrases and it's like you're sitting in your little metta washing machine. It's allowing the things that aren't metta to come out into consciousness, which is like coming out into the wa-

ter. So if you can just keep going and simply be aware—"Oh yeah, there's some wanting happening here. There's missing them happening. May you be happy. Oh, I wish you were here"—just knowing that that's going on. It's part of the process.

If it gets a little too sticky, if it feels like you get lost in the thoughts, you could try switching to another being for a little while, one that's a little less sticky for you. Remind yourself what that quality of the open heart without stickiness feels like, and then bring that being back.

But we're really not going to get through either our vipassana practice or our metta practice without this purification happening. So we need to find ways to be okay that it's happening. It's not a problem that it's happening.

Another question came up about a friend who is experiencing some suffering in their life right now. The person wondered about using compassion phrases instead of the metta phrases, or whether to simply switch to a different person.

There's no one right answer to this. Sometimes the metta practice is taught as a concentration practice, where we are using the quality of metta, cultivating that feeling as a doorway towards concentration. If that's the way you're exploring the practice, if that's what you're doing—using it as an avenue towards concentration—then I would suggest picking a friend who's not particularly suffering right now.

When you bring up that friend who is suffering, it changes the quality. When the open heart meets suffering, the natural response is compassion. So if you're really interested in cultivating the quality of metta in which you can become concentrated, bringing someone into your mind who is suffering will change the flavor of the metta, making it a little less of a stable object to get concentrated on.

If you are simply exploring the quality of metta in your heart and in your practice, and this is a dear friend you'd really like to connect with, I would suggest that it would probably be easier to stay connected if you switch to the compassion phrases for that friend. Often what arises when you bring up a friend who has some suffering is that the suffering becomes quite present. And the phrase that most directly connects with what's happening there is the compassion phrase.

So hopefully that was contextualized enough that you can decide for yourself what would be most appropriate.

Thank you for your metta practice.

CHAPTER 100

Investigating Mindfulness Itself

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella offers a profound reframing of how we relate to the natural fluctuations of mindfulness in meditation practice. Rather than viewing the mind's wandering as a problem to be fixed, she invites practitioners to investigate mindfulness itself with genuine curiosity—exploring when it strengthens, weakens, and what conditions surround these changes.*
>
> *Fella emphasizes the moment when mindfulness spontaneously returns as a particularly accessible gateway for understanding awareness itself. This "unprompted mindfulness" reveals important insights about anattā (not-self), as referenced in the Buddha's second discourse on the five khandhas (aggregates). If consciousness were truly self, we could simply command it to remain present—yet clearly, we cannot. This direct seeing of how mindfulness arises and passes without our control becomes a doorway to understanding the conditioned nature of mind.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance for both formal meditation and daily life practice. Fella encourages investigating where mindfulness typically gets lost—whether in specific activities, bodily states, or habitual mind states like anger, boredom, or spacing out. Through her own examples, including working skillfully with pain and discovering the mind's need for rest, she demonstrates how curiosity rather than control leads to genuine transformation. The teaching culminates in an invitation to trust that mindfulness can be aware of anything, even states we assume impossible to observe, and to allow the mind to reveal wisdom beyond our conscious understanding.*

We've been talking quite a lot about continuity of mindfulness as a support for the stability of mind and the ability to meet just what's happening in our experience. I'd like to explore this side of practice a little bit tonight—how to encourage this continuity by investigating mindfulness itself. In particular, I'd like to explore with you what we could call the comings and goings of mindfulness, framing it in a slightly different way than we usually think about it.

Usually we think about the mind getting lost or wandering off. Here I'd really like to emphasize the mindfulness piece. Mindfulness is stronger at times, weaker at times, and we can investigate that—investigate when that happens, how that happens, what's going on around it. We can be curious about the coming and going of mindfulness as opposed to feeling like this is a problem that needs to be fixed or changed.

There's a lot we can learn in this exploration. One big area we can learn about is where our minds get caught. What is it that hooks us such that mindfulness disappears? Where are our mindfulness sinks? Where are the rabbit holes of mindfulness, where mindfulness just kind of disappears? That's one big area we learn about in exploring this.

We also, in investigating this, if we are curious instead of judgmental about this process of seeing mindfulness as it gets stronger at times and weaker at times, get to see in our direct experience some of the teaching around not-self. Some direct understanding of not-self.

Many of you have probably reflected in this way. When we sit down to meditate, we attempt to be mindful. We try to pay attention to our experience, maybe choose the breath, pick an object to pay attention to. That's our purpose and our intention. And yet what happens? We maybe can stay with experience for a few seconds or a few minutes and the mind wanders. Mindfulness gets lost. Did you do that? Did you decide, "I'm going to have my mind wander right now"? Or did it just happen? This is a pointer to not-self.

And even more amazing, the mind's off wandering in thought and then it comes back. Who did that? You weren't even there to have any say in the matter. This points, again, to not-self.

One of the framings of the not-self teaching that the Buddha offered was to reflect on whether or not our minds and bodies are under our absolute control. In one of his famous discourses, the second discourse he gave, he reflected on this around the five aggregates—body, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. I'll say it with respect to consciousness because it really highlights this. He says, "Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were self, it would be possible to say of consciousness, 'May my consciousness be thus. May my consciousness not be thus.' But it is not possible to say of consciousness, 'May my consciousness be thus.' And it is precisely because it is not self that that is the case."

This exploration of mindfulness coming and going really begins to point this truth out to us. Our minds are not under our absolute control. We cannot say to ourselves, "I am going to sit down and be mindful for 45 minutes." Is anybody able to do that? Maybe at times, rare times, I've been able to do that, but it's not the common thing.

I want to point out here that in this talk I'm going to be using the terms awareness and mindfulness synonymously. Joseph talked about this the other night, but I wanted to state that very clearly. That is how I'm going to be using these two terms.

One of the avenues of exploring mindfulness itself is to begin to recognize it, to begin to recognize what it means to be aware.

What is the experience of being aware?

One of the easiest places to recognize this is the moment when mindfulness returns —that spontaneous awakening I just spoke of. That moment is one of the easiest places to highlight what the experience of being aware, being mindful, actually is. Because as Joseph said the other night, in that moment there's a little bit of a difference. In that moment of the mind waking up, there's a lingering memory perhaps, a little bit of a sense of what it was like just a few moments before when the mind was lost, and what it's like right now when mindfulness is present. And so you begin to get a sense of the flavor of awareness itself.

This is what we might call unprompted mindfulness. It's not mindfulness that we are consciously choosing to do. One of the great things about that moment, one of the really helpful things to recognize, is just how effortless it is, just how spontaneous it is. It doesn't take work to have that moment arise.

One of the things I've seen in my own practice is that highlighting that moment—beginning to recognize what it feels like when mindfulness returns—actually makes us familiar with what it feels like for mindfulness to return. If, rather than judging ourselves for the fact that we were lost in thought, we instead highlight the arising of mindfulness and bring curiosity about mindfulness itself in that moment, we begin to get familiar with what it's like to have that moment. And the familiarity with that experience starts to help us recognize it more often.

What we see as we start to get familiar with that moment of mindfulness arising is that it happens a lot. It happens a lot. Often what happens in that moment is that we start thinking about or orienting to the thing we've become mindful of, and we may—if we're not attuned to that moment, if we're not interested in that moment of arising mindfulness itself—have a moment of mindfulness returning and then quickly it gets swamped. We hear a bird and then we start thinking about birds. Or we hear the sound of a truck and we start thinking about what that truck is doing.

If we're interested instead in the actual reappearance of mindfulness, that very experience, that familiarity, starts to point out or highlight these moments to us.

This is actually one of my favorite practices for daily life. When people say, "I don't have time to do mindfulness, I don't have time to be mindful in my daily life," I tell them about this. This moment doesn't take any effort. It's just the recognition of it rearising.

When you notice that moment, the first thing is to recognize: what is the experience of being aware? What is that experience? Notice just what's obvious in that moment. There's the awareness itself and something that awareness is aware of. In that moment of recognition, highlight the awareness and notice what is here now. What is already here? What is the awareness, what is mindfulness, already aware of? Mindfulness has arisen. It's already attending to something. We don't have to pick anything to be aware of in that moment. It's already happening.

Another helpful thing to do in that moment, or to check into—and do this with a light touch—is from time to time, in that moment of arising mindfulness, you could also check in: what's my relationship to this? Very often, at least earlier in practice, especially at the beginning of retreats, the attitude when mindfulness returns is judgment. The mind shouldn't have been wandering. It's really helpful to recognize that attitude in the mind.

But as that judgment starts to fall away, we can start to see something important. When mindfulness disappears, the mind hasn't been switched off. We know this. When mindfulness disappears, the mind continues doing its thing, often going off thinking thoughts about various things. And in that wandering, the mind may have landed on something from our past, or some conversation we had with somebody before we came to retreat, and emotions may start to be generated.

Sometimes in that moment of mindfulness returning, if we don't check into the attitude, we may miss that the wandering mind has created a new terrain, actually, a new landscape. Opening to that, checking the attitude, can help us to see what was created in the wander.

We can also explore and get familiar with the feeling of awareness when we are already aware. In my own experience, my own exploration of this topic in my own practice, I did find the moment of remembering, the moment when mindfulness returned, to be pretty much the easiest place to recognize awareness.

When awareness is already present, when it's already kind of going, sometimes we know that we're aware, but we don't exactly know what the experience of awareness is. And that's okay.

So sometimes, if there is a period of time where the mindfulness seems to be strong, there's a little bit more continuity of mindfulness, you could just check in, drop in the question: What is it to be aware? What is it to be mindful right now? And don't go looking very hard for it.

Like right now, I think probably most of you are aware and listening to the talk. So just check in. Do you know that you're aware right now? Don't think about it. Do you know that you're aware? Just kind of acknowledge that you know you're aware. And then don't go looking any further than that.

Over time what I've seen is that just that simple acknowledgment—yeah, I know I'm aware—begins to reveal something. Now, can I point to what it means to be mindful or aware in that moment? Can I point to that and say, "Oh, that's it"? That's harder to do. But we can know that we are aware. And over time, that kind of reflection can help us to again land in the experience of knowing awareness itself, of being aware of awareness itself.

Now I'd like to explore this topic from another perspective. I've explored it mostly from the side of when awareness returns. And I'd like to explore what it means to pay attention to mindfulness in terms of noticing where we lose mindfulness.

Getting curious about this really helps to support continuity. It's not intended as a judgment to notice where we lose awareness, but more to support the sense of, "Oh, look at that, I see that's where I'm losing awareness, maybe I can be curious about that." Over and over I'm going to point to this quality of curiosity around this practice—curiosity around how we lose mindfulness, as opposed to, "Oh, I see I lose mindfulness, let me double down and really hold on to that mindfulness." Curiosity is really an ally for us in this exploration of mindfulness.

I'm going to talk about various ways, different avenues of exploring where and how we lose mindfulness. Some of the most obvious places for us to check in—and many of you have actually been reporting in the interviews noticing this kind of thing—is recognizing particular activities, times of day, things that you're doing in which you lose mindfulness.

You might begin to recognize that when you go to your rooms, you lose mindfulness. Or maybe when you're standing in the dish line, you're quite mindful, and then you go to do your dishes and you've done your dishes, you're drying off your hands, and it's like, "Whoa, wait a minute, where did that mindfulness go?" So you see you lose it in the actual washing of dishes. Or you might notice that you're losing mindfulness in your yogi job. There are so many different activities that we do during the day. You may have some favorite places for mindfulness to get lost. Be curious about that.

One of the interesting things about continuity of mindfulness is that the stronger mindfulness gets, the more continuous it becomes, the more it points out the gaps in mindfulness. It's not that you're less mindful—actually the mindfulness is stronger and it's able to see more where it's getting lost.

Take that example of standing in the dish line. You're standing there, very mindfully holding your plate and taking a step, very mindfully, and then it's your turn. And then maybe what happens is that you speed up a little bit, or you think, "Oh, I don't want to hold up the line." That might be one thing that arises: "I don't want to hold up the line. Let me do this really quickly." And it's not so much the speediness of washing the dishes that has you lose the mindfulness, but maybe the idea that you've taken birth, as Carol was saying, concocted this self of, "Oh, I need to be fast in doing this so that the people behind me have their turn quickly."

What I'd like to encourage here is that when you notice places or times or activities in which you lose mindfulness, rather than thinking about doubling down—standing in the dish line thinking, "Yes, I'm going to hold onto that mindfulness, I am going to be mindful all the way through washing those dishes"—rather than doing that, continue your practice as usual and see if you can add a little dose of curiosity. What happens in that situation that mindfulness gets lost?

When mindfulness gets lost, there's usually something we've missed. There's something that's arisen that we haven't seen, and our mind has exited—the mindfulness has exited right out that door. So adding some curiosity: What is it? What is it that's happening in that situation? Curiosity can help to reveal just what is going on, rather than trying to double down and hold on to mindfulness.

I did this exploration for myself. I noticed it was like—

I was pretty mindful throughout—this was at a retreat at Spirit Rock, a month-long retreat, I think. There was lots of continuity of mindfulness throughout the day. And what I began to recognize was that I'd be pretty mindful, and then when I was in the bathroom, I would be mindful going in and doing my stuff, and then washing my hands, and at some point I would find myself gazing at myself in the mirror. I had no recollection of doing that consciously. But I would wake up—it couldn't have been very long, maybe two or three seconds—and I got very curious about what that was. What's going on there?

So I began to explore, not trying to force myself to be mindful. If I was forcing myself to be mindful, that would probably mean forcing myself not to look in the mirror. Instead, I was curious about what was bringing up that activity.

It took a while to see what was going on. And it wasn't any deep, dark old pattern of wanting to be seen, nothing psychological—it was a habit. Just a habit. If mindfulness got weak for just a split second, the habit of what I did in the bathroom kicked in: looking at myself in the mirror. And after I saw that, I could begin to see the intention to look up, the intention to look at myself in the mirror. Then I could choose: Do I do that? Do I not do that? This supports the continuity of mindfulness.

Sometimes people attribute their mindfulness getting lost in a particular place or time to something they're trying to avoid. Sometimes it's as simple as habit. So let go of theories about why you may or may not be mindful at a particular time and just be curious about what is actually happening there.

You might also lose awareness in certain bodily states—pleasant states, unpleasant states. Sometimes as concentration develops and the body starts feeling very delightful, very pleasant, we can get lost in that pleasantness. We're just blissing out, not really clearly aware of the pleasantness. Or we get caught in states of pain. This is an interesting thing to explore: when you're paying attention to pain, observing it, and the mind gets lost or drifts out of the present moment.

What I discovered over and over again was that if I was noticing pain in the body, the mind had various strategies to avoid experiencing that pain. And most of those strategies involved not being mindful—I would say all of them, until I started noticing the strategies themselves. When I would wake up into that experience, whatever strategy the mind had employed, I would recognize that while it was off doing that thing—sometimes a fantasy, which can be common when there's a lot of physical pain—the pain wasn't bothering me.

I got curious about that. The mind understood that it didn't have to be bothered by that pain. It just didn't know how to do that with mindfulness yet.

One example from a couple of years ago: I was teaching a retreat and noticing a lot of back pain during the teaching and in the sittings. I would attend to the pain, noticing its changing nature, and then I would wake up to find the mind singing. At first it was like, "Okay, come back, be with the experience." But then I got curious about waking up into singing. And I noticed that in that waking up, the mind had let go of its grip on the pain. Before the mind had gotten lost, there had been this kind of pushing in, an "I'm going to be with this pain" kind of experience.

And the singing, waking up into the singing—in the first moment of waking up into the singing, the mind recognized that it wasn't gripped to that pain, and there was a different relationship that was possible to that pain. So in that moment, in being mindful

that the mind was not gripped to that pain, I watched in the next few moments as the grip returned. But I had, for just a few moments, seen what it was like to be with pain without that clamping down on it.

So I just watched this. I tried to watch the mind's strategy of how it worked with pain. And as I explored that, the mind learned something about how to let go of clamping down, gripping to the pain, and be able to stay mindful of it. Actually, in that exploration, the need to do the singing disappeared, because the mind began to understand how to be present and not clamped down on the pain.

This was through curiosity. Sometimes the mind understands things. Singing itself wasn't—singing and being lost in thought wasn't necessarily skillful. But the mind knew. There was some wisdom in the mind that knew the way I was paying attention to that pain was not helpful, and it created this strategy. So exploring that strategy, I learned something about how the mind could let go of squeezing down around pain.

A similar kind of getting lost can happen around states of mind. I think we all have our favorite states of mind that we may get lost in—boredom, confusion, depression, planning, various states. You can begin to recognize, and this is another place where the moment of remembering will serve us.

If you're mindful, and then notice that the mind has kind of spun out or gotten lost—so the mindfulness has disappeared—in the moment of remembering, if we've gotten lost through a state of mind, often the mind will be hooked into that state as it's gotten lost. So as we wake up into mindfulness, there are remnants of that state. You may be aware, "Oh, boredom is present," or "Anger is present."

When I first started my mindfulness practice, the thing that was really spinning me out was anger. I was so angry at a particular person. And my very first mindfulness practice was to just notice when I was angry. Mostly what that meant was waking up after having been caught by anger for some time. The mindfulness had gotten lost and my mind was just spinning, and then I'd wake up into anger. I began to just say, "Okay, wake up, notice what's here. This is anger. Anger is present."

That moment of remembering and connecting with what's there—when the mind has gotten lost in states of mind, sometimes the mindfulness isn't so strong around that particular state of mind. And the place that we can begin to get familiar with that state of mind is in the moment of waking up. So for me, waking up into anger was like, "Yes, okay, yep, this is anger. Boy, unpleasant. This doesn't feel very good."

What happens as we do that, as we connect with the experience of remembering to a particular state that we've been lost in, is that the mindfulness begins to attune to that state, get familiar with that state, gets familiar with being mindful of that state. In my own experience with that very first exercise around anger, what I saw happening over the course of several months was that the mindfulness got more familiar with anger. Because it was becoming used to the anger, because the mindfulness was becoming interested in the anger and also familiar with it, the mind started waking up into the pattern earlier and earlier in the process.

You're familiar, I'm sure, with the way anger just cycles—it spins up, gets worse and worse. The first time I did this, I was in a full-blown rage by the time I recognized the anger. But over the course of several months, the mind began to get more familiar with being present with anger and began waking up earlier and earlier in the process. The mind wasn't in such a rage; it was more like normal anger.

And then at one point—this was a couple months into my exploration of mindfulness practice in daily life—I was just hanging out in my kitchen, doing stuff, and I saw a thought that would have led to anger had I not been mindful of it. In that moment, the mind was so attuned to anger, so attuned to the quality of anger, that it knew it was coming. And in the seeing of its potentiality—because it wasn't there yet—in the seeing of its potentiality, the mind let go. And it didn't get angry.

That was mind-blowing to me. That was a couple months into my practice, and I would say that was the moment I knew I would be practicing for the rest of my life. I could see the power of this practice to begin to reveal how these patterns are born.

So if you get lost into habitual mind states, be curious about what you're waking up into. That will attune the mind to that state, and it will help the mind to be able to wake up into that state more easily. It will help it to be able to be present for that state more easily.

The mind can also move into states where it is habitually not present. Spacing out, for instance. Spacing out seems to be the quintessential state of mind in which mindfulness is not present. It's like—spaced out. How can mindfulness be aware of spacing out?

Sometimes we have a belief that certain states of mind are impossible to be mindful of. Spacing out might be one of those. And again, we may have a sense of trying to double down and hold on to the mindfulness, trying not to space out. This is just one example of this kind of state. There are others in which the mind seems unreachable—there's a lot in the terrain of spacing out, low energy, dullness, sleepiness, and restlessness sometimes, where it feels like the mind is just spinning so fast that it can't land on

anything. How can I possibly be mindful of anything when the mind is spinning that fast? Obviously I need to slow it down. Or the spacing out—obviously I need to clear that up.

One of the key tools in my toolkit is that I have come to recognize that mindfulness can be mindful of anything. If there's something happening in my experience where there's any idea that I can't be mindful of that, I question it. I don't believe it. Instead I get curious. How might it be possible to be mindful of that? At times it can take a while to understand, because very often, like with something like spacing out, there can be a very strong habit of not being mindful in that state of mind.

One of the best ways to explore this, again, is the moment when you wake up after you've been lost. Often we notice the places that the mind gets lost in retrospect. You're going through your day and you're kind of present, and then you wake up and remember, "Oh, I was just not present." So it's in retrospect that we often notice. With habitual states of mind where we get lost, we'll wake up recognizing, "Oh, spaced out. I was lost and spaced out." And then because we have this belief that we can't be mindful of being spaced out, we try to do something in that moment. We try to clear up the spaced out, or we try to bring our attention to something and pay attention to it really clearly.

But sometimes the mind is simply spacing out.

I was having breakfast one morning and kept noticing the mind just going into spaced-out mode. Initially, my habit of practice was, "Okay, we're eating breakfast, pay attention to the breakfast. Lifting, chewing, tasting, swallowing." So I brought my attention back to that when I noticed I was spaced out. Initially I did that. But it kept happening, over and over again.

This is another great thing to note. If something happens over and over again like that, really get curious about it. Rather than getting frustrated—"How come I can't control my mind?"—be curious about what the mind is doing.

It kept doing it over and over again. At some point it was like, "Well, I guess trying to pay attention to the breakfast isn't doing it, so let me see if I can notice what the mind is doing instead." So I was paying attention to eating and then began to recognize this feeling of the mind. It was like the mind was here in front of me eating, and then it felt like the mind just took a break and went sitting up here somewhere, like hovering over my head. And I could actually follow that, be with that experience. When I allowed the mind to do that, it felt very pleasant, actually. I was aware of this kind of buzzy, very relaxed state of mind. And in being in that state, what I recognized was that the mind was really tired. It was trying to take a break.

It was trying to relax. And I had kept trying to get it to do something, right? Pay attention to breakfast, pay attention to breakfast. But what was actually going on was that the mind needed a break. It needed rest.

And when I allowed it to rest with mindfulness—it was like, be aware, I watched the mind kind of go into that state, felt the buzziness of it—and at some point, all states are impermanent, it probably took thirty or forty seconds, the buzziness dissipated, and then the mind was very clear. It's like the mind took its rest, and that's what it needed to do.

Sometimes I find this exploration around curiosity more fruitful than thinking, "I know what's the best thing to be mindful of. I know it's best to be paying attention to breakfast, because that's what I'm doing, that's where I'm supposed to be paying attention." Instead of feeling like I have the right thing or I know what to do, be curious about what the mind is interested in paying attention to. Curious about that. In this case, exploring that territory, the mind took its rest and then was very present.

Sometimes we lose awareness as our practice deepens. This is counterintuitive in a way—we think that being more continuously mindful means we lose awareness less. But sometimes the very process and nature of the settling goes through periods where the mind wanders.

I'll describe this. One of the ways this happens is what I've called a purification cycle, where after a period of fairly continuous mindfulness, things that have not been seen for a while can come to the surface, and there's a kind of storm. So there's an alternation between periods of calm and quiet and a storm of something that hasn't really been allowed to be at the surface or allowed to be known before. That's one way this can happen as mindfulness settles.

Another way this can happen is that as the mind begins to settle down—and I'll give you the clue, the highlight, the sign or thing that I look for in this kind of situation—if there's been a period of time where the mindfulness has been fairly stable, I'm not saying one hundred percent stable, not one hundred percent present, but pretty continuous, a fair amount of ability to meet experience in the present moment, not so much reactivity, some amount of calm. If after a period like that, not too much getting lost, the mind suddenly starts to wander, get curious about that.

It often means that something isn't being seen. And a pattern that I've seen happen frequently enough in my practice that I've decided to talk about it, and that I hear enough in meetings with you that I've decided to talk about it, is that as the mind settles, it seems that the mind begins to get interested in things that our conscious

awareness, what we know about—it's like beyond the scope of what we know about consciously. The mind starts getting interested in experience, phenomena, states that are not things we're familiar with.

I'll give an example of this. On one long retreat here at this center, I was at a place where for several days it was very easy to be present. I would sit down and the mindfulness was right there, right with the breath. And after a couple of days of that, I was like, "Oh great, I've figured it out." And then one morning, I sat down and the mind was just all over the place. Thoughts galore.

Fortunately, rather than trying to force myself to stay present, I got curious. What's happening? What am I not seeing? What is not seen here? And what I began to recognize is that I was paying attention to the breath, doing breath meditation, and within the space of half a breath, I would be right with the breath at the very beginning of an inhalation, I'd be right there. And within the space of half a breath, the breath would disappear. And that's when the thoughts would start.

The experience of what I was used to paying attention to in the breath, the sensations I was used to paying attention to—the mind was used to paying attention to a certain level and type of sensation. And then those sensations started to get more subtle. My habit of mindfulness was still looking around at that coarser level, and there wasn't much to find. So the mindfulness would go into thought.

This kind of thing happens as the mind settles down. Often the mind may start to be curious about or interested in something that we have never experienced before, don't even know about.

And if, again, we're trying to be in control—even at the subtlest level of trying to be in control, thinking "I'm going to pay attention to the breath in this way"—if we're trying to control that rather than being curious about what the mind is actually interested in paying attention to, we miss something important.

So if you see, after a period of fairly stable practice, that the mind starts to wander, often it's more of a drifting out of the present moment. It's not like the mind is charging out into emotional reactive storms. It's just that you're present, and then suddenly you're thinking about potato chips or baseball. The number of times I find myself thinking about something I know nothing about—people talking to me I've never met, discussing things I've never heard about or even been interested in. It's just this kind of drifting state.

If that's what's happening after a period of the mind settling, get curious about where it is that the mind is leaving. Another thing to explore is being attentive to the breath and noticing, "Ah, it's slipping out as the sensations get really subtle." Then as I saw that, I wondered, can I just be with that? At one point with Sayadaw U Pandita, I remember reporting to him that the breath was getting too subtle to pay attention to and I had to pay attention to something else. He said, "Just know that it's subtle. Just know that the sensations are subtle." And I was like, wow, what a revelation. So just recognizing, "Okay, sensations are quiet right now. Sensations are subtle right now"—that recognition can allow the mind to land on that.

There was another time I was exploring this question of seeing how mindfulness leaves or where it leaves. Again, I was doing breath meditation, and I had the agenda to be right with the breath. Every time I began to be right with the breath, I could see—and some of you may be able to start to see this at times—that the mindfulness was getting a little bit not so connected to the breath, becoming that more or less mindful place around the breath.

As I saw that—so again, breath, mindfulness, like they were right together—I would notice the mindfulness losing touch with the breath. My original exploration around that was, "Oh, come back, be with the breath." I would notice the mindfulness losing touch and think, "Oh, come back, be with the breath." At some point, watching this happen multiple times, I got curious. It was like, "Oh, the mind is leaving the breath. Wow, but I'm mindful of that. Let's see where it wants to go."

Instead of having the agenda that I think I know what the best thing to do is—that very focused attention—what I saw was that the mind let go of the breath and opened into a much more broad, receptive space, as opposed to a focused, directed mindfulness. It was a space I had never experienced before. I had never explored or touched into that. And I began to understand it through watching the mind do what it was doing. Mindfulness was leaving the breath. Just, "Oh, let's see. I'm aware of that. Let's see where it wants to go. I'm mindful. Let's see where it wants to go."

We often have an idea, I think based on some familiarity we have, about what it feels like when mindfulness starts getting stronger. Our first few tastes of mindfulness getting stronger may happen on retreat, may happen when we're slowed down. We see things in a particular way, things are really clear, we're seeing things very sharply, precisely, we're seeing a lot more detail. And we get the idea that that's what mindfulness is. So we may have that sense of what mindfulness is, and then what we do is we try to construct that. We try to find that state. Even when we're already mindful, we try to find that state.

I did this on one retreat. I was practicing with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma, and I was exploring a lot of different ways the mind paid attention, so that may be why this began to be clear to me. As I was doing some walking meditation and then walked back to my dorm where I was doing sitting meditation in my room, I noticed that the mind was trying to put itself into a state of mind in order to meditate. And in that doing, I recognized—wait a minute, I'm already mindful. What's wrong with this state?

What's wrong with this state?

And what I saw was that the idea was that I needed to subtly repress thoughts. The state that the mind was trying to put itself in was a state of repressing thoughts.

So one exploration around mindfulness again here, this topic of investigating mindfulness: if I'm trying to change the state of my mind in order to be mindful, ask if that's necessary. I ask myself, is that necessary? Very often it's already mindful.

And again, there are so many different ways that mindfulness can be experienced. Sometimes it has that really precise, very clear quality—like you're seeing all this detail. Sometimes mindfulness feels so ordinary. You wake up in the morning and it's just so completely ordinary. I remember this happening on one three-month course. I woke up in the morning and thought, wow, I just feel so ordinary. And I had to check: am I being mindful? It just seemed like it was so ordinary.

Sometimes it can feel really ordinary. Sometimes it can feel really broad and vast and open. Sometimes it can feel very precise and directed.

Check the awareness. Are you aware? Are you aware? And be curious about what awareness is already aware of. Let go of any idea that it's supposed to be a certain way, and that will guide you to see so much that you could never even possibly conceive of.

We cannot find our way to the unknown by being with things we know. We have to allow ourselves to open to the unknown, to things we're not familiar with, being aware in ways we're not familiar with.

So I'm hoping this is encouraging you to be curious about exploring your mindfulness, exploring your experience. The curiosity, the factor of curiosity, is so helpful. And there's so much to learn.

As we explore this quality of mindfulness and it begins to become more continuous—which this exploration does—we see our own minds. We see how our minds get caught, how they get lost. And we also start to see just the processes of mind, the ways it works, the aggregates. We start to see how our minds function.

We don't have to create anything special to be mindful of. The five aggregates are happening all the time. Any moment we wake up and can just be with what's here begins to point us to the wisdom of impermanence, unreliability, not-self.

And curiosity—curiosity about this—be willing to go, be willing to let the mind point some things out to you. Sometimes it knows things that we don't consciously know.

Let's just sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 101

Perception and Papañca

Andrea Fella · 1h00

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella examines perception (saññā) as one of the five aggregates (khandhas) and its intimate connection with papañca—the mental proliferation that the Buddha identified as a root cause of suffering and conflict in the world. Drawing from the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (MN 18), Fella traces the chain from sensory contact through feeling, perception, thinking, and finally to papañca, showing how this process colors all subsequent experience with our past conditioning, opinions, and beliefs.

Using vivid personal examples—from mistaking bat squeals for a pig being slaughtered in Burma, to watching her mind construct a school bus from flashing lights at the Exploratorium—Fella demonstrates how perception functions like a mirage, reflecting something real but easily confused for something it is not. She explores the Buddha's famous parable of the blind men and the elephant to illustrate how we create solid concepts from partial perceptions and then cling to them as reality, leading to views, conflict, and suffering.

The talk offers profound insights into reification—treating ideas as concrete things—and how this process operates constantly in our experience. Fella emphasizes that liberation requires understanding papañca, which appears alongside the abandonment of greed, aversion, and delusion in the Buddha's teachings. Rather than trying to stop these processes, practitioners are encouraged to simply observe them clearly, allowing the mind to naturally release its clinging when it understands how it contributes to its own suffering.

Tonight I'd like to explore with you the topic of perception.

Some of you might remember this is one of the five aggregates, the process by which we recognize experience. Tonight I'd like to spend quite a bit of time looking at just this aspect of the aggregates, just this one process.

On the surface it might seem that it's a pretty simple process, just a simple recognition of experience. We see something and we recognize it. We see a chair, we know it's a chair. We see a cushion, we know it's a cushion. We see the wall, we know it's a wall. It's the process by which we recognize experience, and so on the surface of it, it seems perhaps kind of simple.

And yet the suttas, the teachings of the Buddha, point to not understanding this process as being one of the key reasons, one of the leading causes for suffering, for stress, for struggle, for conflict in our world. When we don't understand perception properly—

when it's infused with confusion and delusion—it can lead to a lot of problems, struggles in our lives, and conflict in the world. Perhaps it bears some reflection and exploration. We'll spend some time this evening looking at perception itself: what it is, how it works, how we might be able to recognize it in our experience, and then ways that this process gets tied up with delusion—ways that we get caught by this process and it leads us to struggle, to suffer.

A little bit of recap about perception, since both Bhante and I talked about it when we each discussed the aggregates, but I'll just review what perception is. Basically, there's a kind of meeting or contact of experience with the eye, with the ear, with the nose, with the tongue, with the skin, with our minds. In that contact, there is the mind trying to recognize what the experience is. What is that sight? What is that sound? What is that smell? What is that taste? What is that contact? It's a natural function of the mind.

As I said in my talk last time, and I think Bhante also pointed out, this is a really useful process, this recognition. The way we wander through our day requires perception. It requires us to be able to recognize things. If we had to figure out every time we walked into a room that these are people and this is the floor and this is the wall and I shouldn't walk through a wall—if we had to figure all of that out every time, we'd be exhausted. This perceptual process is a very useful mechanism of our minds to help save energy. It's a kind of shortcut. From the time we're born, we're taking in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch, categorizing, classifying, and organizing all of that information into concepts, into perceptions. It's a very useful process.

It's also a layered process. If we explore how our senses work, we can do this with a little bit of reflection. You can also see this in your practice as your mindfulness gets a little bit more continuous; I've occasionally seen this in my own practice.

The first thing that our senses meet is the raw sense data. Sight, for instance—the first thing that sight meets is form and color. That's what our eyes register: form and color. From there, the mind begins to recognize that particular shape of form and color is a chair, that particular shape of form and color is a person. It's like there's a layered process. This bell, for instance—there's the shape and the color of the bell, and your mind is perceiving that as well as what you know it to be: the bell. Our minds don't have to consciously go through these layers every time we meet a bell. We just see it and immediately it's bell. Immediately we know.

We can start to see this process at work. At one point on retreat I was sitting outside in California, and something caught my eye. I turned my head and my eye fell on a shape and a color, and the mind kind of named or noted what it saw. The mind first saw green, then it saw jagged, and then it recognized it as leaf. This layered process.

As I said the other day, often the perceptual process is about recognizing the objects themselves—recognizing this is a bell, that's a leaf, this is a flower. This is one aspect of perception: the identification of objects out of our field of experience. Sometimes in our practice, when the mindfulness is a little more continuous and perhaps when the situation or the environment is a little obscured—if the lights are dim, for instance—you might see as you walk into a room your mind trying to figure out what's in that room and where it is in the room.

On one retreat, I walked into a dim room at night with just a tiny bit of light around the edges, and there was this shape on a table. I watched my mind trying to figure out what it was. It came up with some very bizarre things. One of the first things it proposed was that it was a deformed being. I recognized pretty quickly that this was probably not the case. But the mind tried on a couple of possibilities before it actually recognized that it was a vase of flowers.

Sometimes we can watch our minds doing this—trying on various perceptions until it feels like it's found something that matches the situation, meets the conditions, meets what is here. We can think of our perceptual process as matching our experience against our history.

Perception not only includes this naming of experience—although this is the main aspect I'll explore and I think is one of the easiest to see, this recognition of experience. Perception also includes the recognition of space and location. The distance that I perceive in this room is a perception. When we look at the room and see that there appears to be space there, I'm not saying that there isn't space there, but the fact that we recognize it as that space is a function of perception.

This is perhaps a little easier to understand around hearing. When we experience sound, what's happening physically is that sound waves are hitting the eardrum. That's all that's going on. And the mind, through repeatedly having experienced sound waves hitting the eardrum, understands and basically creates the understanding of where that sound is located in space. That too is a function of perception.

When we walk upstairs, the distance that we step, the amount that we move our foot—it works because perception is working. The perception of distance and space, our seeing of that. There are many aspects to perception. Perception is our friend. We get through the world, we navigate the world because of perception.

The process of perception can get us into trouble when we don't understand that it is a process. We easily misunderstand and get caught by the process of perception, basically mistaking what we are perceiving as being the reality of the world.

For each of the aggregates, as Bhante mentioned last night, the Buddha offered an analogy. I'll only discuss the analogy for perception tonight, but the analogy related to each aggregate is said to point to the way that particular aggregate can confuse us—how it catches us off guard or leads us to misattribute something. The analogy for perception is that perception is like a mirage.

I actually looked up mirages a couple of years ago when I was reviewing this talk, and I discovered that a mirage is not completely something made up in the mind. The real definition of a mirage is that it's based on the way light gets refracted. If you're in the desert, for instance, the heat coming off the sand refracts the light in such a way that it creates a mirror effect—you see the sky reflected on the sand, so it looks like a lake.

A mirage is not a complete concoction of somebody dying of thirst, but actually a perception of something. It's a seeing of something that's reflected—the sky is there, but it's reflected on the ground. And the deluding nature of the analogy pointed to here is that we can easily confuse it for being something that it's not.

Perception functions in this way: we're taking something in. At least in my view, there is stuff out there. You are out there. I believe you're out there. You're not just a construction of my mind while I sit here giving a talk to myself. I actually think you're out there. And yet my experience of you is a construction in the mind. I can't actually experience you directly. I experience you through the perception in the mind. So it's like a reflection. Perception is like a reflection.

The way we can get caught or misunderstand the process is that we take that reflection to be the actual reality. With our experience of things coming through, moderated through our mind, there's a very large doorway through which opinions, views, and interpretations can enter—if we aren't aware that perception is a reflection of experience and not reality itself. This is a big piece of the deluding nature of perception.

That we interpret or view our perceptions as being reality, and in that process often drag in a lot of views and opinions. So that representation in our minds of what's happening out there is very often distorted by interpretation. If we can become aware of this process, there is a possibility that we may become aware that the interpretation is distorting our seeing. From this, you might begin to get a sense of why the Buddha says that not understanding perception leads to suffering and conflict in the world.

So let's start with recognizing perception itself. I did talk about this a little bit the other day, but I'll go into it again just to remind you. We can recognize this activity of perception: there is an experience, and then the mind recognizing the experience. In the naming kind of perception—which is the main one I'll talk about tonight—the identification of objects, this kind of perception often happens through language or through images. I would say it happens through our avenues of thought. Perception is often recognized as a very subtle level of thought.

The easiest place to recognize this, at least for me, is in the terrain of hearing. We hear something. The other day I heard the sound of geese. There was the sound, and immediately what my mind did—I was inside, I couldn't look up and see them—but in my mind I saw an image of geese flying in a V formation. That's perception. That recognition, the mind recognizing, "that's what that sound is." Sometimes it might come through a word in the mind. The mind could have simply said, "geese." Just saying the word in the mind. You'll see this; you can watch this happening in your meditative experience.

Because perception is so close to thinking—it's a subtle kind of thought—that simple recognition of "car" or "geese" or "itch," there's that recognition and it's recognized with some kind of thought, often. It's very easy, if we don't recognize perception happening, to move from the perception to thinking about what we've perceived. So we might go from hearing the geese, if we didn't recognize the perception of it, to thinking about times we've seen geese in our past. Memories might emerge. For me, actually, the other day, the memory of my brother when he was little, so proud having killed his first goose. That brought some emotional response, that memory.

So the perception leads to thinking, leads to emotional responses. This is a very normal process, and I'm not saying we should stop it. But we can recognize that it's happening and conditioned on the perception. It's important to recognize that we respond to our perceptions, that in experiencing something—like, for instance, the geese—there is potentially an emotional resonance with what we think we have perceived.

The deluding power of this becomes clearer when perception makes a mistake. And perception is very prone to mistake; I have to warn you about that one too. Perception can so easily make mistakes. We see something and misattribute it—like my mind saying, "Oh, it's a deformed being." That's a far-out one, but our minds do misattribute, misperceive, make mistakes in that recognition.

The classic example offered in the commentaries is walking into a dark room and seeing a coiled form in a corner and perceiving it as a snake. With that perception, fear may arise. Then somebody turns the light on and we see that coiled form is a rope. The fear disappears. The fear was conditioned on the perception of it being a snake. So again we can see how our perceptions of experience, and particularly when they are misattributed, can influence our experience.

The clearest example I had of this—I've told this story quite a few times, so some of you have probably heard this one before—the clearest example for me of this kind of mistake and the emotional response that happens is that there was a period of time I was meditating in Burma, and my room was pretty near the monastery wall. Lots of sounds came over the monastery wall. If any of you have practiced in Burma, you know that Burma is nowhere near as quiet as Barre, Massachusetts.

And so there were sounds. At one point, for three days, Burmese opera was playing nonstop, twenty-four hours a day. That was pretty intense.

But pretty much every evening during a particular stretch of the retreat, at the same time each night, I began hearing a squealing sound. Hearing that squealing sound, my mind perceived it—it heard the sound, and the identification it made was "pig." I had heard pigs squealing before, and this sounded like a squealing pig. So my mind perceived it as pig.

My mind didn't quite stop there. It went a little further, and I could actually see that the rest of what I'm going to describe to you was the mind constructing. Because I knew I didn't know this. But my mind had a sense that this pig was in distress, and it created the idea that what was happening each evening was that I was pretty near, in my place in the monastery, to a butchery just in the village. And what I was hearing every evening was the nightly slaughter of a pig. So compassion arose for this distressed pig. This went on night after night—feeling this, noticing this, hearing the pig.

And then one night, instead of sitting at that particular time of day, I decided to do a walking meditation. While I was walking, I began to be startled by these swooping forms that were coming very close to me. The swooping forms, I figured, must be bats. I mean, I hadn't really spent much time with bats, but that was the perception I had for

those creatures. And those forms were squealing. It was bats that were squealing every night. There wasn't even a pig in the picture. The pig didn't exist. The compassion, of course, just completely vanished.

But again, we see particularly how prone to mistake perception can be. I did not question the perception. I knew that the whole story about the slaughtering of pigs was probably an idea in my mind. It didn't—it still generated this feeling of compassion. But I knew that part was a projection. The idea that I had misperceived entirely didn't cross my mind until I noticed these bats squealing. So the mental perception created conditions for our response. This kind of thing happens all the time.

And this takes us to this more deluding aspect of perception. The teachings connect this process of perception with another process in the mind called papañca. The suttas don't really describe or define what papañca is, but they give a pretty clear description of how it arises and what happens when it arises. And so it's pretty clear that it's really tightly connected with delusion—that papañca and delusion go hand in hand.

The other piece that the suttas say about papañca is that it's intimately connected with conflict in the world. Essentially, the suttas have a kind of step-by-step unfolding of why conflict arises, and it's traced back to papañca. Papañca as the root of conflict in the world. So it's a pretty important process to understand, to get to know. And it's intimately connected with delusion in our minds.

There's a description of how papañca comes up. I'm going to read this to you. This is a fairly famous quote from the suttas, so many of you may have heard it. This section goes through all six sense bases with respect to this process. It's a description of the process of how we go from contact with a sense door to papañca being created, and then what that papañca results in. It goes through it for all six sense doors. I'm just going to read it with respect to the eye.

"Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact." So the meeting of the eye, the form—the visible form that is seen—so the eye, the form, then there's eye consciousness.

The meeting of those three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. What one feels, that one perceives. So there's the contact, there's a feeling, and then there's the perception, the recognition of what it is. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one—I'm just going to put in "papañcizes" here—that one papañcas about.

It's translated in a couple of different ways. One of the ways it's translated is "mental proliferation." So this passage really clearly describes that process I was talking about. We hear a sound, we perceive it—I hear the sound of the pig, or the sound of the squealing—perceive it as pig, and then start thinking about it and mentally proliferating about it.

It's not just thinking. The thinking is kind of more at the bare level. It's like, "Oh, that's a pig. Wonder what kind of situation that pig is in. Sounds distressed." This is where it heads into papañca. "Sounds distressed. Maybe it's being slaughtered. Oh, there's a butcher shop over there. They're killing pigs every night." So this is a simple definition of papañca—the mind kind of running riot with thought. One of the most common ways that people talk about papañca is mental proliferation of thought.

The sutta goes on. This is then a description of how papañca impacts our subsequent perceptions. It says, "With what one has mentally proliferated"—this is complicated language, I'll unpack it for you—with what one has papañcized about, with what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye.

So basically this is talking about a process by which we see something, we experience it, we think about it, we start creating opinions, views, ideas about it. And then our experience is not like bare experience coming in. We are seeing that experience through those opinions, ideas, beliefs—through that papañca. Papañca becomes a kind of filter over our experience, leading us to perceive things differently.

Another example: you might be seeing somebody walk across the street. That might just be a very neutral kind of seeing—seeing a person. But perhaps in this case, this person has a body shape, height, or form that's similar to someone who has caused you harm in the past. And so there potentially becomes a reaction. The sight of that person reminds you of—in classical language, in standard language—the sight reminds you of someone, and that reminding drags in a whole bunch of history. And so seeing that person is now no longer so neutral. There could be a whole bunch of emotional response that's arisen from that simple contact based on—I'll read this again—based on papañca as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by that papañca beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye.

So again you start to see how, when perception is not understood, delusion and perception begin to lead us around by the nose. Our past comes into our present through this process.

That exploration of papañca, the exploration of mental proliferation, is one way to understand papañca. But there's some other thoughts about the meaning of papañca based on how it's used in the suttas, the various places it's used in the texts, and how it is used.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu actually points out that the word papañca is used in Indian art to mean a repetition of a theme that gets represented by a certain object. It might be in art—a repetition of a theme based on a visual object that's repeated throughout a series of paintings or multiple times in a painting. He also says that in music, again, papañca is described as perhaps a series of notes that become repeated throughout a piece of music. And so it becomes kind of like a little object. Thanissaro actually translates papañca as "objectification," and I'll go into that a little bit more in just a bit.

I'm particularly interested in this term because of how it's connected with other terms. In certain places in the suttas, the Buddha actually points to the allaying of papañca as being very important for full liberation.

He talks about, for instance, in one sutta the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion—one cannot be freed without those. The absence of craving, one cannot be freed without that. And the absence of papañca, one cannot be freed without that. So in one list he placed it among the things that need to be released, understood.

To me, this actually indicates that papañca means something more than a lot of thinking. It has a deeper meaning, perhaps, than just the mind thinking about things repeatedly. And so I'd like to explore that a little bit—what else it might possibly point to, what other deluding aspect of experience it might illuminate.

To do that, I'm going to tell a story. Let's start with a story from the suttas. This is a teaching story that came about because a couple of his monks were wandering on alms round and they were hearing some other ascetics arguing. Those other ascetics were arguing, "The Dhamma is like this, it's not like this, you're wrong, I'm right, it's not like that." They were all entrenched in their positions. When his monks came back, he told them this story.

He said, "Formerly, bhikkhus"—and this is an abbreviated version of the story, so it won't take too long—"Formerly, bhikkhus, there was a certain king in this very Sāvatthī, and that king addressed a man. 'Come now, my good man, bring together all those persons in Sāvatthī who have been blind from birth.' 'Yes, your majesty.' 'Now, my man, show them an elephant.' To some of the blind people he presented the head of the ele-

phant saying, 'This is an elephant.' To some he presented an ear of the elephant saying, 'This is an elephant.' To some he presented a tusk, the trunk, the body, the foot, the hindquarters, the tail, the tuft at the end of the tail saying, 'This is the elephant.'

"Then the king approached these people and said, 'Have you been shown the elephant?' 'Yes, your majesty.' 'Tell me, what is an elephant like?' Those people who had been shown the ear of the elephant replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is like a winnowing basket.' Those who'd been shown the body replied, 'An elephant is like a storeroom.' Those who'd been shown the foot replied, 'An elephant is like a post.' And so on, saying, 'An elephant is like this, an elephant is not like that.' They fought each other with their fists."

So the story points to the way we perceive our experience. In this case, the people who were blind from birth, who'd never seen an elephant in their lives, were given a particular aspect of the elephant to feel. That's perception, right? They experienced the elephant with their own experience, their own hands. They weren't given the full picture. And yet from that perception—perception from direct experience, very strong—views got formed. Strong ideas about "this is an elephant."

For the person who was shown the leg, it's not incorrect to say this part of the elephant is like a post. But the view that gets created—and often this happens around perception—a view gets created that grows larger than the actual perception. We take things in with perception, we create an idea about that, we believe that idea, and then we block out other information, other ideas, and say, "It's like this. It's like this." We believe our ideas.

We do this actually a lot. This is not an uncommon experience for us—to create an idea and then hold to it. "It's like this. It's like this."

To take it out of the realm of a teaching story and into the realm of our world: there's the concept of race, for instance. The concept of race is well known, well understood to have no basis in biology whatsoever. No basis in DNA, none. The concept of race is completely a construction of mistaken perception.

And yet, that concept has been one of the most—has created some of the most horrible suffering this planet has seen. Because of beliefs in the concept of race, beliefs about the ideas of what various races are. Even though the idea of race is a complete myth, the reality lingers, continues to this day. The reality of oppression, the reality of suffering because of a concept. It's not just about people and stories coming to blows over an elephant. It's well worth getting to know, familiarizing ourselves with these processes of mind to understand how this works.

So in that story, we take a perception and create a thing out of it. This may be what is meant by papañca. Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro uses the word objectification. The people touching the foot of the elephant, the leg of the elephant, create the concept "like a post." That becomes the reference point for elephant at that point. So we go from a perception to a thought to a belief. I think where the believing part enters may be some of what papañca is about—essentially, the process by which we conceptualize something and then take it to be reality. I started out by saying that's how perception is deluding, going back to that image of the mirage. We mistake the reflection for a reality. This is the deluding nature of perception, and where I think papañca fits in.

So Ṭhānissaro uses this term objectification—the creation of an object out of experience, out of a process. There's another term that I like, the definition of which is perfect for this. It's a philosophical term called reification. Some of you may have heard of this term. I wrote down the Wikipedia definition of reification this evening: "Reification is the error of treating as a concrete thing something which is not concrete but merely an idea." This is what happens all the time with us through perception. We relate to our experience through the concepts, taking them to be the reality.

One scholar, a Sri Lankan scholar, says: "This process of distorted perception, of placing every bare perception into a framework of emotions and beliefs that have come out of our past, our history, our conditioning, robs the freshness out of our experiences. But we are not aware of the constant interference of the past. Because of this unawareness, which is our ignorance and our delusion, we see humanity fragmented as me and others, us and them, and in various other stereotypes—skin color, ethnicity, language, and ideology included."

This is happening all the time. And so we can, through this exploration of perception, begin to see how everything that we experience is created and experienced through the mind. It's easier to see this with the world of thoughts—fairly easy. I remember at one point I had broken up with a partner and had gotten over that partner long ago. Yet at one point I was walking down the street, and my mind came out of this thought bubble which had created the world of being back in relationship with that person. We were going somewhere and doing something, and then pop—the bubble burst. It was a little bit confusing. Where did that come from? At that point the emotional attachment had long since released, and so there wasn't any feeling of "oh, poor me, I'm not in that relationship anymore." It was just seeing the delusion of the mind having created a reality for a minute—that relationship was existent again.

We can see this way in which we live through our thoughts, the creation of thought worlds, thought bubbles that we live in. It's a little harder to see that everything we experience—every sight, every sound, every smell, every taste, every touch—is mediated by the mind. What we experience through sight, for example, is just little pixelated bits of light and color, and it's our mind that puts together the images.

There was an example of this in California where I live. There's a science museum—it's mostly for kids, but it's fun for adults too. I took my ten-year-old nephew there at one point. It's called the Exploratorium. We walked in, and back in the back of the hall there's a big giant open warehouse, basically. Hanging on the ceiling, back in the back of the room, were long rods—probably about five or six feet long, maybe two or three inches around. Each rod, there were probably ten to fifteen of them, hanging about two feet apart.

And on each rod, there were flashing colored lights. I looked up at that and thought, huh, I wonder what that is. I'll have to check that out later.

My nephew and I wandered around the Exploratorium and stopped at one point to get something to eat and rest. He was sitting there eating his ice cream cone or whatever, kind of looking up, and he said, "Look, it's butterflies!" I looked in the direction he was looking, and he was looking at these rods. I looked up and said, "What are you talking about?" Then he said, "Oh, now it's a school bus!" I looked up and saw a lot of yellow flashing lights and a little red flashing light, and I said, "What are you talking about? I see yellow flashing lights. It's kind of the color of a school bus, but I do not see a school bus up there."

It took me quite a while, actually. We went off to do something else, but then we came back and I said, okay, I am going to see what on earth he is talking about. I stood there for a while and watched. At some point—it's kind of like Carol mentioned the other day, this trick of those 3D pictures where you have to look just in the right way to see dinosaurs pop out of the page—well, this is a similar thing. You have to look at it just in the right way. I think it involves a bit of a tracking technique.

What happened as I looked at it was that the entire area delimited by those bars became a screen. It genuinely looked like there was a projector, a screen that something was being projected on. And on that screen, I saw a school bus riding across. The perception was so detailed that I could read the name of the school district on the side of the school bus.

My understanding of how this works is that the flashing lights were timed just right, and there's a kind of persistence of vision that carried—in imagination, because it clearly was not happening out there. That was what was so amazing about this exhibit. It clearly was not happening out there. That school bus was in the mind. The persistence of vision put all those little bits of light together to create the image of the school bus.

This is another area where delusion can creep in. Because the concepts—that was really clear, that school bus did not exist anywhere. It wasn't even a projection of a school bus; it was completely in the mind. And yet the mind creates the object. It creates the solidity of a thing. This too, I think, is in the terrain of papañca—the creation, the solidification, the objectification of experience.

All experience is mediated through the mind. Clinging, of course, is a mental experience. I think you're probably all really familiar with that one by now—the experience of clinging. That's a mental formation, a present arising in the mind that has no inherent reality in the world. And not only that, but what we cling to is a construction of our own minds. What we are clinging to is created by our own minds. Mostly we cling to concepts. We cling to ideas. There's no way to cling to reality.

And so this doorway of perception and concept is very fertile ground for clinging. When not seen clearly, when perception is not seen for what it is, we create that object and we cling to it. Our perceptual process has been co-opted. Perception has been taken over by delusion to make us believe that there's something actually to cling to. But what we're clinging to is a formation of the mind, an idea in the mind.

When our minds start to see this, when our minds get it, begin to get that the mind is contributing to its own suffering—fortunately our minds don't particularly want to suffer. As our minds get the information about how suffering is created, they begin to recognize: well, that's not necessary. That can be let go of.

But it's not something we can necessarily just act to do. The mind has to see things clearly. And perception happens all the time.

We have abundant opportunity to watch this process. Yet it is not necessarily something to try to do. I believe I mentioned this last time—Sayadaw U Tejaniya often says this isn't something to do, but rather information that may help you see something new in your experience. Just observe. Very simple.

These processes can become apparent through the simplicity of meeting experience. And the ways that we are confused and deluded will also begin to be revealed. The mind will choose to let go when it understands.

CHAPTER 102

The Experience of Wisdom

Andrea Fella · 1h03

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella examines the nature of wisdom (paññā) as a conditioned factor of mind that can be cultivated and recognized in our direct experience. She explores the three traditional categories of wisdom: sutamayā paññā (wisdom from hearing), cintamayā paññā (wisdom from reflection), and bhāvanāmayā paññā (wisdom from meditation practice).

Drawing from her own practice journey, Andrea offers practical guidance on using wisdom reflections such as "this is just anger" or "this is nature" to create space when caught in difficult mind states. She explains how wisdom operates within the Five Spiritual Faculties (pañc'indriya)—faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom—and how these qualities mutually support each other's development.

The talk illuminates multiple ways wisdom manifests experientially: the simple shift that creates ease with challenging experiences, recognizing thoughts as present-moment arisings rather than reality, understanding dukkha directly, seeing defilements vanish upon clear observation, and recognizing the non-arising of unwholesome states. Andrea emphasizes that wisdom develops gradually through meeting dukkha with mindfulness, and that the mind's natural orientation toward well-being, when given accurate information through clear seeing, naturally releases what causes suffering. This purification process happens not through force but through wisdom's own momentum.

The topic I'd like to explore with you tonight is wisdom—what it is, how we cultivate it, and how we experience it. That last piece is really what I want to explore most deeply.

Following from Bhante's talk last night, he said a number of times that little by little we cultivate the conditions that allow us to open to the truth, to open to this freedom. And the conditions, this little by little cultivation, is the cultivation of wisdom. We've said so many times on this retreat, and it came up again in the hall this morning: wisdom is what does the work of freeing the mind. We can't consciously do that. Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, when asked why we practice, "We practice to cultivate wisdom."

This fits in very much with the Buddha's teaching. The Eightfold Path begins with wisdom—wise understanding, wise intention. And yet there are two framings of the Eightfold Path. The standard framing includes the eight path factors: wise understanding, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindful-

ness, and wise concentration. In this framing, the path begins with wisdom, begins with what we can call the wisdom of learning. We have to start somewhere, right? We have to start somewhere from learning, from hearing teachings.

This is where our path begins. It begins by hearing the teachings of the Buddha, then beginning to reflect on them, which we can think of as the second kind of wisdom. So first we hear, we listen, we read, we take in wisdom and begin thinking about it. Does this make sense? How can I apply this to my own life? Do I want to apply this to my life? Does it make sense to me? This is the part where we begin to practice. When we reflect on the teachings, wise understanding—that first factor of the path—leads to wise intention, which carries us into action. And so the wisdom of the Buddha carries us into practicing wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, practicing wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration.

The second way the path is described, and some of you are probably familiar with this framing too, is the gradual development beginning with generosity, then leading to sīla (ethical conduct), samādhi (the cultivation of the settledness of mind), and paññā (wisdom). The understanding is that the gradual training unfolds in this direction. We begin with cultivating our hearts and minds in connectivity with the world through generosity and ethical conduct, and then begin cultivating the inner mind to let go of the ways that we cling. This creates the conditions to open to wisdom.

In many ways we can see the path both begins and ends with wisdom. At the beginning of the path, it takes the form of wisdom that is hearing, reflecting, understanding—this is sutamayā paññā in Pali. The wisdom we take and act upon is the wisdom of reflection, cintāmayā paññā. And the third kind of wisdom is the wisdom of insight, where we actually have the direct experience of wisdom: bhāvanāmayā paññā.

When I first started hearing the word wisdom a lot in dharma talks, I had this rather grand idea about it. I thought, "I don't have any wisdom," or "What is this wisdom?" I also had this idea that there was going to be some big mind-blowing insight and then after that everything would be different. But as Bhante said so many times yesterday, it's a gradual development of wisdom. Little by little, over and over, we cultivate our hearts and minds and wisdom grows.

Wisdom is actually a factor of mind. Carol mentioned this morning in answer to one of the questions that wisdom is a factor of mind, subject to causes and conditions. It's actually found in one of the key lists of the Buddha called the Five Spiritual Faculties. These five spiritual faculties are five of the really beautiful wholesome qualities that are cultivated as we practice. The other night Winnie talked about this—that as we

practice, wholesome qualities are cultivated. This is one of the lists of wholesome qualities that are very active in the practice of meditation. Sayadaw U Tejaniya actually calls this list essentially the way the meditating mind works.

Those five factors are confidence (or faith), energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. You'll recognize them; we've talked about all of them. They are all factors of mind that are cultivated by conditions. They arise with certain conditions; they pass away when conditions are not present. Wisdom is a conditioned arising. We can cultivate conditions that will support its arising.

The wisdom of the Buddha was vast. At one point—I think somebody mentioned this in the hall—he picked up a handful of leaves from the ground and said, "Tell me, are the leaves I have in my hand greater than the leaves that are in the trees in the forest?" And they said, "Well, obviously the leaves in the forest are greater than the leaves you have in your hand." And he said, "In the same way, what I know, what I understand, is vast."

But what I teach is this handful of leaves. I teach just what you need to know to understand suffering and to end suffering.

And so the wisdom that the Buddha taught, the teachings of the Buddha, are really oriented around this question: How do we understand suffering, and how can suffering come to an end? It's no surprise, actually, that wisdom is developed through contact with dukkha. Joseph sometimes says that we want insight into dukkha without experiencing dukkha. And it doesn't work that way.

I'd like to talk about these three kinds of wisdom—briefly about the first two, and then more in depth about how we actually experience wisdom. Because you have all experienced wisdom, and it can be helpful to have it pointed out to us that wisdom is arising in our experience. It took me a while before I really understood this. It was very helpful to be able to acknowledge and recognize: yes, this is wisdom.

The first two kinds of wisdom—the wisdom of hearing, of learning—we're engaging with this one a lot. The meetings, the interviews, the questions in the hall, the dharma talks—we're offering support, teachings, information for you to take in and reflect on. And then we begin to reflect on that, apply it, look at it in our practice.

The practice of satipatthana, the practice of right mindfulness, is an exploration of wisdom. Right mindfulness, the way the Buddha offered that teaching, as we've been talking about and explored very early in the retreat—right mindfulness includes wisdom. The orientation of wise mindfulness is to understand that what's arising in the

present moment is a present moment arising. It's really very simple: a turning of the mind to recognize that what's happening in the present moment is an arising in the present moment. That orientation begins to allow the whole of the Dharma to unfold.

Munindraji is said to have told Joseph a number of times: sit and know that you're sitting, and the entire Dharma will be revealed to you. It can be that simple. Know what's happening in the present moment as a present moment arising. That's our orientation. That's what we've been practicing.

This bringing of right mindfulness, hearing the teachings, bringing right mindfulness to our experience—this is a way of cultivating chintamaya pañña. We are reflecting on the teachings and beginning to act on them, exploring for ourselves.

We can also use reflection, actual conscious reflection, to bring wisdom in if things feel challenging or difficult. I've certainly had many experiences where I'm sitting, attempting to bring wise mindfulness to my experience, and still really struggling. Sometimes it can be helpful to use this second kind of wisdom consciously, actively, by bringing in wisdom thoughts. This is a practice Sayadaw U Tejaniya teaches quite a bit—just dropping wisdom into the mind if there's a sense of struggle.

I'll offer you some of the reflections I've found helpful: "This is just anger. This is just fear. This is just confusion. This is just sadness. This is just loneliness." It's a kind of reminder, pointing back to that recognition: yes, this is something happening in the present moment. If we're caught, we can bring some of these thoughts to bear on experience and see what happens. This is a conscious use of thought, a use of skillful thought in the practice.

Reflecting on the impermanent nature of experience: "This will pass. This will pass."

As I mentioned that, the memory that came to mind—I don't think I've shared this in the hall before. At one point I had a really strong orientation toward aversion. I still have that as a tendency, although it's shifted quite a bit. But early in my practice it was very strong, and it was hard to experience pleasant emotions. As I began in the practice to experience metta and joy, it was very uncomfortable.

At one point I was sitting at my table having breakfast, and a wave of joy just rose over me. I felt like, "Whoa, this is way too intense. I can't handle this." And a wisdom thought passed through. This one I didn't consciously bring in—it just passed through: "It's okay, it will pass."

That really helped. The joy actually got very strong for a few moments, like a big wave. And then I went to the other side of it, and it became this delightful happiness. I had been trying to hold it down because it was so strong, so intense, and I was not used to it. Reflecting on its impermanence was very helpful.

Another reflection I find really, really helpful—this one Sayadaw U Tejaniya taught me, and it requires a little explanation—is simply to remind yourself: this is nature.

Whatever's happening, this is nature.

On reflection, I really liked this reflection, because what it points to is that whatever is happening in the present moment, of course it's happening. Whatever's happening in this moment is a product of all of the choices from the past leading to this moment, all of the conditions having come together leading to this moment. What's arising right now is arising very naturally. It's like a tree growing—a seed has been planted and the tree has grown. Of course this is arising.

To me, saying "this is nature" encapsulates a whole understanding about the process nature of experience, the cause and effect nature of experience, and the vast number of conditions that come together to create this moment. It's just nature unfolding right now. This one has been really helpful to me when I've gotten caught in certain kinds of mind states. Just dropping that in has created some room in which mindfulness could meet the experience more easily. Instead of fighting against it, it helped to create the conditions for wise mindfulness, rather than the attitude of mind that was resisting or fighting the experience.

The Buddha himself recommended something similar. He actually uses this kind of reflection in some of the discourses. He says that what is arising you should understand: "This is not I, this is not mine, this is not myself." It's a kind of reflecting to yourself—this is not self. This is not I, this is not me, this is not mine. That's another version of "this is nature."

It can sometimes be helpful to find reflections like this that resonate with your understanding and make them your own. For me, having reflected on "this is nature," it has a very deep resonance when I drop that into my practice. You can find language for your own expression of wisdom.

At one point in my practice, Sayadaw U Tejaniya asked me to recognize the wisdom that was arising in my experience. At that time, wisdom still seemed pretty abstract to me, and I wasn't really sure what he meant. But I began exploring: what wisdom is

arising in my experience? This was at a point when my practice was pretty settled, when there was quite a bit of continuity of mindfulness. I began exploring: what is wisdom?

It took a while for me to be able to recognize it, and then when I began to recognize it, I saw it all over the place. I saw it actually retrospectively all over the place. I saw that wisdom had been with me my whole journey, and I hadn't really recognized it.

This talk really grew out of that exploration—well, that exploration plus a question somebody asked me on retreat after I began using the word wisdom in my talks. Somebody raised their hand and said, "What are the symptoms of wisdom?" I thought that was a great way to put it. I reflected on it and gave an answer, but this talk really grew out of both the exploration that Tejaniya set me on and answering that question.

So I'd like to spend some time now pointing to ways in which wisdom is experienced, from very simple ways to some perhaps less familiar ways. These are just some examples. I cannot possibly be exhaustive here. As I have seen in my exploration of this topic, there are, I think, infinite ways wisdom can manifest. Your own experience will point things out to you in different ways, and you will begin to understand it yourself. These are just some examples of wisdom at work in experience.

Probably one of the first ways that we see wisdom at work as we begin to practice meditation is that simple shift around something challenging. We are meditating, perhaps struggling a little bit with a reaction to anger or confusion, and then suddenly there's a shift and the mind recognizes, "Oh, this is just anger." This is different from what I was describing earlier about using that as a reflection. What I'm saying here is direct understanding in the moment—a shift of perspective, a kind of space that's created.

I know you've all experienced this. There's been something happening and suddenly it's like, "Oh right, this is just happening right now." This is a situation where the experience doesn't suddenly vanish, and it doesn't feel like you've seen through it or understood it completely, but there's some ease with being able to meet it.

An analogy might be: if you're in a car going sixty miles an hour down the freeway, this kind of insight is like taking your foot off the accelerator and putting the car into neutral. The seeing doesn't stop the momentum of that pattern from continuing.

But it will stop because you're no longer fueling it. Just like the car will come to a stop because the car's in neutral.

So that's one way that we experience wisdom—that sense of "oh, this is just..." That shift is the shift of wise attitude that Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about, the attitude of mind that can be okay with whatever is arising. Okay that anger is arising. Okay that confusion is arising. It's just an arising.

This is another aspect of wisdom in the present moment: that mind that recognizes what's happening now is happening now. I started with that at the beginning of the talk—that recognition of "oh, what's happening is actually something that's happening right now."

There's a huge difference, and I think you've all seen this: there's a huge difference between thinking and being aware that thought is arising in the present moment. When we're aware that thought is arising in the present moment, what tends to happen is that the mind is not fooled by the thought. It's not fooled into thinking that the thought is something it's not. I talked about the kind of bubble of world that we get born into when we're not mindful of thought—we believe the reality that thoughts paint for us when we're not aware that thought is arising in the present moment.

And so this is a manifestation of wisdom. When we see thought and know "this is a thought happening in the present moment," wisdom is operating. It's helping us to not believe the creation of that thought as a reality, as a firm fixed reality. We understand it is something that is being created now in the present moment.

Another way that wisdom operates in the present moment, a kind of different perspective of how wisdom sees things, is when it sees things as causes and conditions, as you're seeing a pattern unfold. So you have something difficult, for example, and as I said early on, it's not an accident, it's not a mistake when we are meeting dukkha. It's how wisdom grows—through the meeting of dukkha.

And so we observe over and over again a difficult pattern. Around my example of anger—over and over again watching that pattern come and go. We see it over and over and over again.

This is where we get a little caught. Wisdom doesn't work like knowledge. Wisdom isn't something that you can necessarily just say, "Oh, I have that wisdom. I can use that now." We can do that a little bit with the use of the reflections that I mentioned. But I know you've all seen this too—that we have an insight into something, we see "oh, this is just anger," and we watch it dissipate. And then there's another time when we see "oh, this is anger," and it's not "this is just anger." We're caught in it. And we wonder, why is it I learned this lesson? I've seen "this is just anger." How come I can't do that now?

Wisdom isn't something we just pick up, like book knowledge. It has conditions that come together. Sometimes the conditions come together to help us see in this moment, "oh, this is just anger." And sometimes we get to watch the pattern unfold. We get to see the creation of the pattern. Instead of just watching it fade, we actually get to see how it gets perpetuated. Over and over again we get to see that. And so over time the mind begins to understand: this pattern is suffering.

This was a mind-blowing insight for me at one point when I was early in my practice. The practice of observing anger was my very first mindfulness practice. I wasn't particularly interested in meditating, but I was interested in understanding my mind and why I got angry. And so I practiced with exploring my anger in daily life. That was my first meditation practice, my first mindfulness practice—explore when I'm angry, be aware of that.

And over the course of months, reflecting back now, as I said, I didn't really understand this so much as wisdom until later. But at one point I recognized or realized that there was something going on in my mind. I was angry at a particular person and there was something happening in my mind—I was somehow believing that this anger was going to make them miserable. Does that sound familiar?

And in some ways, fortunately, this was very obvious to me because I happened to be in the Peace Corps on a South Pacific island, and the person I was angry with was 7,000 miles away in California. So after some weeks of observing the anger, I finally got it. Oh, this isn't making that person feel miserable at all. They have no clue that there's anger in the field. They have no idea. And what I began to see is, oh, and this anger makes me miserable. Duh! But the idea that it was hurting someone else or that it was going to make someone else miserable was obscuring the dukkha here.

That is an insight. It's wisdom to recognize this present moment arising—in this case, of anger—as dukkha. This is the first noble truth. The Buddha asked us to recognize "this is dukkha" and then to understand dukkha.

This morning in the hall, the question came up about looking at craving for becoming. And this is a similar example in a way, in that in our non-mindful mode, what we're typically focused on with craving for becoming is the idea of what we will become—the good yogi, the good meditator, the one who's seen, the one who's respected or admired. We have that craving to be that person. And that idea, the mind projecting, "Oh yes, that's what I'm going to be someday"—it's a pleasant fantasy, a pleasant thought. The mind is in that pleasant thought, and that pleasant thought is obscuring the suffering of the craving.

So this morning, the recognition in the question was, "I'm seeing the craving for becoming and it is suffering." Yes, that's an insight. It's wisdom that shows you craving is suffering. Again, it's not a mistake when clear awareness sees dukkha. Wisdom sees dukkha. Wisdom understands dukkha as being something arising here, and the deeper understanding is that it can be understood, it can be freed.

This is one of the ways that purification works. We've used that word a lot in the hall too. With clear seeing, the mind begins to understand the consequences of what it is engaged with, what it's engaged in doing. For me, with the anger, after several weeks of observing the anger come up over and over again, the mind began to understand the consequences of that, which was suffering here. Until the mind understood the consequences of that, it wasn't going to change its pattern.

Somebody asked me in one of the meetings today, "How does purification work? What's the mechanism of purification?" And I think this is connected. It's like our organism is oriented towards well-being. It wants to be happy. It wants to feel good. And in our typical way of meeting the world, the organism will go the quickest way to the quickest place of well-being, which would be having what I want and getting rid of what I don't want. Greed and aversion, basically. So without mindfulness and wisdom, the organism really fundamentally misunderstands how well-being is found, how well-being comes about.

With mindfulness and wisdom, the organism gets good information—the wisdom of "oh, craving is suffering." Yes, wisdom sees craving is suffering. That information points the mind toward understanding that this way of going about finding well-being doesn't work very well. It reveals the underlying unreliability of that approach to finding well-being. And so we experience the dukkha in mindfulness and wisdom. It's not a mistake.

This wisdom then begins to help the mind let go of that craving. When the mind really begins to understand that its own processes are contributing to non-well-being, the mind itself begins to understand how to let go. And this is what we mean when we say wisdom does the work of freeing the mind.

A few more ways of experiencing wisdom. Some of you might have seen at times, as the mindfulness gets stronger and as wisdom gets stronger, sometimes you turn to look at something challenging—there's that confusion or frustration, a sense of abandonment, a feeling of loneliness—and the mind turns towards it and it vanishes. This very quick disappearance of a defilement on being seen is another symptom of wisdom.

One of the first times this happened to me, I didn't trust it actually. I was on a three-month retreat, right in the middle of it, and there was the crossover where I knew I'd be getting new teachers. I felt abandoned by my teachers who were leaving. I bow to this. I know that some of this will be happening for you too. It's hard. I want to acknowledge that. It is hard.

So I was exploring that feeling of abandonment, and at some point I recognized, "Oh, I feel like a four-year-old little girl who's been left." There was part of me that felt that four-year-old little girl, and there was this sense of compassion holding the whole thing. I was exploring it in this way, and then at some point interest got strong. "Well, what is this feeling of abandonment anyway?" I turned to look at it, and it vanished.

The story I told myself in that moment—this is how far I was from really recognizing wisdom—was, "Oh, I must not know how to observe emotions. I don't know how to do this right, so I'm going to ask my teacher how to observe emotions." I went in and reported this to Carol, and she asked, "Was it your experience that there was any lingering sense?" I said, "No, it was gone!" She said, "Trust your experience." I said, "I thought I'd made a mistake." She said, "Trust your experience."

So sometimes wisdom can be strong like that. Interest gets high, the mind orients and observes something, and it vanishes. You can just notice that it vanishes. You don't have to go back and figure out what happened, like I tried to do. Just notice: that happened, that vanished.

Going back to the car analogy, in this case what happens isn't that the car goes into neutral or even that the car stops—the car disappears. It's kind of a funny feeling.

Another way wisdom can manifest is in seeing or recognizing that defilements are not arising. Bhante mentioned this reference in the Satipatthana last night—looking at the fetters. We see the fetters, we understand the fetters, we see as they arise, we see the conditions for them passing away, and we see the conditions for the future non-arising of that fetter.

This idea of the non-arising of something—somebody asked me, "How on earth do you see the non-arising of something?" In exploring this, much of the time seeing the non-arising of something is more of an understanding.

I've thought of four different ways you might recognize that defilements are not arising. The first is through the tool of wise effort. We begin to get familiar with what conditions create defilements, and we learn to avoid those situations. We recognize how not to engage in the conditions that create the arising of that suffering. We learn to avoid unhelpful conditions.

The second way is through reflection, looking back. "Wow, you know, if this situation had arisen five years ago, there would have been a lot more reactivity." So it's not that you're actually seeing the non-arising of the defilement, but you're knowing how in the past more defilement would have arisen. Is this familiar? Do you recognize that one? You know that after some time of practice we begin to see that we're not as reactive anymore.

So this is a way of recognizing the non-arising of a defilement.

The most direct way, or most experiential way, of seeing the non-arising of a defilement is as the mindfulness starts to get more continuous. We see in the mind stream, we begin to recognize—like for instance this exploration of anger that I did early in my practice. I watched anger for months. The mind got really, really familiar with anger. And at some point it got so attuned to the experience of anger that it actually began to recognize the just beginning of congealing of the state of anger. What in retrospect I can see was the intention to anger.

So this happened. I had been observing this pattern of anger for several months and I was just in my kitchen, doing something, cutting an apple. In that moment I wasn't really trying to be mindful, but there was a fair amount of mindfulness present. This was maybe two or three months into my practice, just practicing. I wasn't even doing sitting meditation at this point. This is the power of mindfulness and the power of practice even in daily life.

I was just cutting this apple in my kitchen, and because I had been exploring this quality of anger, I apparently had been fairly attuned to the conditions that led to anger. And I saw in my mind, as I cut that apple, a thought about the person I was angry with. And I felt in my experience what seemed like a freight train of, "Oh yeah, let's jump on this thought and think more thoughts to get angry at that person." This is all seen within a split second. I saw that momentum towards anger.

And in the next split second, the mind recognized—here I had been paying attention to anger for months. I had fully recognized, "Oh, anger is dukkha." And the mind, this is again the power of how purification works, the mind in seeing that freight train of intention to get angry, in that moment recognized: anger, that's dukkha. And the wisdom in that moment deconstructed, let go of that intention. And the anger did not arise.

That was the most direct seeing of the non-arising of something. Seeing how the mind was kind of poised to leap to anger, and the wisdom was right there, and the anger did not arise. So that's another way that we see the non-arising of defilement—through seeing the intention or the momentum of something. And basically the wisdom understanding, "Ooh, that way lies suffering."

The feeling was very much like, you know how if you put your hand on something hot, the hand will draw back even almost before you felt the heat? The body recognizes, "Oh, that's dangerous." It was that kind of seeing. The mind drew back from it. That way lies suffering. So this is another part of the mechanism of purification.

Another way that we know that wisdom is present is when we experience the balance of mind that is non-reactive. This is the experience of wise attitude. We see, we feel the stability. We feel that sense—and several of you in the interviews have talked about feeling rooted, like not buffeted around by things. That sense of equanimity is an indication the defilements are not present. So this is also the non-arising of the defilements.

Other conditions, other states of mind may be arising at this time too. Compassion, joy, metta, interest, curiosity. These also can be manifestations of wisdom.

As the mindfulness gets stronger and we really start to see the dynamic flow of experience, we land in the impermanent, changing, dynamic nature of experience. Wisdom. Wisdom creates the conditions for us to see that in the first place. And at times wisdom will be quite strong and clearly recognize—in that moment it's like there isn't anything to hold on to. Nothing to cling to. It's not even possible to cling in that moment. The mind is so attuned to the changing nature of experience.

Sometimes wisdom can operate kind of in the background, not obvious to us. It can be at work while we're not looking. And this is actually good news too. Wisdom can be a factor that develops its own momentum.

Wisdom develops its own momentum and begins to just do its thing.

One instance I had of this—still around the story of anger—this was some years after this exploration began. The investigation of anger was a several-years-long process. At one point I began recognizing that certain times when I tried to turn my attention to be mindful of the anger, to really get familiar with it, to investigate it, to look at it... When I was first starting to explore this stuff, I was really naive. I didn't know any of the tools of investigation. I was just like, "Oh yeah, anger, that's anger, okay. Oh, anger again, okay." I had no tools. Nobody had ever told me or taught me, because I was off in the

Peace Corps. I had read books but hadn't had a meditation teacher to teach me. So I didn't have anybody telling me about how to investigate it in my body and feel where it was. I didn't know any of that.

After I learned all of that stuff, I started digging when the anger came up. "Oh, anger—ooh, let's put that under the microscope. Let's figure that out. Let's look at that." And what started to happen is that every time I'd do that, I'd go down the rabbit hole of anger. So at some point, I kind of got the idea: okay, trying to be mindful—at least in that way—trying to be mindful of the anger wasn't so helpful. So I set it aside. I would notice, I would see the anger. When it came up, I'd bow to it. "I see you, anger. And I'm going to put my attention on my feet right now. You can be here. I'm not going to tell you you're not going to be here, but you wait over there, and I'll be with my feet."

So I did that for a long time, actually. I don't even know how long—maybe several months, or maybe as long as a year—I explored the anger in that way. And over time, I began recognizing that the bouts of anger were getting further apart. In some sense I was seeing the non-arising of the anger, but mostly what I recognized was: wow, it's not bothering me as much anymore.

And then one day—I remember so clearly where I was—this was the wisdom being presented to me. I was walking up my sidewalk and it occurred to me: wow, I haven't experienced that anger in a very long time. And in that thought, of course, the person I was angry with came into my mind, and I couldn't conjure it up. It was gone. I didn't believe it was gone at first. It's kind of like, "Where did it go?" And yet, that moment, the recognition was: it was gone. And it has not come back since then. It vanished while I wasn't looking.

The wisdom showed me—that was a really great learning there—that moment of recognizing: okay, actually, my orientation of this isn't always the way. Sometimes things will let go kind of on their own in the background. That's another form of wisdom.

So learning to recognize these little bits of wisdom, these moments of wisdom, helps us to cultivate the wisdom. As we have been saying, when we are aware of wholesomeness, it creates the conditions for the wholesomeness. And so actually, when I first began exploring this with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, what I did—I mean, I didn't have the way to articulate the different ways I was seeing things like I do now—but what I started to do is when the mind was particularly clear, and there was a sense that there was a clarity of mind seeing things, I just said to myself, "Wisdom is here." And that's where I left it. I didn't go digging or try to figure out what the wisdom was. I just said, "Wisdom is here," and went on with my practice. Just a simple acknowledgment of the sense that wisdom was operating in that moment.

Since wisdom is a conditioned phenomenon, and insight—the manifestation of wisdom—paññā, insights are impermanent. Wisdom is impermanent. The conditions arise for clear seeing, and sometimes it happens that it is so obvious when we're in that state.

Is this familiar to you? It's like, how can I not see this? It is so clear. And in that place, when wisdom is very strong like that, the mind cannot comprehend the possibility in that moment of not seeing it that clearly.

And yet, maybe seconds, maybe hours later, something shifts. And it's like, wow, I guess it wasn't that obvious. You know, just seeing the changing nature of experience and how there isn't anything to cling to. A thought wafts through and it's like, oh yeah, that's a thought, oh there it goes. It seems so clear and so obvious. And yet, that's a very refined state of mind where wisdom is very strong. And it is, again, conditioned. It will fall apart. It's not a mistake that it falls apart. It's not a personal failing that it has fallen apart. Conditions have shifted.

And yet, having seen something clearly like that, there's a way in which the memory of that lingers. Maybe at some point you've had the clear recognition: yes, things are just arising in the present moment. And then another time when it's like, well, I can't see it that way anymore. Rather than second-guessing the insight, which sometimes we do—and I've done my share of that: Was that real? Did I really see that?—rather than second-guessing the insight, what we can recognize in that moment is that clearly delusion is operating right now.

When we're not seeing something clearly like that, having seen it clearly before, we can recognize that delusion has descended and simply be aware: ah, this is delusion. Delusion is operating right now. Having seen it without delusion, you begin to recognize delusion actively in the present moment. And this is very powerful, because we're no longer fooled by our delusion. We may not be able to see through it, but we're also not fooled by it.

So our insights, our wisdom, supports our confidence, our interest in exploring, supports our mindfulness, supports our continuity of mindfulness, which leads to further insights. Those five faculties that I mentioned at the beginning really spiral and support each other. A little bit of wisdom generates confidence, generates a sense of, yes, this is possible, I'm willing to try this. Generates the energy, generates the mindfulness and the concentration, creates the conditions for more clear seeing.

So it's a process, of course. And just a reminder: simplicity, simplicity, simplicity. We can see what we can see. It's often helpful not to dig, but rather to just notice, ah, this is what's obvious. Meet that. And meet the next moment that's obvious. Wisdom will grow. We don't have to make it grow. It grows because the conditions are there to support it.

So let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 103

Wisdom and Effort

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a nuanced exploration of how effort functions in Buddhist meditation, challenging the common assumption that forceful, goal-oriented striving serves our practice well. She begins by establishing the wisdom framework the Buddha offered: that dukkha arises not from the eight worldly winds (praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute) but from our relationship to them—our tendency to grasp at impermanent, unreliable experience.*
>
> *Fella presents the four aspects of sammā vāyāma (right effort): avoiding the arising of unwholesome states, abandoning unwholesome states that have arisen, cultivating wholesome states not yet arisen, and maintaining wholesome states that are present. She explains how these four efforts are naturally contained within mindfulness practice itself—when we turn toward difficult states with awareness rather than reactivity, we simultaneously stop fueling them, allow them to wind down, and cultivate wholesome qualities like mindfulness, concentration, and compassion.*
>
> *Drawing on the Buddha's teaching to the monk Soṇa about tuning a lute—neither too tight nor too loose—Fella describes the art of calibrating effort. She encourages a light touch applied frequently rather than bearing down intensely, comparing it to riding a scooter that gains its own momentum. The talk concludes with the teaching that while we create conditions for awakening through wise effort, the fruit ripens in its own time: "When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree."*

For those of you for whom this is the first retreat, I'd like to offer my joy with you that you have made it through a whole day of your first retreat. It's an accomplishment.

Tonight I'd like to talk about one of the things Pat talked about this morning—how our practice is kind of like an art. He talked about how we create our own canvas of our practice. All minds are different in so many ways, and certain practices work for some of us while other practices are more helpful for others.

In my own exploration of this art of meditation, there's one aspect of the practice that I feel is really helpful to highlight, and that is how we use our effort. So the exploration tonight will be about wisdom and effort.

The usual way that we approach making effort for whatever we want to do in our lives may not actually be the best approach for our meditation practice. We often have a kind of go-out-and-get-it attitude, bringing a lot of energy to what we're trying to accomplish, a lot of focus and drive to what we're doing. That approach may not actually be the best way to go about our exploration of our minds.

In a way, our minds are a delicate creature. It takes a very delicate kind of investigation to really begin to see into how our minds work. The sledgehammer approach doesn't get to the subtlety of what's going on.

So the Buddha encouraged us to apply ourselves with wisdom and with balance. I'd like to start by talking about the wisdom that he suggested we bring, because this wisdom frames the entire approach to our practice.

The Buddha offered a kind of worldview, a way of approaching our experience and our lives, that shifts our perspective and reorients us in terms of how we live in the world. Our usual worldview is given to us by our families, our parents, our culture, the television programs we watch, the radio we listen to. All of that influences how we see our world, and from that perspective we orient our activities in a certain way—in particular, around what we think it takes to be happy.

Our approach to being happy is basically one of acquiring material things or good opinions of people. We think that happiness will come from that acquisition. One of the teachings of the Buddha is that there are these eight worldly winds that blow through our lives: praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. The Buddha's perspective is that these are just like winds blowing through the sky. There's going to be winds coming from the north or the south, some days from the east or the west, and that's just what's happening.

But the way we normally approach our lives and happiness is to believe that it's possible to only have pleasure, praise, gain, and fame—that this is what happiness would be, to have only that in our lives. We somehow get the idea that it's possible, and that if it's not happening for us, we're the problem. If we haven't managed to construct our lives to be nothing but pleasure, fame, praise, and gain, something is wrong with us.

The Buddha's approach is this: if that's where you're looking for happiness, you are destined to be unhappy, because it's not possible to control those worldly winds. We don't have that kind of control.

So the wisdom that the Buddha offered largely has to do with this topic or concept of dukkha, often translated as suffering. I like leaving it untranslated because the term dukkha itself is much broader. It means everything from really catastrophic suffering down to the subtlest unease that comes with just being alive.

The Buddha, in his own journey, went out in his own exploration to see what this dukkha is about and whether it's possible to be free of it. In his exploration of his own mind, what he discovered is essentially that our struggle with the world is not caused by those eight worldly winds but by our relationship to them. We struggle because we are pinning our happiness on things that are impermanent and unreliable. That's what we're doing. It's the poignancy of being human.

One of the stories told about the Buddha's awakening is that after he awakened, he looked around at how people were engaged in the world. He saw them trying to be happy, looking for ways to find happiness, doing the best they could—and doing exactly those things that would ultimately lead to their unhappiness. Trying to hold on to things that are impermanent and unreliable. Living in a delusion that it's possible to control these worldly winds. Feeling like it's a problem when we don't have that control.

This is one of the offerings of wisdom that the Buddha has for us: that it is this holding to impermanent, unreliable experience that is right at the core of our struggle. And in that, he also saw that there are some key things that happen in our minds that keep us tied up with this—we could call it a program.

We are born with this notion—it seems to be very deeply ingrained in us. It's not necessarily just given by culture. The Buddha described this program of how we try to find happiness by controlling the world, by holding on to things that are impermanent and unreliable. He described this 2600 years ago. This is not a new program running in our minds. It's a very deeply embedded program.

But fortunately, it's not hardwired. This is one of the things he discovered: it's possible actually to shift how our minds work. And one of the key things he suggested we do is to look at certain states of mind. He said that if we take actions out of certain states of mind, we will tend to wind ourselves into the patterns and habits of suffering over and over again. He identified those as states that were based or rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed—wanting to hold on to things. Aversion—wanting to get rid of things. And delusion—confusion and misperception around our experience.

So this is another key piece of wisdom that the Buddha offers us: if we act, if we take action out of states of mind based in greed, aversion, or delusion, we will tend to perpetuate our struggles.

These states based in greed, aversion, and delusion, the Buddha calls *akusala*—unskillful states, unwholesome states of mind. I like the word "unskillful" because it points to a more practical ethics in what the Buddha was talking about. He really wasn't that judgmental about these states of mind. He simply said: if you want to be happy, these states are not going to lead to your well-being and happiness. So it's helpful to find ways to let go of those states, to cultivate states that are based in non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion.

These unskillful, unwholesome states encompass the whole host of afflictive emotions—and then some that we may not necessarily think of as afflictive, but when we actually begin to look at them, we see their agitating nature. States like anger, hatred, irritation, frustration, confusion, excitement, pride, lust—lust for power, lust for money, for fame—despair. All of these states are rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion.

Skillful states of mind, wholesome states of mind, are those that tend, when we act out of them, to lead us more towards happiness. These are states like joy, happiness, tranquility, peace, equanimity, mindfulness, generosity, love, compassion. When we act out of states like that, when those are in our hearts as we act, our actions tend to lead us more towards happiness.

So this is the wisdom that the Buddha offers us. If we want to free ourselves from the way we get caught, the way we struggle in our lives—and this is the full range of struggle, everything from the despair we feel when we lose a partner to the irritation we have at a co-worker who didn't finish their job.

I want to pause here, because sometimes saying something like that—saying that the despair we feel at the loss of a partner is *dukkha*—can feel challenging. And it is dukkha. It is. We feel it as dukkha, as suffering. And yet sometimes we feel, "Well, if I didn't feel that despair, I wouldn't be human." So we may resist looking at what we're holding on to there. We may resist seeing our participation in that despair.

But there's a way—and I think in my own experience and exploration of this—that loss, the experience of loss, will produce a form of sadness, a form of acknowledgment of that loss that is not flat. It's not like nothing. It's not like you're this robot, this automaton that just registers "oh, loss" with no reaction to it. There is a response in the

heart and mind. But the heart doesn't contract around it. It's as if the heart is acknowledging that this is the way it is, without resistance. Feeling the loss fully, but without resistance, without clamping down around it, without getting stuck.

When I've experienced this kind of sadness, it feels very pure. It doesn't stick anywhere. It's like it's just washing through.

It doesn't have any kind of stickiness to it.

So this perspective of wisdom—that it's possible to begin looking into our minds and seeing how our mind is participating, whether these unwholesome states are acting in our minds—this is the way the Buddha suggests we apply our energy and make effort in our practice.

Energy itself is a kind of neutral quality of mind. The same energy could be connected with actions tied to hatred and despair. There's energy in the mind and body bound up with those kinds of states. And energy can also be directed towards freeing ourselves from the ways we get stuck. Energy itself is neutral, and the art and skill of our meditation practice is to orient that energy towards the wisdom the Buddha offers us—cultivating skillful qualities, letting go of unskillful qualities. This is essentially the Buddha's definition of what making skillful effort is.

I'm going to take a few minutes to talk about this teaching on wise effort. The Buddha said there are four ways of making skillful effort in this practice. And no big surprise, it's oriented around these qualities—whether we have skillful qualities or unskillful qualities in our mind. He said that we should work towards avoiding and letting go of unskillful states, and we should work towards cultivating and maintaining skillful states.

The first one, the actual wording of it as I'll read it to you, is: the effort towards the non-arising of unwholesome states that have not yet arisen. That's the way it's framed in the texts. The effort towards the non-arising of unwholesome states that have not yet arisen. Three negatives in that sentence. That one I had to think about when I first started reading this. Essentially, to change the wording a little bit, it's the effort to avoid those states that lead us to suffering.

Part of how this works is that we explore in our minds when we do find ourselves in states of suffering—what is it that's getting us there? We explore, we notice what goes on in our minds, and begin to recognize: these are the conditions that lead to this. The avoiding is to, in seeing those conditions, begin to not engage with them.

A simple example: you might think this teaching about avoiding unskillful states means something like noticing that every time you see a particular person, your mind gets really agitated. You begin to notice the connection—and this may be pretty obvious to you—between being in the same room as this person and the agitation. One way to explore this teaching would be to say, "Okay, that person is the cause of the agitation, so I should avoid being in their presence." And that would certainly help the situation.

Yet the avoidance the Buddha is suggesting we look at has a subtler exploration than that. A subtler way to explore it. Because again, remember that the Buddha said there's something in our own minds. Stuff is happening in the world—praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. And it's not that stuff that's the problem. It's our relationship to it.

So in this situation of having agitation arise whenever this person is in the room with you, the encouragement might be to look more closely, because that person doesn't have the power to agitate your mind. And that's actually really good news. That person does not have the power to agitate your mind. The worldly winds do not have the power to cause suffering. Your own mind is what has that power.

A deeper exploration might be to recognize that when that person is in the room with you, fear arises, or confusion arises. Maybe that fear or confusion is because the person has a body shape that looks like somebody who was very unkind to you when you were younger. You might begin to see those connections in the exploration of this. This deeper exploration of looking at the causes of agitation, the associations in the mind, how the actual agitation is constructed in that situation—as we meet those more direct internal causes, our mind begins, through wisdom, through seeing how that suffering is put together, to understand how to let go of it.

It's not necessarily something we can figure out how to do, how to let go of that suffering. But the mind, as it sees the workings of that suffering, begins to understand how to release and let it go. And so this would be a different way of avoiding that unwholesome state. We see into the deeper causes of that agitation.

This is more of what we explore in our meditation practice. As things arise, we turn towards them. And this is pointing to the second wise effort: the effort to let go of unwholesome states that have arisen. So we avoid unwholesome states, and we let go of unwholesome states.

Now, the letting go of unwholesome states that have arisen has some subtlety to it. We can at times, in seeing difficult states of mind—and actually Wes is going to talk quite a bit about working with challenging states of mind tomorrow, so this is just a

preview—when we see that we're caught in some kind of unwholesome or difficult state of mind, such as anger, frustration, irritation, or wanting, when we see that we're caught by it, we may be able to actively let it go.

That's what it sounds like this exploration of wise effort is saying: we let go of unwholesome states that have arisen. So it sounds like I should be able to simply say, "Oh, there's anger. I'll let that go." How many of you have been able to do that? Our minds are just not that trainable immediately. Sometimes we can. Sometimes we can notice it, bring some reflection in, recognize that this isn't helping. We can see the drawbacks of the state, or we can actively bring in some reflections that help us to let it go. Or we may be able to actively redirect our attention.

There was one period of time in the first few years of my practice where anger was very strong—anger at a particular person. There was a very strong pattern. Whenever the thought of this person came up in my mind, anger would flare up. The causes and conditions there were pretty clear to see. But I also saw that as I tried to just allow the anger, be with the anger, trying to do that practice, the anger had way more momentum than the mindfulness did. I would just get sucked into the anger.

So I began doing a kind of setting aside. When the anger arose, I just bowed to it. I said, "I see you, but I can't be mindful of you right now. I'll be mindful of you when my mindfulness gets stronger. But right now, I'm going to pay attention to my feet." Just redirecting the attention—not with an aversive pushing away, but simply saying, "Yep, I see you. I'm going to put my attention over here." This is one way of letting go of an unwholesome state. What I saw happen as I did that is that by turning my attention elsewhere, it was like taking the gears out of the anger. It wound its way down, and I went on with my day. This is another approach for that abandoning of unwholesome states.

I think one of the main ways we work with this abandoning of difficult states when they arise is simply the mindfulness of them. When we can be mindful of them, when our mindfulness has the ability to meet them without getting sucked in, we just turn towards them, allow them, open to them. And this too is like taking the gears out of the pattern.

If instead of being engaged in the pattern—in this case, anger—if instead of being engaged in that program, which when we are in that pattern without clear awareness and clear mindfulness, we tend to be thinking thoughts about it. We think, "Well, that person shouldn't have done that. I've got to figure this out. I'm going to make sure this happens and that happens so that they're just as miserable as I am right now." Our minds just spin, and it perpetuates the anger.

When we, instead of allowing that pattern to run, turn towards the anger and feel into being with it—or with any of these difficult states—just turning towards them, it's also like taking the gears out, putting the mind into neutral. If a car is going a hundred miles an hour down a road and you put the car into neutral, the car doesn't stop immediately, but it will stop because you're no longer giving it fuel.

Very similarly in the mind, when you allow and open to these states of mind without any longer feeding or fueling them, those patterns may continue for a while. You may have to hang out in the space of feeling what it's like to be a human being that feels that difficult emotion. This is what it's like to be a human being that's angry. You may have to hang out in that space for a while, but if you can allow it as opposed to engaging with it, it will wind out. This is a huge part of our practice. This is much of how this abandoning of unwholesome states works.

Wholesome states of mind that have not yet arisen.

There are two basic ways to do this, and Pat touched on at least one of them yesterday when he talked about the precepts. One of the ways to encourage wholesome states is essentially to refrain from acting unwholesomely. This is part of the benefit of our engagement with the precepts. As we engage in refraining from false speech, we are simultaneously—whether or not it's obvious—cultivating the wholesome quality of truthfulness. When we refrain from causing harm to living beings, whether or not we're consciously aware of it, we are cultivating compassion.

This is one way to work with the cultivation of wholesome states: to engage with the precepts, to engage with refraining from harming. And as Pat said last night, it has this beautiful side to it. It's not just about "thou shalt not." It's really about cultivating some of these beautiful states of mind. We cultivate compassion through refraining from harming. We cultivate contentment through refraining from stealing. We cultivate truthfulness through refraining from lying.

We can also cultivate positive qualities through positive action. One of the practices we'll be exploring in this retreat is the practice of metta—actively cultivating the open heart, this feeling of a connected mind, a relational, non-sticky relationship, a kind of unconditional well-wishing. It's a very beautiful state of mind that we'll be actively cultivating by inclining our minds in that direction.

Another key way to work with this effort is to cultivate mindfulness—mindfulness with this perspective of wise effort. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita in Burma, said this kind of mindfulness is the most wholesome mind state. Actively cultivating mindfulness is cultivating a mind state that will serve you in your movement towards happiness.

Again, this is one of those things that's kind of hidden from us. We don't necessarily recognize or realize that as we're turning to pay attention to whatever difficulty we're paying attention to, we tend to be oriented toward the suffering. It's like, "Oh, there's depression happening. Okay, depression. This is what it feels like to be depressed. Unpleasant experience, heaviness, tightness." We're working with being with it. And yet we're not noticing that as this happens, we are cultivating wise mindfulness, wise effort, and wise concentration. They're kind of coming along for the ride, these beautiful states of mind, as we engage in our mindfulness practice, whatever we're looking at, whatever we are with.

So this is another major way we work with this aspect of wise effort—arousing wholesome mind states. The moment that mindfulness re-arises, that moment Pat was talking about this morning when mindfulness spontaneously re-arises, that's the opportunity to reconnect with that wholesome quality right there.

And then the fourth: the effort to sustain wholesome states that have arisen.

When I first heard this one, I thought, "Well, why would we have to make effort to sustain these beautiful states of mind?" Then I began looking at my own mind and saw a couple of things. I saw that my own mind actually felt really uncomfortable with joy and happiness. I was way more comfortable with aversion. So when joy arose, one of the patterns that happened is I kind of talked myself out of it by spinning myself into the future, thinking about how this was going to keep going, what I was going to do to make sure it continued, how this person has to know, what that person needs to understand.

There were times when I would wake up into a state of agitation. I remember one time in particular, I woke up into this state of agitation while I was driving my car. I thought, "Okay, come back. Steering wheel, hands on, be present, come back." Then the mind would spin right out again. It happened several times, and I'd just come back to my hands on the steering wheel. Eventually I wondered, "What else is going on here?"

When I opened up my attention to ask that question, what I discovered was that I was really happy. I had completely missed it because the mind had picked up on "How do I keep this going?"

So actually noticing, recognizing when happiness arises, when calm arises, when joy arises, when generosity arises—mindfulness of these states is really one of the biggest ways to sustain them.

In our practice, many beautiful qualities begin to come along. We cultivate attention to the breath and calm begins to settle.

Rather than having a sense of indulgence in that, clear knowing: yep, calm. There's calm and the breath. There's spaciousness and the breath. There's joy and the breath. Clearly recognizing these states rather than either missing them entirely, which was my pattern, or reveling in them.

Sometimes in exploring this teaching of right effort, people ask how it fits with being mindful, opening to what's happening, meeting our experience without trying to change it. They say, "Well, how does that fit with wise effort? In wise effort, we're trying to cultivate the wholesome. We're trying to let go of the unwholesome."

What I'd like to point out here is that when we practice mindfulness in this way of opening to and allowing experience, it already contains the four right efforts.

For example, if we are cultivating mindfulness of frustration—turning towards it, opening to it, allowing it—we are no longer feeding the anger or the frustration. We're no longer thinking it with our thoughts. We're no longer fueling that frustration with our thinking. And so we are essentially, in that activity of bringing mindfulness to our frustration, avoiding the arising of more frustration. There may be some frustration arising now, but it is not getting worse. It's not perpetuating. So we are avoiding the arising of future frustration, which is the first kind of wise effort.

We are working with the abandoning of the frustration that has arisen—the difficulty, the state that has arisen—by the very mindfulness of it, that disengagement of the gears that will eventually wind out, like the car coming to a stop as we put it into neutral. And we are simultaneously cultivating mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, and compassion.

One of the great things that develops as we watch our own minds is a kind of recognition: in seeing what our minds do, we clearly see that it's not just our own minds. This is the mind multiplied by—what is it now?—seven billion. Seven billion people in the world. It's just amazing. We see very clearly that it's not just our own mind. And with that, compassion is born. The poignancy of seven billion minds doing this same thing.

So right effort in our mindfulness practice is essentially four sides of a single process, four ways of being with experience.

The other aspect or avenue to reflect on regarding effort and energy is in how we bring our effort to our practice. I want to talk about one basic thing here. If we have a kind of curiosity or interest in our experience, if we bring to our experience an attitude of interest, of curiosity, of exploration—instead of, "Oh, frustration's arising"—it's like, "Okay, frustration." It actually doesn't matter what's arising in our minds. It really doesn't matter. We can cultivate these qualities of mindfulness, of equanimity, of compassion, of mettā with whatever is happening. So it doesn't really matter what's happening. What matters is how we are with it. What's our relationship to that?

If we can have this relationship of curiosity—"Oh, frustration. What's it like to be a human being that's frustrated?"—if we can have that approach, a very natural kind of energy follows. It doesn't feel like we have to drag up the reserves of energy and go, "Okay, let's turn it up. Let's bring that mindfulness to that frustration." That interest, that curiosity, that investigation naturally brings a very skillful kind of effort and energy to our minds.

You may be able to reframe or just drop in the attitude of curiosity into your experiences. It's like you're all out there running your own science lab on your own minds. What does this experiment do? Here's the experiment of depression—let's see what that's producing. Here's the experiment of anger—let's see what that's producing. Not taking it personally.

Again, recognizing these patterns—they're human patterns. So curiosity, interest, investigation.

The other piece is that sometimes we do need to bring in that active approach. Yes, we need to actually direct the attention, make some effort to connect. This is really where the art of effort comes in.

The Buddha actually used an analogy of art, of music essentially, in exploring this tuning of our effort. He said to one person who had been—the story goes that this person had "enlightenment or bust" on his forehead. He was going for it. He was doing walking meditation all night long until his feet bled. And the Buddha said, "You know, when you were a lay person, did you play a musical instrument? Did you play the lute?" And he said, "Yes, I did." And the Buddha said, "Well, when the string was too tight, did the lute make beautiful music?" And he said, "No." "And when the string was too loose, did it make beautiful music?" And he said, "No." "Likewise, in our practice, the amount of effort has to be tuned like that—neither too tight nor too loose."

The implication here was that Sona, the name of this monk, had his string tuned so tight that it had completely snapped. He was way overdoing it.

So it's helpful to recognize essentially some of the symptoms of overdoing it or underdoing it. Overdoing it, too much effort, often will manifest as a restless energy in the mind. Underdoing it will often manifest as a kind of dullness or sleepiness in the mind. We can balance the energy—this tuning—by the way we make our effort.

Sometimes our effort is too intense. This is like when Sona was doing the walking meditation until his feet bled. When our effort is too intense, we get exhausted. We get burned out on the practice and it feels burdensome. So those are also some possible signs to notice. If it feels burdensome to be practicing, sometimes our inclination is to think, "Oh, the practice feels burdensome, but I need to practice," and we double down. What actually may be called for there is to back off. If it feels burdensome, see what happens if you back off.

Sometimes what I explore when I'm feeling like there's that kind of charged energy—I ask myself, how little effort do I need to make to be mindful? Let me check out whether maybe I don't have to make this much effort. Let me just sit back and see. Oh, yeah, wow. No, don't have to make that much effort. Okay. And it's kind of like dialing back the level of effort. And at some point, it's a little too dialed back and the mind goes off. Okay, well, maybe that's too far. Let's add a little bit more intentionality.

When the effort is too lax, our mind won't stay present. The mind won't be connected to experience. There may be a sense of laziness or dullness in the mind. That may be when we need to add a little bit of connect, meet, sustain the attention on experience.

And yet, that way of connecting, sustaining, meeting experience—it's not like picking up something heavy. It's more like picking up something light and then doing it again and doing it again. In a moment, it actually doesn't take very much effort to be mindful. Right now, how much effort does it take to notice the sensations of your hands? How much effort does it take to notice the contact of your hips or buttocks on the chair or cushion or bench? How much effort does it take to notice the contact of your lips touching each other? It doesn't take much in a moment to be mindful.

What's hard for us is to sustain that. And typically what we think we need to do is to bear down and hold the attention there. It's like, "Okay, attention to breath. I'm going to bear down on it."

The approach that's more helpful to us is rather than bearing down in that way, trying to hold on, is to be with the breath for a second, for half a breath. Joseph Goldstein sometimes calls this the secret teaching of our breath practice. All the effort you need to make is to be present for half a breath. That's it. Half a breath. And then do it again. And then do it again. And then do it again. And again.

It doesn't take a lot of effort in a moment. It takes the light touch moment after moment after moment. And so exploring that light touch of effort and connecting moment after moment—effort in this practice is about the frequency of that connection. Every half breath, for example. Every one to two steps in the walking. Just reminding yourself.

I would do this in the walking. If I found my mind really wandering around, I would say, okay, I see a little spot on the carpet there. Let's see if I can make it to that. And it was like a step and a half. I could make it that far and be mindful. And then I'd pick another spot. Oh, I can make it that far. And in this way, just that light amount of effort, just like hand over hand, just a little bit of effort moment after moment.

So the effort that we make is a light touch many times. And then what begins to happen is that effort gains a momentum. It's like being on a scooter. Initially, if you're on a scooter, you have to tap the ground a lot to get it going. But once the momentum builds, you don't have to keep tapping it as much. You get familiar with the feeling of the momentum of that scooter going forward, and you learn when you need to put your foot down again.

It's similar with our meditation. We have to start by making that light touch like every half breath, every half breath, every half breath. And then we begin to see that there's more of a momentum, and maybe we see, wow, we can hang out for three or four breaths and we don't actually have to do much. But if we don't make that connection, that conscious connection every three or four breaths, we may find our mind wandering off.

And so this is really the art of meditation—getting familiar with essentially our mindfulness and energy getting wobbly, like the scooter gets wobbly. Get familiar with that state of being present, and we begin to recognize how much do I actually need to make that light touch of effort? How much do I need to tap? How much do I need to connect? Connect and sustain, connect and sustain.

The sustaining is kind of like riding that scooter. We get familiar with how long can I ride this wave of awareness? We get familiar with that feeling of awareness and learn to tune our effort to how that awareness is. If that awareness is actually naturally sustained and we're every half breath noticing, every half breath, every half breath, we're actually getting in the way of our mind's ability to get into that subtlety that I was talking about. The less active effort we employ, the more fine our understanding of our minds can be.

And so this skillful effort produces a skillful energy, and it begins to feel effortless over time. You may run into this in little bits. And it's not like you hit the effortless part of the retreat and it's like that for the rest of the retreat. It doesn't work that way, unfortunately. You may find that during one sitting, you find, wow, I can be with fifteen breaths without hardly doing anything at all. And that's a taste of that less effortful practice. And then something will happen—a neighbor sneezes and the mind goes reactive over that.

And then, oh, okay, every half breath now. Let me notice the agitation of how I was with that sneeze. And okay, that agitation's unpacked. Half a breath, half a breath, half a breath. And then, oh, every three or four breaths is enough now. So it's really tuning our level of effort to how the mind is in this moment.

We make the effort, we turn our attention towards our experience, and then we let go. Our other habitual way of being in the world is to make effort to get something, to get a particular result. On our schedule, usually—we want a particular result. And in this practice, we really have to let go of that.

Our exploration is cultivating the mindfulness and the wise effort. We cultivate those turning towards our minds, our hearts, meeting whatever's arising there. The wisdom, the insight, the freedom, the release—that happens on its own time. We can't make it happen. And so we make the effort and then we let go. We're not in control of the time frame of our practice.

Kamala Masters, one of my colleagues—I was in a retreat that she taught, this was probably ten or fifteen years ago. And she told a story of a time in her practice when things were fine, things were kind of going along. And yet there was an impatience. It just seemed like ordinary. Isn't something supposed to happen? And she went to her teacher and described what was going on and described all of the experiences that she was having. And his response was: "When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree."

And that, to me, was such a helpful teaching. Over and over again, I found myself with that attitude of making the effort in order for a result, and then reminding myself: I can't create that result. When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree.

Our effort in helping fruit ripen is to make sure that a tree has the nourishment it needs, to make sure that the tree has the water that it needs, the conditions that will allow it to have the fruit ripen. But we can't make that fruit ripen. And likewise in our practice, we create the conditions in which our minds can release. This wise effort and wise mindfulness are the conditions, the soil, the nourishment for the release. But that happens in its own time.

When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree.

CHAPTER 104

The Experience of Feeling (Vedanā)

Andrea Fella · 58 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella illuminates vedanā (feeling tone), one of the most crucial yet overlooked aspects of Buddhist practice. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda), she explains how every moment of experience carries a quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—and how our unconscious reactions to these feeling tones drive the cycle of craving and suffering.

Fella unpacks the mechanism by which feeling serves as a 'springboard' into reactivity: when something pleasant arises, we grasp; when unpleasant, we push away. She reveals the delusion embedded in both patterns—the belief that acquiring pleasant experiences or eliminating unpleasant ones will bring lasting happiness. Through vivid examples, including a fascinating pain study and personal retreat experiences, she demonstrates how much of what we think we're reacting to externally is actually constructed in our own minds.

The talk offers practical guidance for meditation, encouraging practitioners to investigate feeling tone in bodily sensations like itching or breath, and to notice how mental reactions multiply physical discomfort—the Buddha's teaching of the 'second arrow.' Fella also addresses the often-overlooked territory of neutral feeling, where boredom or habitual patterns can easily take hold. She emphasizes that the goal isn't to eliminate pleasant or unpleasant experiences, but to bring conscious awareness to feeling tone, allowing the automatic program of reactivity to naturally decondition itself.

This morning in the question and answer period there was a question about the experience of feeling—whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—and how to work with that, how to explore it. There's a lot to say about this topic, so I thought I'd take some time tonight to reflect on this theme with you.

This aspect of our experience we call feeling; the Pali is vedanā. The translation as "feeling" tends to confuse us with the notion of emotions, but the exploration of vedanā is much simpler than emotion. It is simply about whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

All experience, every experience that we have, has this quality to it—whether it's physical experience or mental experience. A very simple process happens in our minds and bodies where there's contact with the sense base, whether it's sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or the sense base of the mind. Based on that simple contact, the organism feels it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

This is an aspect of experience that happens every single moment, and yet it is often not consciously seen, not really consciously recognized. Part of the reason is that the programming in our mind—the human programming, or actually it's more like animal programming—is to maximize pleasant as much as possible and minimize unpleasant as much as possible. So we very quickly react to this feeling tone without being consciously aware of it. We move right into doing something when we experience something pleasant or unpleasant. We start to try to keep, hold on to, get more of the pleasant; to push away, get rid of, control, fix, change the unpleasant. We're fairly automatically reacting to this aspect of our experience, but not consciously knowing that it's happening.

One of the Buddha's teachings says that all experience converges on this quality of feeling. By that I understand that when we're responding to experience, we're pretty much responding on that point of convergence. We are responding to the pleasant or unpleasant aspect of experience; we're not really responding to the detail of the experience.

For instance, around food, we might think we like particular flavors or tastes or particular kinds of food like chocolate. We think we like chocolate. But what we actually like is the pleasant experience. What we're actually responding to is the pleasant. This is one of the points the Buddha highlighted—that we are responding to this aspect of pleasant and unpleasant, like automatons running around looking for more pleasant, trying to get rid of the unpleasant.

So this aspect of feeling is like a springboard. We leap off of it into judgments, views, opinions, liking, not liking, aversion, greed. It's a leaping point for us. The Buddha pointed to this aspect of our experience as being a really important place to pay attention to.

In his own understanding of his mind, as he explored and looked at his own mind, he described a process by which suffering, this dukkha, is generated in our minds, and this aspect of feeling plays a key role. He said this is really important—really important to look at this aspect, to be wise about it, to recognize that it happens to us. It's not that we're going to stop pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral from happening to us, but we can wake up to it.

The process the Buddha described, by which we end up in suffering, is a teaching called dependent origination, or codependent arising. The creation of selfing, the creation of suffering, is described in a set of twelve links—cause and effect processes in our minds. I'll explore just a little bit of this process because understanding how it works helps us see the benefit of exploring feeling, of exploring this aspect of our minds.

The Buddha recognized that based on our bodies and minds, we have these senses, and these senses receive sense impressions: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, contact in the mind. Every one of those contacts, every one of those sense impressions has a contact point, and with that contact with the sense organ comes a feeling.

Based on that feeling, he said, tends to arise craving. When something is pleasant, we like it, we want it, we want more of it. When something's unpleasant, we don't like it; we want to get rid of it. Based on that automatic programming, we act on that desire—trying to get more of what we want, hold on to it, feel like we've accomplished something when we've gotten it, or feel like we've failed if we don't manage to get it. We act on that wanting through a process of clinging and identification.

When we get the thing that we want, it becomes mine. Or if it's a state—for instance, we may have this idea that we want to become a good meditator, and that's a kind of pleasant idea in our minds for whatever reason—we act on that, trying to become a good meditator. Perhaps we have a good sitting and, lo and behold, we're born as a good meditator. There we are. That identification takes hold; we become a self there. We take birth into that identity. And then the suffering around that happens when the next sitting comes along.

And we're not so able to stay with our breath or notice what's going on. And lo and behold, we have ample evidence and proof that we are not a good meditator. And we feel like we failed. What have I done wrong?

So this process is generated, the Buddha says—this cycle, the leaping point of reactivity—begins from that feeling. That's a point where, when we can begin to see consciously how we are moving in this automatic program towards things we like, away from things we don't like, towards pleasant, away from unpleasant, when we see that feeling itself, there's that choice point. Pat talked about this choice point. And we can start to not have that program automatically react—that program of liking, of wanting, of needing, of creating, of holding on to.

So that program is a fairly automatic program, but it is not hardwired. Thank goodness it's not hardwired. The seeing of feeling with some degree of consciousness can help to short-circuit that program.

When we're not very conscious, we're in a kind of automatic mode with our experience. The Buddha says that delusion or ignorance is operating for us. We're not seeing clearly. We're not clearly seeing the nature of feeling. The ignorance, the delusion comes around a kind of belief. When there's pleasant experience, the delusion that gets activated is: having more of this will make me happy. That's how we're acting. So that delusion is operating for us when we're not clearly aware.

Around unpleasant, the delusion is that getting rid of this, fixing this, changing this will make me happy.

So essentially we're confused about reality because, as we've seen, as we're learning here in our experience and exploring what's going on, we're beginning to get, I think, that having what we want may bring some sort of happiness for a moment or two, but because of the inherent impermanent nature of pleasant, it's not going to make us happy for very long.

And with unpleasant experience—I think it was Wes who talked about the different personality types—I'll confess, I'm an aversive type. This is my mode of meeting the world. My way of meeting the world is to basically find what's unpleasant and try to get rid of it. That's how I find myself operating. And so the delusion around that, that it would make me happy, it's like: oh, look at this, here's this unpleasant thing, let me fix that, change that, organize it and get it just right—and whew, we're there for a moment. I got that fixed. But then what does my mind do? It goes and finds another unpleasant thing to fix. There's always something unpleasant out there. It's not possible to fix all the unpleasant things. So the delusion is that this will make me happy. It makes me happy for a split second.

This delusion that's typically present in feeling, in meeting our feeling—this is what propels us into this automatic reactivity. When we can bring some understanding, the basic understanding that nothing is worth clinging to, largely because everything is impermanent—things that are impermanent are unreliable, unsatisfactory, inherently unsatisfactory—and when that wisdom is joined with mindfulness, and mindfulness sees this quality of feeling tone, it naturally doesn't want to pick it up. It doesn't want to hold on to it. So that automatic program begins to decondition itself.

The Buddha talked about mindfulness of feeling, bringing our clear awareness to this aspect of experience. There's the teaching of the four foundations of mindfulness, which we've talked about a few times here. The first foundation is the body—all aspects of bodily experience. The second foundation is devoted entirely to this aspect of feeling tone.

It's a really simple instruction the Buddha offers us. I'll read the first part of this section: "How does one abide contemplating feelings as feelings? When one feels a pleasant feeling, one understands: I feel a pleasant feeling. When one feels an unpleasant feeling, one understands:

I feel an unpleasant feeling. When feeling a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands: I feel a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling.

Really simple. Not so easy to do, but very simple instructions. Just recognize feeling as feeling—as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Feeling tone can be quite subtle. That's part of why this is a challenging instruction. It's partly unfamiliar to us, as I said, because we're so quickly responding to it. So it's a subtle kind of experience, and yet once we begin to get curious about it and look at it, it begins to be more obvious.

Feeling tone is associated with all experience, both physical and mental. But the feeling tone itself is understood to be something that happens in our mind. The experience of whether something is pleasant or unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant is understood to be a mental experience.

Now this makes sense for us when we are thinking about something like happiness. The experience of happiness has a pleasant, sweet quality to it, and we can understand that as a mental pleasantness. The experience of anger often has an unpleasant quality to it. There's also a kind of feedback loop that happens—when there's happiness, there are often light sensations in the body that may feel pleasant. In anger, there's the mind state of anger that is unpleasant, and also probably some physical experiences that are unpleasant.

The physical pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences are also understood to be mental, though. So when we cut ourselves with a knife and there's physical pain, that unpleasantness is understood to be something happening in our mind.

How does that work? How does that make any sense?

In an everyday way, one approach to understanding this might be to think about how our experience of whether something's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral depends on context. Suppose you're standing on a busy street corner waiting for a friend. There are all these people going by, lots of noise, lots happening. Right around the time you've agreed to meet your friend, you feel a tap or a touch on your shoulder. That experience might perhaps be experienced as pleasant because of the context. You're waiting for your friend. You're expecting your friend. You turn expecting to see your friend with that tap on the shoulder.

Now imagine the exact same street corner, exact same situation, only you're not waiting for a friend, and you feel a tap on your shoulder. Might that be experienced as unpleasant? A kind of startle. You're not expecting to be tapped on the shoulder.

There's also a very interesting corroboration of this notion of feeling being mental in a recent study published in March of this year in the journal *Pain*. The study sought to understand how people perceive pain. I'll read a section of this.

The author of the study was Siri Leknes. To see how people perceived pain, Leknes and her colleagues hooked up sixteen participants to a device that applied variable levels of painful heat to their arms. At the same time, the researchers measured their brain activity using MRI scans—magnetic resonance imaging. In the first setup, participants experienced a series of either slightly painful stimulus (about as painful as grasping a slightly too hot cup of coffee) or no pain. So they were going to either experience a slightly to moderately unpleasant experience or no pain at all. In a second setup, the participants experienced a series of either moderate pain (that same slightly too hot feeling) or intense pain. It doesn't say what the intense pain was like, but on a screen the participants could see what type of pain was coming up in the next series.

In the first scenario, the participants rated the moderate pain—the slightly too hot cup of coffee pain—as unpleasant. And I understand from what they said later that it also registered as pain in their brains, registered in the brain regions associated with unpleasantness. But interestingly, participants rated the moderate pain in the second setup as actually pleasurable when the alternative was the intense pain. During the moderate stimulus in the second setup, the participants' brain activity also showed less activation in the pain region of the brain and more activation in a region in the middle of the frontal lobes that's associated with pain relief than during the same stimulus in the first setup.

The explanation they give is that the likely explanation is that the subjects were prepared for the worst and thus felt relieved when they realized the pain was not going to be as bad as they feared. In other words, a sense of relief can be powerful enough to turn such an obviously negative experience as pain into a sensation that's comforting or even enjoyable.

So even the scientists agree that pain is felt in the brain. Pain is a mental experience. We're responding to this mental stimulus. There's the feeling tone associated with physical sense, and the feeling tone associated with mind experiences—anger being unpleasant, happiness pleasant.

Getting familiar with feeling tone, getting familiar with this quality of experience—usually the easiest place to begin is in the realm of the physical senses. In fact, our touch sense is particularly designed, apparently, to be very sensitive to pleasure and pain. The nervous system there is particularly attuned, so it's easier to begin experiencing feeling tone there. We can start exploring this in our meditation practice.

When there is unpleasant experience—the unpleasantness of an itch, for instance—this is a great place to explore unpleasant. As far as I know, nobody has ever died of an itch. So while they drive us nuts, that sensation being something with a fairly strong unpleasant quality, we can remind ourselves that it's not going to hurt us to sit there and pay attention to the itch. We can remind ourselves of that. We just get to watch how insanely reactive our mind is with this particular stimulus.

We can begin to tune into the unpleasant aspect of that sensation. Sometimes tuning into the actual unpleasant quality is enough to begin breaking that automatic cycle, that automatic reactivity towards aversion, hatred, frustration. Sometimes a simple recognition of the feeling tone can be enough.

Exploring the unpleasantness of itching, of other body sensations, just looking at what the actual physicality of the pain is—we begin to see that the reactivity to our physical unpleasant experience multiplies the unpleasantness. So what's going on there? There's the itch, which has an unpleasant quality to it. And then there's aversion, which has an unpleasant quality to it.

As is explained in the suttas, the Buddha says it's as if a man, having experienced being struck by a dart—so that first itch is like being hit by an arrow—then picks up another dart and stabs himself a second time. There's the physical unpleasantness of the itch, and then there's the mental unpleasantness of the reactivity. That mental unpleasantness of the reactivity is far more the issue. It's a multiplying factor. It's far more the reason for our feeling like we just can't stand this—that mental reactivity.

Sometimes looking at what the physical pain actually is, turning and checking out: okay, my knee feels pain. What is it? Well, there's a little tightness there, a little squeezing. When we actually look at it, we may find that the actual physical unpleasantness is nowhere near as great as we believed it was, because we were seeing it through the lens of aversion. The aversion multiplies that experience.

We can also attune to and get familiar with pleasant experience in our sitting. There can be very lovely experiences with the breath. The smoothness—sometimes the breath can just feel very smooth and pleasant. If that pleasantness of the smoothness and delightful sensations with the breath is not noticed, it can become a doorway through which we slip out into la-la land, just drifting off in the realm of "that feels good." So again, consciously being aware of feeling tone helps us stay present.

I talked about the double arrow around unpleasant experience—when there's something unpleasant in our experience and how the feeling tone plays into that, the aversion having an unpleasant quality itself and the multiplication through aversion. Well, what happens on the flip side? Why do we like getting what we want? What's going on there?

There's the idea, the experience, the thing that we want out there. It might be a pleasant object—good food or some actual thing. Or it might be some pleasant state we're going for: having somebody see us or recognize us, having a good report to the teachers or something. I remember having whole fantasies about walking into the interview room and reporting these great experiences. I had no idea what I was doing, but I was really into those fantasies.

So there's this pleasant idea, this pleasant thing that we want to get. If we get that thing, actually mostly what's going on is that we've got an idea in our minds that we want it, and our idea is that we will feel good when we have that thing. That's a pleasant fantasy. So there's the thing itself, which may be pleasant, but there's also this pleasant fantasy going on about how great it's going to be when I get that thing. There's that kind of multiplication of the pleasant happening there.

And in that whole process, there's also a wanting going on—the desire to have that thing. Now, that wanting itself, and this is something we begin to see as we start to really closely pay attention to our experience, that wanting itself is unpleasant. It doesn't feel good.

Largely, we don't notice that the wanting doesn't feel good because we're so involved in our fantasy about how great it's going to be when we get it. So that's a delusion. That's a delusion operating. That's the delusion of wanting, actually. The delusion of wanting completely obscures the fact that we don't feel very good while wanting is happening. It gets us convinced that happiness comes from having the thing we want.

So there's that wanting. The wanting itself is an unpleasant experience. And yet the delusion of the fantasy is very powerful. This is largely why we stay caught in this pattern—because of that delusion, that fantasy multiplying the idea of the pleasant.

Now, when we get what we want, what happens there? We get the thing, perhaps. We get the hit of having what we want. That's pleasant. So we do get that bit of pleasantness. But what is that? Often it's quite a fleeting thing. Maybe we get that piece of chocolate, for instance. Check it out sometime: how long does the pleasantness of a piece of chocolate last? Not very long.

Check it out if you get, for a moment, what you want—somebody's good opinion. That feels good, to have somebody's good opinion. But how reliable are the opinions of other people? So again, the pleasantness of that is fairly fleeting.

What really does end up feeling good, the largest part of the pleasure of getting what we want—and check this out in your own experience—is the fact that the wanting goes away. The unpleasantness of the wanting goes away. When unpleasant ends, there's a pleasantness to that. And the pleasantness of wanting going away feels really, really good. We get hooked to that.

And so what happens to us is actually quite amazing. We get what we want and then it's like, "Oh, that felt pretty good. When's the last time I felt really good? It's when I got what I wanted. So what can I want?" Watch yourself wanting to want.

A good place to look at this is sitting in front of the Google box, sitting in front of the screen on the search engine. I find myself sitting there thinking, "What can I look up?" Trying to figure out something to get a little hit of "Oh, that's interesting information"—sitting there, trying to figure out something to want.

So this is how wanting works. And what wanting doesn't tell us, what the delusion of wanting doesn't tell us... I'll start on the other side first. The delusion of wanting tells us that you have to get the thing you want in order to have that satisfaction. The delusion of wanting won't tell you that if the wanting goes away, the suffering goes away. The wanting will go away because it's impermanent. If you have the interest enough to hang out with that unpleasant experience and not buy into its delusion, it will pass. And then you'll really get to see the freedom of that release, of that grip.

When wanting vanishes, it's like being freed from a vice grip.

So the whole process of how wanting and craving and the way we go about trying to be happy—it's all tied up with this pleasant-unpleasant aspect of experience. Getting familiar with this will really serve you.

So there's the feeling tone associated with our bodies, the physicality.

There's also feeling tone associated with ideas and thoughts, with beliefs. Something like "so and so doesn't like me"—often these beliefs, these ideas, these thoughts will generate some kind of emotion which has a feeling tone associated with it. The thought arises in the mind that this person doesn't like me, and a feeling of rejection arises, which is unpleasant. So thoughts, views, and beliefs can also be associated with feeling tone.

Actually, from my own experience, thoughts, beliefs, and ideas are a leading cause of feeling tone. Much of what we think of as physical pleasant or unpleasant, when we actually begin exploring the experience that we're reacting to, is not necessarily the physical but is something in our minds.

There's a teaching in the commentaries of the Buddhist texts that highlights this. I don't know if I completely believe this teaching, but I found it an interesting exploration. The teaching says that all of our physical senses, except for our touch sense—our touch sense, it says, does experience pleasant and unpleasant directly through the nerves, our skin will experience pleasant and unpleasant, the nerves are designed to experience pleasant and unpleasant—the other senses, this commentary says, sight, sound, smell, taste, are inherently neutral. If there's a sense of them being pleasant or unpleasant, it's because of an idea, of a concept, of a subtle reaction in the mind that's overlaid on that experience.

A simple example: if you see a rose, that might be experienced as pleasant. You see the rose and there's the noticing of pleasant experience. But what's actually happening at the eye door is blotches of form and color. The concept of rose is actually in our minds. And that's probably what we like—the idea of rose and what it represents.

I had a firsthand experience of this exploration through looking at my own experience. And this is largely what I want to encourage. Look at your own experience. What's going on? When you're feeling something is pleasant or unpleasant, begin to look at it, investigate it.

An example: one night I was having trouble sleeping, a kind of insomnia. So I got up to meditate in the middle of the night. While I was sitting there meditating, there was this really quiet kind of tapping sound, just a quiet, random little tapping happening. There was a sense that this was unpleasant. I certainly didn't like it. So there was an unpleasant quality that I was responding to, the feeling of not liking that sound. And I was just noticing it. I kept on noticing. It came and went, and when it came back, I got to watch the sense of reactivity arise.

I saw that when the tapping happened, there was a contraction in my body. The contraction was unpleasant. The physical contraction was unpleasant. Still I had the sense of the tapping sound being unpleasant. And then, again, just keeping watching it.

Now this kind of investigation, I want to highlight or point this out—this isn't digging. I wasn't trying to figure it out. I was just watching. How is it this time? Okay, here's this sound. What's happening in my body? What's happening in my mind?

The third time looking at this, there was the recognition of fear. Fear arose when that tapping happened. The fear was definitely unpleasant. There was a clear unpleasant experience. Now I hadn't seen the fear before. But when the fear was clearly seen and known, the mind recognized the tapping itself, the sound of the tapping, as being pretty neutral. The tapping itself wasn't unpleasant.

The idea of what it represented created some fear, which was unpleasant. And all of that became revealed through this kind of watching.

So this is again seeing how our minds create our suffering. How do our minds create the reactivity? Much of what we react to is constructed in our own minds. We think we're responding, reacting to what's out there, but actually what we're reacting to—what we're afraid of, what we like, what we don't like—is what's arising in our own minds.

It's quite freeing to see this. It sounds a little odd for that to be freeing, but it is freeing, and it's fortunate that this is the way our minds work. When our minds see—I was observing this—I didn't have to say in my mind, when the fear was seen, "Oh, now I can see that tapping is neutral." It just happened. So as the mind starts to see how it constructs suffering, how it's responding and reacting to this feeling tone, it also begins to understand how to find its way out of that reactivity.

You could play with this in the hall, recognizing what seems to be unpleasant for you. A rustling of somebody in the hall, somebody moving—what is actually unpleasant there? Is it actually the sound that's unpleasant? Or is it the idea that the person shouldn't be moving? Is that what's unpleasant? When there's something that feels un-

pleasant, check out what actually you're reacting to. You might come in and check out the sound. Is the sound actually unpleasant? Sometimes that can be a very helpful exploration if there's a kind of persistent reactivity. If you find yourself persistently reacting to rustlings in the hall, just begin to explore: what actually is the unpleasantness there? What are you reacting to?

On one retreat, I found a lot of reactivity when I was doing walking meditation—reactivity to the other people walking nearby. This was a huge part of my practice, exploring and understanding the aversion, the reactivity to the people walking nearby. And one time, after I had heard a talk—Carol Wilson had said, "If there's aversion happening in your experience, there's something unpleasant. You're reacting to something unpleasant. So what's unpleasant? See if you can notice what's unpleasant."

While I was walking, I was up in a hallway where there were a lot of people walking back and forth. We were all pretty well spaced in the walking hall. And then somebody else joined in right next to me, trying to narrow the lanes a bit. Aversion was born right there. Okay, there's the aversion. What's going on?

Having just listened to this teaching, I thought, okay, what's unpleasant here? Let's see. And I went through all the senses. Is it sight? Well, the person wasn't actually physically unpleasant to look at. Okay, it's not the sight. Sound? Well, they weren't making much sound, so it wasn't sound. Touch? They weren't bumping into me or anything, so it wasn't touch. They didn't have an odor, so it wasn't that.

I quickly ruled all of the physical senses out, and it was like, well, there must be something going on in my mind. Kind of obvious, but it was a revelation in a way. What's happening? And I didn't know what it was. I didn't see it yet. So just walking and watching—what's going on? There must be some kind of thought happening.

And so just walking back and forth. And then suddenly this thought appeared in the mind: "He's weird." Okay, there's a thought. And I still didn't quite get it. Kept walking, and then another thought exploded in my mind. This was at Insight Meditation Society in December, and the person was in bare feet. My mind said, "They're in bare feet and it's freezing cold." This was my justification for "he's weird."

Immediately seeing the ludicrousness of that, the whole thing crumbled. The mind actually saw that it was reacting to a thought. That was what was so potent and powerful about that insight—it had nothing to do with the person. It was all a construct of the mind. The aversion was born because that thought was experienced as unpleasant. And when it was seen just as a thought, the whole thing fell apart, and in the next moment I was feeling nothing but mettā for this person. It just shifted.

So checking in: if there's a persistent reactivity present, what is it that you're reacting to? It might surprise you what you're actually reacting to. A lot of what you'll find is that it's something happening in your mind. And what an amazing thing to see. It's not bad news, actually. We take it as bad news—we blame ourselves or something, thinking we shouldn't have those thoughts. But it's just the way our minds work. And when it's seen for what it is, the mind begins to let it go. That's the good news. That's the really good news.

I've mostly talked about pleasant and unpleasant tonight, but I want to say a few words about neutral, because exploring neutral—neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience—can be a very interesting place. Often when things are neutral, we space out. We don't consciously recognize when things are neutral. We'll maybe quickly slip into boredom, not seeing the neutrality of experience. We're attuned to the highs and the lows—that's where we want to go. Even to the lows. We'd rather be depressed than feel neutral. We'd rather feel angry than feel neutral.

So noticing that subtle sense of "not good enough" or "not feeling something"—sometimes we have a sense that either the highs or the lows have an energy there that makes us feel alive or something. The neutral experience can be something we either feel is basically wrong, not where we're supposed to be, or we get bored with it.

Neutral can also be a place where we slip into the habits of our mind. When not much is happening—actually, I'll back up for a moment. One of the things we begin to see is that not much is happening, there's not much in the way of highs or lows, not much in the way of either pleasant or unpleasant. And what's actually beginning to happen is that calm is arising. Peace is arising. This is a subtler kind of state. One of my teachers, Michelle McDonald, says we have to acquire a taste for neutral—acquire the taste for calm, for peace—because we're so attuned to the highs and lows.

In that place of neutrality, if we're not clearly aware of the neutral, it's very easy for our habits of mind to kick in, our habitual reactions and responses. For myself, one of my strong patterns was—well, it had a double side to it.

It either was "I'm doing really great" or "I'm failing." And I would go into that failure mode pretty easily. If I wasn't doing great, I was failing. What I began to recognize from that neutral place was that the habit of feeling like I was a failure could easily be launched.

So it went something like this. I was on a retreat and had learned enough about this neutrality to recognize and begin to sense—acquiring a taste for neutral—I'd begun to sense that this is a kind of deepening of the practice, when the mind begins to move into those more quiet places, the less reactive places. And so there was that sense of, "Ooh, it's neutral. Maybe something really good will happen."

So there I am, hanging out, and then there's this little leaning in. And when two minutes later nothing mind-blowingly amazing had happened, the mind said, "You failed." Out of neutral. Neutral experience. The mind would just construct its pattern.

This is a really great place to begin to see—when you're in this place of not much happening, watch what's coming up that's pulling you away from it. Watch what's drawing you away.

We're not trying to get rid of feeling. We're not trying to not feel unpleasant. We're not trying to avoid pleasant so that we don't cling to it. That seems to be something we think: "Okay, we see that pleasantness leads to that pattern of clinging, so I'm not supposed to feel pleasant." We get worried. We start getting afraid of pleasant experience because we see that we start clinging to it.

What we're trying to do here is bring consciousness to this experience of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. With wise attention, the habit of reactivity doesn't have a toehold, doesn't have a place to land.

I'll end with this poem from the suttas, slightly revised based on my own liking of particular words:

If one feels joy, but knows not feeling's nature,
bent towards greed, one will not find release.

If one feels pain but knows not feeling's nature,
bent towards hate, one will not find release.

And even neutral feeling, which is peaceful,
if in attachment one should cling to it,
one will not be free.

One who understands feeling's nature
in this very life will be free.

CHAPTER 105

Understanding and Abandoning

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a profound reframing of how we work with the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa) in meditation practice. Rather than viewing sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt as obstacles to be forcefully removed, she presents them as gateways to freedom when met with mindful understanding.

Drawing from her own recent retreat experience, Andrea explains that concentration (samādhi) develops not through effortful doing but through letting go—specifically, through clearly seeing and releasing what causes suffering. She unpacks the Pāli term 'pajahati' (to abandon), noting that true abandonment arises naturally when we understand that these states are neither valuable nor useful, much like abandoning a broken-down car or a sinking ship. This connects directly to the first noble truth: dukkha is to be understood, and that very understanding catalyzes release.

For each hindrance, Andrea offers practical guidance using the traditional bowl-of-water analogies from the suttas. She encourages practitioners to turn toward these difficult states rather than away—observing the felt sense of wanting, aversion, dullness, agitation, or wavering without resistance or indulgence. Through personal stories, including her transformative exploration of self-hatred on a three-month retreat, she demonstrates how the hindrances themselves become the path when met with non-judgmental awareness. The talk concludes with the invitation to approach practice with curiosity and even playfulness, recognizing that mindfulness of any experience—pleasant or unpleasant—contributes to the continuity that supports awakening.

This morning in the question period, someone asked about concentration and how it fits into the practice that we're doing. Greg talked quite a bit about continuity and how important continuity is in our mindfulness practice, and that actually the continuity, the moment-to-moment mindfulness, is really the ground out of which concentration can develop.

There's another exploration that we can make around concentration. It has a kind of different approach to it, and that is to look at what gets in the way of concentration—to explore letting go of what gets in the way.

Actually, on the retreat that I just finished this past month, my practice was almost entirely letting go. Whenever there was any suffering, any holding, any clinging, the practice was to recognize it. Not so much to try to do the activity of letting go, which can happen at times, but more often the letting go happens as a result of the clear seeing. As the mind would see suffering, see holding, see clinging and let go, let go, let go, the mind became very concentrated. This really gave me such a beautiful new perspective on concentration. It's not about doing. It's not about holding. It's really about letting go.

Some of the key states that happen to be in the way of concentration are some of the main forms of suffering, of dukkha. These are termed the hindrances: sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt.

Of these states, of these hindrances, the Buddha suggests that we abandon them. That's the term—the translation of the Pali term pajahati. Abandon these states, abandon the defilements, abandon the kilesas, abandon the hindrances.

While abandoning is a translation of this Pali term, I found it interesting to reflect on what that word means in English, and how that word can perhaps help us have a bit of an understanding of what we're doing here. My understanding of the way this word is used is not so much the kind of abandonment that we think of in terms of a parent abandoning a child, but rather in the sense of—like sometimes we talk about abandoning a car that dies by the side of the road. We abandon things when they're no longer useful to us. We understand that they no longer have value.

Another way this term is used—I checked in the dictionary today—is that we abandon when we understand there is danger, such as abandoning ship. Likewise, we can begin to understand the danger of these hindrances, and with understanding, we naturally begin to let go.

The letting go of these states, the abandoning, isn't so much something that we do consciously. We might think of it as pushing away, but rather the abandoning comes from the understanding that these things are not valuable, that these things are not useful. In fact, they can be harmful to us.

So there's a relationship in terms of abandoning the hindrances—a relationship to wisdom. We need to understand why these things are not valuable, why these states of sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt are not useful, why they are in the way. We need to understand that. And the understanding allows the mind to let them go. It's the understanding, the wisdom, that's the key. And to understand something, we need to study it. We need to get to know it.

This is related to what the Buddha says in terms of the First Noble Truth, the truth of dukkha. Guy, I believe, is going to talk about the Four Noble Truths tomorrow. The Four Noble Truths: the truth of dukkha, the truth of the cause of dukkha, the truth of the cessation of dukkha, and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of dukkha. Each of these truths has an action associated with it. The Buddha suggests that we understand dukkha, that we let go of the cause of dukkha, that we realize the release, and that we cultivate the path.

This understanding of dukkha—I look at this as being really a huge part of our practice. The understanding is what frees us.

The hindrances, these challenging states—"covering" is another translation of the term often translated as hindrances, nivarana. Coverings, things that cloud our mind, that are in the way of the settling into concentration, this gathering of the mind into non-distraction, unification of mind.

An image comes to mind around settling for me, and that's the image of scooping up a jar of water from a turbid stream. When I was a kid, I used to live in a place where there was a stream in the back, and we would always go gathering rocks and collecting water and looking for tadpoles. Scooping up that water from the stream was often cloudy because of all the mud and sediment that was in there.

And one of the most effective ways—or for a child, the most effective way—to let that water clear is to set it down. Set it on the shelf. Let the sediment settle on its own.

If you're running around with a jar, picking it up, shaking it, looking at it—is it going to clear? Can I see in it yet? Can I see if there's any tadpoles in it yet? If we're shaking it up and looking at it, it's not going to clear. But if we set the jar down on the shelf and just leave it alone, the mud will settle.

In a similar way, we can support the settling of our minds by not stirring them up—by leaving alone the stirring activity of thoughts and thinking, leaving alone the stirring activity of agendas, of confused or frustrated attitudes or wanting in the mind. All of these things are like taking the jar and shaking it up. And so one way to consider this possibility of settling our minds is to see if we can bring our minds into an attitude of simply observing and allowing our experience. Non-resistance to the hindrances, but also non-cooperation with the hindrances either. It's not like we're giving in to them, but we are stepping back and observing.

This kind of non-resistant, non-judgmental, almost impartial observer is a way that the agitated qualities of these hindrances can begin to settle on their own. And we learn a tremendous amount about our minds as we watch them. We begin to gain the understanding I was talking about. It's understanding that frees.

Understanding how these hindrances are put together in our minds—the way that sense desire works, the way we go after things that are pleasant and want to push away things that are unpleasant in the case of ill will, the way our minds get confused about things. Understanding the patterns in our mind that lead to these states arising—that's one side of the understanding.

The other side is understanding that these states, which very often—particularly in the case of sense desire and ill will—the mind seems to think acting on them is going to somehow make us happy. So mindfulness begins to unveil the deluded nature of that, and it unveils the fact that these states, in themselves, in the experience of them, are very far from happiness. We think we act on sense desire thinking it will make us happy. But in the very moment of having that sense desire, we are very far from happiness. Mindfulness begins to show us this. It shows us the suffering nature of these states in and of themselves. And this is wisdom.

It doesn't feel very good to see this. Hanging out with dukkha doesn't feel very good. But sometimes that's exactly the medicine our minds need in order to understand. And in that understanding, in the seeing of the dukkha of these hindrances, the mind itself begins to understand how to let go. The abandoning begins to happen. In a way, the abandoning is the fruit of the understanding. The abandoning is the fruit of our practice.

So we might think that looking at hindrances, observing hindrances—if we're to abandon them, how can observing them actually be of any value? I know this rose in my mind early on. One of the very first things I read about Buddhist practice was that if something is difficult, like if you're angry about something, see if you can notice the state of anger itself rather than acting on it. Just observe the fact that you're angry. I read that and thought, "How's that going to help? What good is that going to do?" But I was pretty much at the bottom of my barrel at that point, so I thought, "Well, okay, I'm going to give this a try."

And actually, to my surprise—as I think most of you know—that action of turning towards, letting go of the thing we're frustrated about or angry about or wanting, and turning towards the feeling itself, is a huge shift. That very shift essentially changes the hindrances from being something in the way of our practice to being the very deepening of our practice, to being the ground of understanding out of which our practice un-

folds. In this shift from focusing outwards on the thing we think is bothering us to looking at the state itself, the hindrances become our path. They become our gateway to freedom.

This is true. This is completely true.

I remember so many times in retreats, especially long ones, I would be caught in something over and over again—self-hatred, loneliness, depression, despair. And some part of my mind, even though I'd been through this many times, would say, "Yeah, the teachers say this is the practice when it's happening, but really I know that the real practice is not going to unfold until this goes away. This self-hatred, this is the problem, and the practice is not going to—I'm not going to get to those bliss states until the self-hatred goes away." That seemed obvious. So there was that view, that belief. And in a way, a little bit of a repression of those states, like maybe I can just hold them at bay long enough to get concentrated, and then maybe I won't have to worry about that self-hatred.

When I finally surrendered—when I said, "Okay, this three-month course, this is my self-hatred retreat, this is the retreat where I really get to look at self-hatred"—the understanding, the learning, and the insights that happened out of that very exploration of a hindrance, of something so difficult, a state so difficult... Right in the midst of exploring a state like self-hatred came deep insight, deep understanding into impermanence, unreliability, not-self.

So these hindrances themselves are the path when they are present. They are not in the way; they are actually the very thing that will allow your practice to deepen in that moment. Meeting them, turning towards them.

In a way, we could say that when we are mindful of these states, these hindrances, when we are aware with this non-judgmental mindful perspective, they are no longer hindrances. They are simply any object. Like any experience, as Greg was saying—anything. It doesn't matter what we pay attention to. It doesn't matter where we are cultivating that continuity of mindfulness. If we are aware of those states, that very process of awareness of those hindrances is contributing to that continuity. And we are on the path. It may not be pleasant. Get used to that. Sometimes it's pleasant, sometimes it's unpleasant.

With all the hindrances, I think the basic exploration is to simply observe, allow, turn towards. And yet I think it is helpful to highlight some ways to work with each of them, because they each have their own ways of hooking us into their orbit. So I'll take

a little bit of time to speak about each of these. Since there are five of them, it won't be very long for each one—just enough to get a flavor of different ways to explore each, and some of the different ways they tend to hook us.

Sense desire: the desire to have pleasant experience. Why is this a problem? Why is this a hindrance? How does this get in our way?

One of the ways it gets in our way is that when we're driven by sense desire, when we want that pleasant experience, we are essentially buying into a delusion that having pleasant experience is the way to happiness. And in buying into that belief, we end up in a kind of never-ending cycle of having to get the next pleasant thing. Because pleasant things don't last very long. So we're endlessly agitated, trying to find the next moment of pleasant. And in the moment of wanting the pleasant, even if it's only a few seconds away, we are not in the present moment.

We are pulled out of the present moment, inherently agitated, stirring that muddy jar of water, not settled because we are leaning forward, looking for something else, something other than what's actually here.

The texts offer analogies for each of these hindrances, and they're related to a bowl of water. The image is about looking into the water and seeing your reflection—can you see clearly? The sense desire analogy is when there is a lot of dye, someone has put drops of color in the water. What happens is that we get enchanted by the colors. "Oh, aren't those pretty?" We can't see the reflection clearly because we're enchanted by the colors.

In a similar way, we can't see clearly with sense desire because we are enchanted by the promise of a hit of pleasant experience. Part of the obscuration that happens is that we do not see the unpleasantness of the wanting itself. We are so enchanted by the idea of that moment of happiness we're going to get—or few moments of happiness—having bought into that delusion of sense desire that this is going to make me happy. And we're missing the fact that we're actually suffering in this moment. We're not cultivating that sense of well-being in this moment.

There are so many kinds of things that we want. A lot of it is around comfort and pleasant experience—having food that we like, drinks that we like, nice comfortable clothes and a nice bed, pleasant smells and pleasant sights. Those are the more obvious things. We also want to satisfy our curiosity. We want to look at people. Especially on retreat, this can become highlighted—we're inclining to not let our gaze wander on retreat.

And I found that to be a very interesting exploration, because just in not letting my gaze wander, I discovered how much wanting there was about looking at people. How much desire was there about wanting to see who was in the room with me, who was walking next to me?

So the exploration here—non-resistance to sense desire—doesn't mean giving in to the desire. It means seeing if you can let go of the thing you are interested in having and turn towards the experience of desire, the experience of wanting itself. What does wanting feel like? It's that shift, turning towards the wanting. Not trying to stop the wanting, but having a completely different relationship to it.

This is a shift of attitude around the wanting. We shift from believing it, from buying into the delusion of wanting—that having that thing will make me happy—to simply recognizing: this is what wanting feels like.

Often there's unpleasant experience when we actually turn towards wanting. It feels like a pull, a magnet, this sense of "gotta have that, gotta do that, gotta feel that." There's this kind of magnetic pull, an inherently unpleasant feeling of dissatisfaction. That's what wanting is about. As soon as there's wanting, there's dissatisfaction. And dissatisfaction is not a pleasant experience. Turning towards that feeling of dissatisfaction, of wanting. Watching it without acting on the desire.

Here there are so many opportunities to do this, to get familiar with this state of wanting. It'll happen all over the place in ways that are not so threatening—like looking at people while walking. That was an exploration for me for weeks on one three-month course: that feeling, that wanting of looking at people. Feeling how it was like the tractor beam from Star Trek, wanting to look at people, feeling that pull, watching it, then watching it spring into being. Finding a place where I could walk where there weren't too many people, and then seeing that wanting spring into being as soon as somebody appeared in my field of vision. Feeling it, watching it, not following through and looking, but feeling the wanting—and then seeing it disappear, just vanish when that person moved out of sight.

Feeling the wanting vanish like that feels like being released from a vice grip. That moment of seeing the release from wanting is such a clear demonstration of the freedom that comes from letting go. The ease, the peace that comes when the mind has let go of clinging.

There are all kinds of opportunities to play with this. I really think of practice as a big sandbox. Let's try this thing. Let's try that thing. Let's play with observing these states. Play with not going back if there's a dessert some night. Play with not going back for seconds. And watch your mind. It's something you want—just play with it.

We need some discernment with looking at sense desire, to recognize the distinction between allowing the feeling of desire and indulging the feeling. Sometimes the desire can move into fantasy of having that thing, and the fantasy is pleasant, and it will mask that sense of dissatisfaction. So we need to be honest with ourselves about when we are actually looking at the desire and when it kind of slips into indulging.

We also need to be compassionate with ourselves. Sometimes our mindfulness isn't quite strong enough to meet the hindrances. This is true for any of the hindrances, and in the case of sense desire, sometimes there's something we have such a pull towards, some habitual desire that we have such a pull towards, that when we try to bring mindfulness to it, the momentum of the desire is stronger than our ability to meet it. That mindfulness just gets sucked into the momentum of the desire.

So we also need to be honest with ourselves when we find that it's not so helpful actually to try to relax, observe, and allow sense desire—when we try to relax, observe, allow, and two seconds later we're caught back in that state of desire. Maybe it's time to pick some other experience. Not to repress the desire, but just kind of set it aside. It's like, "Yeah, not now. Not now. I'm just going to put my attention over here."

I'm going to put my attention on something else—I'll open my eyes and pay attention to seeing for a little while. So just placing your attention elsewhere, perhaps on something a little neutral rather than something pleasant in this case.

The second of the hindrances is ill will. This is related to the aspect of aversion—not liking things, wanting to get rid of things, wanting to push things away. Dislike of things, of people, of situations, of experience, of ourselves even. In this case, we are buying into a delusion. The story that ill will tells us is that happiness will depend on getting rid of this thing, getting rid of this unpleasant thing. The agitation, the stirring, happens with the feeling that we have to get rid of it. Again, the movement to fix, to control, to change. We're pulled out of the experience of the present moment in order to do something, to get rid of something. If only I could get rid of this thing, then I'll be happy.

It's essentially like we're stirring up that jar of water, trying to scoop out little bits of mud. Every time we stick the spoon in to try to get a little bit out, to get rid of it, we're just stirring it up more and more. So the wanting to get rid of is just contributing to the agitation. The bowl of water analogy for ill will is that the water is boiling. The heat agitates the water and we can't see clearly the reflection.

So again, non-resistance to this state—very similar in a way to sense desire, kind of the flip side of sense desire. Taking the attention away from the thing we want to get rid of and turning the attention to the feeling of ill will itself. What does it feel like to want to get rid of something? What is that feeling of pushing away like? Turning the attention to the body. Often it's really helpful to turn the attention to the body with this experience. Seeing if you can let go of thoughts around ill will—likewise with sense desire. Thoughts like "they shouldn't have done that" or "I have to have that"—thoughts contribute to the stirring. And so if you can take your attention and put it in the body, it helps to let the thoughts settle so that they're not stirring things up.

What is it like to feel that you don't want something? When we can turn to that feeling itself, we see that this feeling of ill will has somehow convinced us that the only way to happiness is to get rid of the thing we don't want. The delusion of ill will is not going to tell us that if the ill will goes away, it won't be a problem. Likewise with sense desire—the delusion of sense desire isn't going to tell us that if the wanting goes away, the problem goes away. The delusion of sense desire, the delusion of ill will, is focused on the thing we want, the experience we want, the state we want or want to get rid of. So can we turn towards that feeling itself? The state of the body—how does it feel? Just the simplicity of: what does it feel like to want to get rid of something? It's not so threatening actually when we can just be with that feeling. Oh, this is what wanting to get rid of feels like. This is what hostility, pushing away feels like.

As with sense desire, there are times when the state of ill will—which can take the form of self-hatred, can take the form of rage, really strong forms of that aversive state of mind—sometimes the energy of that ill will is stronger than our ability to meet it. When we try to turn our attention towards that anger, that self-hatred, we find ourselves sucked into the story of it again and again and again. So again, being honest with ourselves about when it's not so helpful to use that relax, observe, allow. Instead: not now.

That "not now" is a setting aside, a kind of skillful ignoring. The way I framed it to myself was this: I would see something like anger arise and recognize, yeah, not a good time to pay attention to this. And the little conversation in my mind would go some-

thing like, "Yeah, I see you. I see you're wanting some attention, but this isn't a good time. So you do your thing—I'm not going to stop you—but I'm going to put my attention on my feet. I'm just going to put my attention on my feet and walk right now."

So letting it be, essentially. Not trying to repress it, but also not engaging with it. That whole conversation I had with myself did get collapsed down to just: not now. With essentially that light tone. It wasn't "NOT NOW!"

It was not now. I'm going to put my attention here. A very, very skillful tool when ill will is strong in that way—kind of recognizing when we're overwhelmed by that state.

The third of the hindrances is sloth and torpor. In my meetings with many of you, you've mentioned this as being something that's present these days. It's a pretty familiar state for the beginning of retreat. Sometimes we call it "the swamp"—you know, the first few days of retreat just feel like we're trudging through sludge. And in fact, the analogy for sloth and torpor, the water analogy, is that there's algae growing on the bowl of water. So, kind of a literal swamp.

Sloth and torpor is a low energy state. It's the states of sleepiness, dullness, fogginess, being spaced out—that kind of state of mind. Sometimes actual sleep. The energy is low, and because the energy is low, it's hard to see clearly.

But much of the agitation around this state has to do with thoughts like, "I can't pay attention while my mind is this dull. This is a problem. This has to be fixed." The thought "I can't meditate if I'm in this state." How many of you have had that belief, had that thought come into your mind when you're in a state of dullness? "I can't meditate in this state."

I'd actually like to propose that if you have that thought, if you can be aware that you have this thought—"I can't meditate when my mind is this dull"—there's actually enough energy and mindfulness to meet the sleepiness and the dullness, to actually be aware of it. Now, if you're actually falling asleep, you're not going to have that thought; you're going to be asleep. But if you find yourself thinking that thought, question it. See if you can turn it around and say, "I've got enough mindfulness to think that thought. Let's see if I can meet the dullness and sleepiness."

Sleepiness is an interesting experience because it has this quality when we're resisting it—which we often do in meditation. When we're sleepy and we're meditating, we feel like we're not supposed to be sleepy. We're supposed to be alert. It's when we're alert that we can see things clearly, and that's when insights are going to come. So we have those thoughts, and we're resisting the sleepiness.

When we resist the sleepiness, the dullness, those states feel really unpleasant. It doesn't feel very good. We're fighting them. But often—not always, sometimes the thickness of mind itself has an unpleasant quality—but often the resistance to sloth and torpor is the largest part of the unpleasantness of it. And many times I've seen that as soon as the resistance stops—oh, does it feel good! It's a really pleasant experience to be sleepy.

That's a little carrot for you. When it feels good, it can be a little bit more fun to try to pay attention to. So even just the shift from resistance to non-resistance, if you can feel the sensations and recognize the pleasantness of it, that might be enough to keep you aware enough to be present for the experience itself.

On one retreat, one of my early retreats, I finally realized that I just couldn't resist the sleepiness, but I found that I could kind of watch it. And during one particular sitting, I let go—I just completely let go of the resistance to it. And I just watched it. I felt the sleepiness descend. The body first got really relaxed. The body was like, "Yeah." There was awareness, but the body was really relaxed. That felt pretty good. The muscles got all soft. The inside got all soft. I thought, "That's pleasant. That's really pleasant."

So noticing the pleasantness of that, and then watching the mind go into these really pleasant states—like just before sleep, the mind goes into these really pleasant, wavelike experiences. And then I would fall asleep. I was sitting, right? So this woke me up. Okay, I'm awake. Let's do it again. Just let the body get all soft and gushy. Let the mind go.

And do it again. It was so much fun—better than any Disneyland ride I'd ever been on. It was a really fun exploration, and something that surprised me as I did this. Through this exploration, in the period of a forty-five-minute sitting, my mind began to recognize the state just before I dropped. The mind knew the moment before I was going to fall asleep. And when it recognized that moment, all I had to do was straighten my spine a little bit. There'd be a little rush of energy, then I could let go and do it all again. That entire sitting was an exploration of mindfulness of sleepiness, mindfulness of that hindrance. And yet it wasn't hindering the mindfulness. It wasn't hindering the continuity. It wasn't hindering the cultivation of concentration. In fact, it was the very support for that cultivation.

I really encourage you to have fun with your hindrances. It's kind of amazing. We think there are certain states we cannot be mindful of. And if there's any state you think that about—I can't be mindful when I'm spaced out, I can't be mindful when I'm

this or that—question it. I started to question that and got interested in how it might be possible to be mindful of spacing out, and I discovered that it is possible. So looking at this as a possibility for waking up.

Now again, there are times to use the antidotes—when if you try to be mindful of sleepiness, you fall asleep and you're out until the bell rings. If you're finding that level of sleepiness, it takes some honesty. It takes some willingness to look at what's happening and recognize, okay, mindfulness for sleepiness right now doesn't seem to be working. I would try mindfulness first and see what happens. And if you end up lost in the sleepiness or asleep for long stretches of time, then use some of the antidotes. Stand up, open your eyes, look at light, do some walking meditation, walk backwards. That's a great antidote to sleepiness. My teacher in Burma, Sayadaw U Janaka, taught me that one. Walk backwards. It's amazing how it makes the mind more alert.

The fourth of these hindrances is restlessness and remorse. This hindrance has both a bodily side and a mental side. Sometimes the bodily side is just the restlessness of body—feeling like jumping beans under your skin, or restless leg syndrome, like you just cannot sit still, like your body is going to explode. The restlessness of mind is the mind feeling like it can't settle, like the mind is so jumpy. The analogy for the bowl of water is that the water is rippled by the wind.

With physical restlessness, that jumping-bean quality, there are different ways to pay attention to something. Often we have a focused quality to our attention—we dive in and look at things closely. With restlessness, it's really helpful to have a wide-open lens. Almost like letting the restlessness get as big as this room. Let the awareness get as big as the room. Let the restlessness get as big as the room. It sounds a little scary to think of it that way, but when we're trying to contain that physical restlessness in the body, it's like a pressure cooker. We're holding it in this really small space, and it's like all this fast energy sparking around. Whereas if it's got a big container, that energy has much more space to be held. So that sense of having a big container of awareness can be very helpful.

With the restless mind, with the spinning in the thoughts, when the mind feels like it just cannot settle, just jumping from thing to thing to thing—sometimes there's an emotion underneath that. Anxiety, worry. We'll talk in a few days more about working with emotions, but one of the most helpful tools is turning toward how that emotion feels in the body. If you notice restlessness, you might just check in. Is there something else happening here? Some other emotion going on? Oh yes, there's worry. What does worry

feel like in the body? Again, seeing if you can let go of the thoughts and turn toward the bodily experience. Sometimes this restless mind is the mind trying to work something out, trying to figure something out, motivated by this emotion.

And sometimes the restless mind is that emotion trying to get our attention. *Pay attention to me. Something's wrong here. We need to do something about this. Hey, you got to fix this.* So sometimes the restless mind is that emotion seeking acknowledgment. And when we actually turn to that emotion itself, the emotion goes, *Oh, thank goodness you're paying attention to me.* And it stops spinning out so much.

There's a lot more that we could say about restlessness, but time is limited this evening. I would really encourage exploring that broader attention for a restless mind. Restlessness is a very core hindrance. It's said that restlessness is one of the last hindrances to go before we get enlightened. So it's going to be with us for a long time. It's worth getting familiar with it, beginning to understand it, learning about it. The learning about it will allow the grosser forms, the larger forms, to begin to release and settle. And then we start working with subtler forms and subtler forms and subtler forms. Restlessness is embedded very deeply into our minds.

As for using antidotes, again, if it feels like the mindfulness just makes it explode—sometimes with restlessness, if we turn towards it, it's like a positive feedback loop and it becomes a screaming restlessness in our experience—it might be helpful then to take a walk, go outside, open your eyes, be in nature. Just take your attention off the restlessness itself and put yourself in a more spacious container. Allow for a spacious mind.

The fifth of the hindrances is doubt. There are so many different kinds of doubt in our practice. Doubt in ourselves is probably the biggest one that we meet. We also doubt the teachers. We doubt the teachings. *The Buddha lived 2600 years ago. What on earth does he know about the kinds of suffering I'm experiencing here and now?* It does happen to turn out that minds haven't changed too much, so the tools he offers us are completely applicable to our situation.

The analogy for doubt is water clouded by mud so that we can't see. It often manifests as a kind of wavering, a vacillation. In terms of our practice, sometimes we have doubt about what practice we should do right now. *Should I do metta? Should I focus on the breathing? Maybe I should go take a walk. Or maybe I should do mindless gazing, useless gazing practice and have a cup of tea.* We're caught in this what-should-I-do mentality. The mind walks two steps down the path of one practice. *Well, let's do loving-kindness. May I be happy. Oh no, no, let's do anapanasati. Breathe in. Oh, let's take a walk.* So we end up taking only a few steps this way, then coming back and taking a few steps that way.

The analogy is of being lost in the desert. We take a few steps this way. *Maybe that's the way I'm supposed to go. No, no, that's not right. Let me go this way. No, no, that's not right. Let me go this way.* Doubt has that vacillating quality to it—not being able to decide what to do. The mind can spin in what can sound like very logical, wise arguments, discussions in our heads. And yet those very thoughts are keeping us from being here in the present moment.

One of the most important tools with doubt is to get familiar with the stories of doubt. *I can't do this.*

What good is this? I should do another practice. What do these teachers know? Get familiar with the stories around doubt. When you recognize the mind caught in a story of doubt, there's hope. Then we can start to pay attention to it. Then we can turn towards the experience of doubt. What does doubt feel like?

Often there is some kind of underlying emotion with doubt as well. I find it often related to fear—some kind of vulnerability, a feeling of inadequacy, a fear of failure, a fear of the unknown. Often these kinds of emotions will lead us to doubt. But look for yourself. When you recognize doubt, when you recognize, "Oh, this is doubt"—I remember on one retreat, I was in a state of doubt. I was doing walking meditation in the courtyard out here when it hit me: "Oh, this is doubt. That's what's happening here." My mind had gone off into these thoughts—I shouldn't be here, this practice isn't for me, I'm obviously not worthy of this practice. And at some point it was like, "Oh, this is doubt. Okay."

What does doubt feel like? And I turned towards my experience. What's here? Doubt is here. And what's here? The feeling was a surprise to me. The feeling was grief. That was the feeling. And when I felt the grief, the whole thing collapsed within a few minutes. And I was just back in the practice.

Doubt feeds on non-mindfulness. When the mind is aware of what's happening in the present moment, doubt cannot get a foothold. The antidote to doubt is attention in the present moment. And so if you can recognize "this is doubt," that very recognition is the beginning of doubt falling apart.

Sometimes our doubt is intellectual. We want to understand how things work, how the practice works, whether it will work, whether it's worth doing this practice versus that practice. And so we think about it rather than actually doing it. There's a term that's applied to the Dhamma: *ehipassiko*. It means "come and see." Try it. Instead of thinking about whether something's going to work, run the experiment. Try it and see.

For me, this has been a great antidote to that kind of intellectual doubt. Like that question I had at the very beginning, when I read that book and it said to pay attention to your anger. "Well, what good's that going to do?" That was doubt. But as I said, because I had hit bottom, I was willing to try it and see. Somebody says it's useful. Maybe it's helpful. So there's the willingness to run the experiment, the willingness to try. Come and see. That willingness is the step of faith that also is the antidote to doubt.

I hope that you really have gotten a sense of the possibility of working with the hindrances—not simply because we need to get rid of them in order to get to the real practice, but that this *is* our practice, and the depth of what we can learn in the exploration of it. How much we learn about our hearts and minds in this exploration, and actually how much freedom is possible through that exploration.

Let's sit together for a moment.

CHAPTER 106

The Disappearance and Reappearance of Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · 1h00

In this illuminating retreat talk, Andrea Fella invites practitioners to shift their attention from what they are mindful of to mindfulness itself. Rather than focusing on the content of experience, she encourages curiosity about the coming and going of awareness—how mindfulness spontaneously disappears and reappears without our conscious control. This investigation reveals the out-of-control nature of mind that the Buddha pointed to as evidence for anattā (not-self), as expressed in his teaching that if consciousness were self, we could simply command it to be as we wish.

Fella distinguishes between two forms of mindfulness: unprompted mindfulness, which arises spontaneously when we "wake up" from being lost, and prompted mindfulness, where we consciously direct attention. She highlights the moment of mindfulness returning as a precious opportunity—it's completely effortless, offers a clear contrast between being lost and being present, and helps us become familiar with what awareness itself feels like. This familiarity naturally pulls a thread of mindfulness through daily life.

The talk also explores where and how mindfulness gets lost: in particular activities, pleasant or unpleasant bodily states, familiar mental patterns like boredom or anger, and paradoxically, as practice deepens and experience becomes more subtle. Fella shares her own discoveries, including how investigating anger over months allowed mindfulness to catch the pattern earlier and earlier, eventually seeing the very intention toward anger arise and release. Throughout, she emphasizes approaching this exploration with compassion and curiosity rather than judgment, understanding that wisdom grows through direct experience and naturally facilitates letting go.

We've been spending much of our time here exploring and being aware of our experience. Tonight I'd like to reflect with you about mindfulness from a different perspective—not in terms of focusing on what we're aware of, but rather on mindfulness itself. Investigating mindfulness itself. Taking an interest in the coming and going of mindfulness.

Mindfulness as a factor of mind sometimes appears, sometimes disappears. We usually call this appearance and disappearance of mindfulness the wandering mind. I thought of turning this around. Rather than exploring how our mind gets lost, let's explore the factor of mindfulness and how it disappears and how it reappears.

We can actually do this. And this exploration, I think, supports us in a kind of disidentification with the act of mindfulness itself. We often identify with being the one who does mindfulness. Exploring how mindfulness comes and goes can help to begin to unhook us from the identification with the doing of mindfulness.

There's a lot we can learn in this exploration of how mindfulness appears and disappears. We can learn about how we get hooked, where we get out of balance. We also get a really clear recognition of just how out of control the mind is.

We sit down to meditate. We're going to be mindful. That's our intention. I will be mindful. And how long does that last? The mind wanders. We actually have very little control over that. We have a modicum—a small, tiny little bit of control when we are mindful. But there's a lot of habits, a lot of conditioning that tends to pull us away. Much of that comes from a subconscious realm. While we are sitting here trying to be mindful, our mind has other ideas about the matter.

And then there is how long we're lost for. We have no say over how long we're going to be gone. We have no say about when mindfulness comes back. Mindfulness comes back—who did that? You didn't decide, "Oh, I'm going to be mindful now." Mindfulness appears spontaneously.

This exploration around the coming and going of mindfulness really helps to point out just how out of control our minds are. And this is a pointer to the Buddhist teaching on anattā, not-self—this out-of-control nature of experience. The Buddha, in one of his key teachings on not-self, pointed to this aspect of our experience being out of our control as evidence for understanding the not-self nature of our experience. He said, "If consciousness were self, it would be possible to say of consciousness, 'May my consciousness be thus. May my consciousness not be thus.' But consciousness is not self, and so it is not possible to say, 'May my consciousness be thus. May my consciousness not be thus.'"

Likewise for states of perception, feeling, body—all of the states of mind that we go through. There's some level of choice from time to time that we have, but largely when we look at our minds as we are here, we really get it. There's not a lot of control. This is part of this exploration. We really start to see the out-of-control, not-self nature of our minds.

This can be unsettling, disturbing, frustrating, confusing. And so I'd like to offer this exploration with an attitude of compassion, of friendliness, of curiosity. Rather than judgment, what can we learn about our minds? What can we understand about our minds? As I said in the talk on the hindrances, the understanding—not an intellectual

understanding, but an understanding that comes through meeting experience and seeing directly our experience—that understanding brings wisdom to our minds, which begins to replace the habitual conditioned patterns of our mind.

And so rather than habitually acting out of our conditioned patterns from childhood, or the patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion, our actions begin to be motivated from wisdom. It's still not self. It's still not me or I. And yet the whole process of the unfolding of our practice as wisdom develops through this direct experience is to move towards the letting go of that conditioning that ties us to suffering.

Another aspect of this exploration of mindfulness is to learn about awareness itself. As we explore the comings and goings of mindfulness and get interested in how the mind pays attention—interested in mindfulness itself—we start to learn not only about awareness, but about the functioning of the mind, how the mind works. All of this exploration brings wisdom, brings understanding to the mind, which helps to free us from those conditioned tendencies.

The first place this exploration began to unfold for me, in my own experience, was looking at essentially the comings of mindfulness—the times it re-arises. This happens countless times in the day. We're sitting here, our minds wander, and at some point, nothing that we choose to do, mindfulness returns. That moment of mindfulness returning is a really great moment. Not just because we're no longer lost, but because there's a possibility there of beginning to get familiar with what it feels like to be mindful.

This kind of spontaneous re-arising of mindfulness is one form of mindfulness that happens to us. The Abhidhamma calls this unprompted mindfulness. It arises without conscious choice, without conscious prompting. It arises without our consciously doing it. It happens spontaneously.

The other form of mindfulness is what we typically practice and think of as our practice: prompted mindfulness. This is where we're already mindful and we remind ourselves to be mindful. That kind of mindfulness is what we're most familiar with in terms of the feeling of what it means to be mindful. Often it includes a kind of choice about what we're paying attention to, and I hope to talk about that a little more later.

Unprompted mindfulness arises spontaneously, and we're not choosing what the mind is paying attention to. The mindfulness is just re-arising and it's already paying attention to something. Mindfulness always arises with some experience happening along with it. And in that moment, what we tend to do is get involved with the thing that we are mindful of.

We may be walking down the hill to the dining hall, maybe a little spaced out, in that more or less mindful place that Joseph describes. There's a kind of rustle on the side of the road and our attention's drawn to it. There's a brief coming out of whatever lostness we've been in, and we turn our attention—but then we get involved with what we've turned our attention to. It's a bullfrog by the side of the road. We get interested in looking at the bullfrog and thinking about bullfrogs. There's been just a little moment of coming back, of recognizing, of knowing experience for a split second, but then we tend to get involved again.

Beginning to cultivate this recognition of that moment of waking up is important, because actually that kind of moment happens a lot in our day—where we're kind of lost and then something happens and we are aroused a little bit out of our lostness, but then get sucked back into whatever we've become aware of.

If we get interested in this experience of mindfulness coming back, interested in the quality of mindfulness—what is it for mindfulness to return?—it's kind of amazing. In that moment when we go from being lost to being aware, what I discovered in my own exploration was that there can be a clearer recognition of what it means to be mindful, what the experience of mindfulness itself is. There's a kind of contrast in that moment between what it was like a few moments ago to be lost in thought and what it's like now to be aware. So the experience of mindfulness itself, the feeling of mindfulness, the quality of mindfulness is highlighted in that moment—if we are interested in exploring it, if we're interested in being aware of it.

There are a couple of great things about this kind of exploration. The first is that it begins to create a sense of familiarity for us about the feeling of mindfulness, what it is to be aware. And that very familiarity—what we're doing there is being mindful of mindfulness. We're recognizing the quality of mindfulness itself. So we're getting familiar with that: what does it feel like to be mindful? And that very familiarity begins to help us see it happening more often. Because that moment of remembering, that moment when mindfulness re-arises, actually happens way more often than we're consciously aware of. It happens and then we're lost again, for a split second, and we're lost again. The more familiar we get with that feeling of mindfulness, the more those moments when mindfulness re-arises spontaneously become available to us.

begin to kind of point themselves out to us because we're familiar with them.

And so this practice begins to pull a thread of mindfulness through the non-formal times of practice. There are so many moments of mindfulness coming back like that.

Another wonderful aspect of this exploration is that the moment of mindfulness returning is completely effortless. It doesn't take any work on your part for that moment to happen. And if we can connect to that quality of effortless awareness present in that moment, it gives us a pointer to the possibility—it shows us a little bit about what it might be like to be mindful without trying so hard. Just in that split second of mindfulness coming back, it's a light, completely effortless moment.

Another helpful thing for me about this practice was that it really cut the tendency to judge the fact that my mind wandered. Because what we often do in that moment, especially in sitting meditation, when mindfulness returns, is think, "Again! My mind wandered again." But if we are curious about the re-arising of mindfulness, what I began to feel was: it doesn't matter if my mind wanders a hundred times during a sitting—that gives me a hundred opportunities to look at that effortless mindfulness. Just turn it around. Rather than being frustrated about the mind getting lost, be interested in exploring the mind coming back, the re-arising of mindfulness.

It's very simple in that moment. This isn't exactly something to do—it's not something you can actually make happen, because in that moment of the spontaneous arising of mindfulness your mind will do what it's doing. So it's not exactly an instruction where I can say, "Do this." Rather, this is the kind of instruction where you put an intention in your mind. Just drop in: May I be aware when mindfulness returns. And when mindfulness returns and you find yourself judging yourself—"Oh, right, okay, well here I am, let's check in what's going on"—just remind yourself, and try again. Keep this intention to check into that moment.

On one retreat where I began to explore this moment of the arising of mindfulness, my mind got curious about how early I could notice the re-arising of mindfulness. Of course that's not something I could do deliberately. But that very curiosity began to investigate the phenomenon in its own way. So inclining towards curiosity is more how this practice will unfold.

In that moment when you remember—if you remember—it's simply recognizing that you are aware. The first thing is to recognize that you are aware. And then just notice what's obvious. Awareness is aware of something in that moment. There's awareness, and something that awareness is aware of. Just notice that.

Then, depending on what practice you're doing, that very awareness of the arising of mindfulness and the knowing of a tickle, or the knowing of peace, or the knowing of frustration—whatever it is that mindfulness is arising into—it may simply be that that's enough. The mind has connected back again with experience and you're present. No

need to choose an object. And yet if you're doing a form of concentration practice, with the breath or with metta, in that moment, because you are now aware again, prompted mindfulness is possible. So you can choose an object if that's appropriate.

It's also possible to make this exploration around what it feels like to be mindful. For me at least, the arising of mindfulness was probably the easiest place to get familiar with that feeling of awareness or mindfulness itself.

Just one note: I'm going to be using the terms mindfulness and awareness synonymously in this talk. Some teachers don't really define the term awareness, and sometimes teachers use it in different ways. I'll just tell you straight out—when I say awareness here, I mean mindfulness, just to keep the confusion at a minimum.

So when you are mindful, when awareness is present, you can also check in. What is it like to be aware? For me, that moment when mindfulness returns was the clearest place to get a sense of that, because of the contrast between being lost and being present. But we can also begin to check into this in the moments of just the flow of our awareness, of our mindfulness, whatever we're paying attention to.

Right now, do you know that you're aware? If you are alert enough to hear me ask the question, the answer is probably yes. In fact, the answer is yes—you know that you're aware. What it is to be aware can be kind of mysterious. We don't actually really know what it means sometimes. It's not so clear to us. We know that we're aware, but we don't know what awareness is.

We don't know the feeling of mindfulness itself. It's such a familiar experience, so close to how our minds work, that it's kind of like the air we breathe. It's not something that's easy to recognize.

And yet, what I've seen is that just that kind of recognition—"Do I know that I'm aware? Yes, I know that I'm aware"—that simple recognition begins, over time, to help us understand what that experience of awareness itself is. That experience of mindfulness itself.

So another part of this exploration—I've been talking mostly here about the waking up side of the equation. It's also possible to get curious about where mindfulness gets lost. At one point I was in a sitting group and somebody said something like, "Well, I don't see how it's possible to see when mindfulness goes away. It's either there or it's not." In my own exploration of this, I began to see that actually it is possible to recognize where awareness gets lost. So there's a curiosity about what situations, what mind states—how and when awareness gets lost.

I'm going to go through some of them now, just an exploration of some of the ways I've seen awareness get lost in my own practice. Again, this isn't intended as a judgment. The exploration here isn't to notice where your mind gets lost and beat yourself up about that. It's to notice where your mind gets lost and get interested in it, get curious about that.

We might lose awareness or tend to find ourselves losing awareness in particular activities—our yogi job, washing dishes, eating, using the toilet, going to our rooms, or walking in the hills as opposed to doing formal walking practice. Just begin to see where mindfulness tends to get lost for longer periods of time. You go into your room and close the door and the mind kind of goes, "Phew, okay, don't need to be mindful here." So notice that, notice that tendency.

On one retreat I found—well, actually what often tends to happen with this exploration of noticing where awareness gets lost is that we're not actually seeing the mind going out. We're not seeing the mind leaving the present moment. What we notice is that the mind has come back after a while and we know, "Oh yeah, I've been in my room now for ten minutes and haven't been very mindful." We recognize it kind of late in the game.

So on one retreat I began to recognize that I would come back into awareness in the bathroom, staring at myself in the mirror. And it's like, "Wow, how did that happen?" This happened repeatedly enough that the awareness would return while I was staring at myself in the mirror. I didn't even notice that I was standing at the sink, much less looking at myself in the mirror.

So I began to get curious about that. If you notice an area or a place where mindfulness tends to get lost, you can add a little bit of curiosity. I would know that I was headed into the bathroom—"Oh, I'm headed into the bathroom. Maybe I'll see this time where awareness gets lost"—and go into the bathroom and then find myself staring at myself in the mirror again. "Okay, missed it again." Using a lightness. "Wow, look at that. Amazing." *Emaho* is the word the Tibetans use. *Emaho*—amazing. Amazing what the mind does.

So just the curiosity about it. And it took a while for me—every time I'd go into the bathroom it was like, "Yeah, maybe I'll see it this time." At one point I was pretty present through being in the bathroom and I was standing at the sink and it's like, "Oh, I'm standing at the sink. I know I'm standing at the sink." And then I saw the intention to look up at my face. It wasn't like some deep childhood pattern of needing to be seen. It was just a habit of looking at myself in the mirror that wasn't seen, just an unseen habit.

So that's another thing I'd like to throw out there.

Sometimes we put interpretations on our experience. We think, "Gosh, if I always get lost when I'm looking at myself in the mirror, it must mean something significant." So just notice where you get lost, and then get curious about how it happens, what happens there. Add a little interest to the exploration.

The point is not to stop the activity. Certainly I couldn't stop going into the bathroom. Sometimes you might think, "Oh, if I find myself getting lost taking a walk in the hills, maybe I shouldn't do the walk in the hills." That's not what I'm suggesting here. I'm suggesting that when you're getting ready to take a walk in the hills, get curious about how that getting lost happens. How does it happen?

Joseph Goldstein tells a story about himself—how when he would go into the dining hall, he found himself just getting lost. Every time he went into the dining hall, he got lost. And his exploration of that was as soon as he walked into the dining hall, he began recognizing: seeing is happening. He noticed, he recognized, that what was happening was his awareness was going out the eye door. It was the seeing that was pulling him out. And so he began to simply recognize: seeing is happening in this situation.

We can begin to expand the terrain, the field, the places where we are aware, by noticing where we lose awareness.

We also might lose awareness in states of body—either pleasant states or unpleasant states. Those would probably be the two main places we'd lose our awareness. If the body starts feeling really comfortable, the sensations of sleep arising, the pleasant experience that happens as the mind goes to sleep—the mind can get lost in that. The mind can kind of just hook into the pleasantness and lose touch with the awareness of the pleasantness. So exploring the feeling tone that Greg was talking about this morning becomes important—being consciously aware of pleasant quality or unpleasant quality.

Pain is another place where we tend to get lost. The mind tends to kind of go out. And again, the point isn't to force yourself to stay with an experience like a pain in the knee or a pain in the back, but rather to be curious about what does the mind do when pain is happening? There's the pain, there's the aversion, and then—poof—the mind is gone.

One thing I noticed is that a lot of times with pain, my mind had various strategies. I would wake up, for instance, in some kind of fantasy or singing a song in my mind. And in that waking up, I recognized: wow, in this moment, the mind is not really bothered by the pain. And so I got curious about that. Seeing that the mind had a strategy—some-

times our minds have strategies for how to deal with pain. Rather than trying to force ourselves to just hold in and grip and stay with the pain, get curious about those strategies.

When I began exploring the singing strategy, what I noticed was that in the singing strategy, the mind had kind of let go of its grip on the pain. It had let go of "this is a problem, this is something that needs to be fixed or controlled or changed." And the mind was just happily off singing its song. When the mind woke up into that and noticed both the singing and that it wasn't stuck, wasn't fastened to the pain, it began to understand a little bit about how that unpleasant experience could be there without aversion.

This is one of the questions from this morning: How can that unpleasant experience be there without aversion? That strategy of singing was one way to get there. It's possible to actually have that unpleasant experience arise without that grip.

So exploring that back and forth—exploring how the mind would go into that strategy of singing and lose its grip, then in the re-arising of mindfulness seeing the lack of the fastening or gripping to the pain—there were a few moments where there was just the pain and no aversion. And then the aversion arose. The grip arose. So I got to see the grip arising itself. And noticing, just the exploration of that, began to lessen the need for the strategy of singing, because the mind could see that the grip would kind of come and go. The mind could just be present for that.

We also might lose awareness in states of mind—particular familiar states of mind. Perhaps boredom, frustration, depression, planning. We all may have our particular familiar ways the mind tends to get lost. It's really helpful to begin to recognize the particular patterns. Guy talked about this the other day—recognizing the top ten ways our mind gets lost.

The moment that mindfulness comes back into those states—so the mind is wandering off and you wake up recognizing the thought and perhaps the state associated with it, planning or confusion or boredom, or maybe peace or ease (we can actually get lost in those kinds of states of mind also)—in the moment of waking up, of having mindfulness re-arise into a state of mind, the familiarity with that state begins to build, much like I was describing with mindfulness itself. It helps us become familiar with it.

At one point early in my practice, one of the main explorations I was doing was around anger. When I first started exploring this, the mind was pretty angry by the time it remembered that it was going to be paying attention to anger. The mind was pretty much in a rage. At that point it was like, "Wow, okay. Oh, anger. Yep, I said I'd be aware of this. Yep, oh boy, unpleasant." So it was about that level of awareness.

But that interest in exploring that pattern—this was a way my mind just took off. I would find myself frozen in anger, unable to even function. So I was curious: Is there some way that mindfulness can infiltrate this pattern?

Each time the mind woke up recognizing, "Oh, this is anger, this is what anger feels like"—I didn't have to do anything, this is just what unfolded. Over the course of months, each time I woke up I recognized that the anger wasn't as bad. It hadn't spun into rage by now. The mindfulness was picking up on the anger sooner, and I think this was because of the familiarity the mind had gained with it, and also the familiarity the mind had gained with the suffering of that anger. Because the mind really got it: anger doesn't feel good.

So the arising of awareness into the state of anger kind of backed up. I began to see just more like normal anger, and then waking up into just the beginnings of anger. And one time, actually seeing the inclination towards anger—seeing the mind want to get angry. That one kind of blew my mind. Why would the mind want to get angry? But seeing that, seeing the mind want to get angry, the mind also recognized from the months of having paid attention to anger: that way lies suffering. And again, I did not have to do this. The mind just let go of that intention towards anger.

This exploration of getting familiar with states of mind we get lost in—just a simple familiarity, in a moment, "Yep, there it is, there's depression, there's boredom, there's frustration"—that simple recognition begins to help the mind see it more quickly, even to the point where it may start to see it arise. And then we may not get lost in the state.

We also might lose awareness as our practice deepens. There are a couple different ways this happens, I think. As our mind settles down, becomes more still, more quiet, sometimes things that we have held at bay through conscious repression or even subconscious repression... it's like the loosening of the usual structures of our mind, the ways we hold things in. The mind begins to loosen like that, and some old deep patterns can just kind of erupt. It's as if they're saying, "Oh, finally there's some space for me to be seen. Thank you."

This practice can be an alternation of what Michelle McDonald has called the cycle between purity and purification—the settling into the space of calm and ease and peace, the purity of mind, and then purification. The purification is the allowing into consciousness or the coming into consciousness of habits and patterns that we've held inside.

Mindfulness functions similarly to how I spoke the other day about metta practice, how metta kind of functions like soap in the washing machine. The soap draws the dirt to it, pulls it out of the clothes into the water. It's similar with mindfulness practice. This purification part is where mindfulness is like the soap, pulling to the surface those things that are counter to the purity—those states of greed, of aversion, of confusion. It pulls them into consciousness, and that coming into consciousness is where they can be released.

It's not a mistake, this alternation between purity and purification. It's actually part of how the practice works.

And so, as the mind settles down, we may find suddenly there's an explosion of the mind going back into something that happened when we were ten—some memory that triggers a whole host of feelings. We might get lost in that for a while. When that kind of thing happens, when the purification starts to happen, we sometimes feel, "What did I do wrong? What happened to my beautiful, calm, settled mindfulness?"

It's just this purity-purification cycle. A sense of knowing that this is the way the practice unfolds really helped me to not be so judgmental about those eruptions.

Another way the mind can start getting lost as the practice deepens is this: as the mind settles down into more states of calm and clarity, sometimes experiences arise that are not very familiar, or experience gets more subtle. I've seen this pattern quite a bit—to the point now where if, after a period of the mind being settled, the mind starts to wander, I get curious about it.

The purity-purification cycle is pretty easy to recognize because we tend to be in story, in strong emotion. But this other kind of mind wandering—when there's something new happening, something unfamiliar, the mind touching into more subtlety—it tends to be that you're just really present, things are going quite well, and suddenly you wake up ten minutes later thinking, "Where did the mindfulness go?"

When this first started to happen to me, I thought I was doing something wrong. And then I began to get interested in where the mindfulness was going.

One of the first times this happened, I was paying attention to the breath. For a couple of days—this was on a three-month course at IMS—the mind had been pretty settled with the breath. I'd sit down and the mind would be right there with the breath. Just right there. Then one morning I sat down and within a second the mind was wandering. "What happened to my mindfulness?"

At that point, I was more curious about it rather than judging myself. So what I explored was: okay, here I am, I'm mindful. Let's see if I can notice where mindfulness gets lost.

The mind was attending to the breath. As I was being with the breath, I noticed that the sensations of the breath got very, very quiet. Within the space of one in-breath and one out-breath, the breath almost disappeared. There wasn't much to pay attention to, and the mind got lost.

When I noticed that—that the breath was disappearing, that there were no sensations—I understood what was happening. The mind was used to paying attention to a particular level of sensation. Then the level of sensation got more subtle. And the mind was still looking at the grosser level, not finding anything there, and wandered off.

Often, as the mind settles, sensations get quieter. There are also sometimes unfamiliar states of mind that begin to arise. And as these unfamiliar states happen, the mind can get lost.

What I'd like to encourage here is curiosity. If your mind has been settled and it suddenly starts to wander, rather than judging it as something wrong—rather than thinking you need to try harder—get curious. In that case with the breath, I found that paying attention to the subtlety required that I actually not try so hard. The effort to be mindful was in the way of seeing the sensations. When the mindfulness backed off that intensity of effort—oh, there's the breath again.

The meditation itself sometimes shows us how to deepen. And sometimes that doorway is revealed to us through the wandering mind. It's paradoxical, but I've seen it happen so many times that I want you to know about it.

The mind can also get lost in states where it holds the opinion that it's not possible to be mindful. Low energy, sleepiness, sloth and torpor, dullness, spacing out—that's like the quintessential example. "The mind is spaced out; it's not possible to be mindful of that."

It is possible to be mindful of spacing out.

The way into this kind of exploration, again, is through that recognition on waking up, on the re-arising of mindfulness. Mindfulness re-arises into some kind of space—like spacing out. In that moment you recognize, "Oh, I'm spaced out." And what we typically do there is say, "Come back." But in that arising of mindfulness, mindfulness has already arisen connected with that spaced-out state.

Can you touch into that? Can you be aware of that? Actually, the fact that mindfulness has re-arisen within that spaced-out state indicates yes, it is possible to be aware in that spaced-out state. But the view, the opinion that "spaced out equals not mindful, have to do something"—that's our typical approach. We bring our mind to some other object. We bring our mind to the breath, to the body.

One time I really began to see this. I was eating breakfast, and I had the agenda while eating to be mindful of the experience of eating—the movement of the hand, the lifting, the chewing, the swallowing, the tasting, all of that. I was trying to pay attention, bringing my attention to that. So that was a directing of attention, the prompted mindfulness directing attention to the meal. And then the mind would space out. I noticed that and brought my attention back to breakfast. That was what I was doing. That was my understanding of what it means to be mindful here: pay attention to breakfast.

At some point, I began to see the mind kind of leave the conscious focus on breakfast and move into spaced out. It felt like the mind was hanging out up here somewhere in a buzzing state. And rather than in that moment saying, "Let me bring myself back to something else," it was kind of like, "Oh, the mindfulness is actually aware of that state." Let's hang out here. Let's see what this is like. I'm mindful. This mindfulness is here. Why not?

So paying attention to that state itself, there was a recognition that actually the mind was resting. The mind actually needed some rest. And the mindfulness of that state kind of allowed that rest. Within thirty seconds or a minute or something like that—it didn't take very long—that state ended. And then I was present with whatever else was arising in my experience.

So again, I mentioned this with the hindrances, but just to reinforce it: if there's any state where you think you can't be mindful, question that. If you have enough awareness to know, "Oh, this state—I can't be mindful here," there's some mindfulness of it. See if you can kind of push the edges of that, where mindfulness can go. A lot of this talk I'm exploring what are the boundaries, what are the edges of where mindfulness can go. Begin to push the edges of that. See, can mindfulness begin to infiltrate the areas where we think it can't go or where it's habitually not arising?

We also often seem to think we have to be in a certain state to meditate, that the mind has to be in a certain kind of meditative state. I don't know what your meditative state is. Sometimes we have a sense of—I think this comes from familiarity with certain states that are particularly clear in our mindfulness practice. We get a sense of, "Wow, just seeing the arising of experience so clearly, a really clear sense of presence in a particular way." And we think, "That's it. That is what mindfulness is about. That is what I'm looking for." And then we try to recreate it. We try to find it.

What we can begin to see, what we can begin to recognize, is that there are many different ways you can feel when mindfulness is continuous or present. Sometimes it can feel really clear. Sometimes it can feel like the mind is broad and vast, taking in a kind of panoramic experience. Sometimes it can feel like the mind is precisely focused on one thing—just right there, clear—and then that thing disappears and another thing arises and the mind is right there.

Sometimes it can feel like there's no place the mindfulness can land—everything vanishing even as we see it.

So many different ways that experience can unfold. What this reveals is that mindfulness is attuning to different kinds of experiences. We tend to look for a particular state, a particular way of mindfulness, a particular kind of experience that we think *is* mindfulness. And that very looking for mindfulness to be a certain way will obscure the way it actually is now. How is it now?

I was once on a retreat in Burma, doing some walking meditation, and I'd been pretty present in the walking. But as I walked back to my dorm, I noticed my mind trying to put itself into some kind of special meditative state. I was getting ready to go to my room to sit, and I saw my mind try to put itself into a state in order to meditate in a specific way. Seeing that, it was almost amusing. It's like, why are you doing that? What's wrong with this state? Awareness is here. Let's be with this.

I saw that happen several times—the mind trying to put itself into a state in order to meditate. And what I saw was that it was a subtle repression of thought. The mind had attributed or decided somehow that that space where there wasn't so much thought was a better place to meditate from.

My hope here primarily is that you'll be interested—that this may encourage some interest in exploring the edges of your practice. Where you get lost, how you get lost. And to not have a sense that this is a problem at all. There's so much we can learn from exploring the places where mindfulness goes and from where mindfulness comes back. It's a huge place of learning for us.

Not only do we learn about our habits of mind—sometimes I call this kind of practice "Your Mind 101," getting familiar with your patterns of mind—we also begin to get familiar with what we might call "The Mind 101." The patterns or ways that our minds work, the ways our minds feel things, the conditioned nature of experience, the way it responds to pleasant and unpleasant. Things that we share as human beings. We also begin to see these insights into impermanence, unreliability, and not-self. This exploration takes us into that terrain as well.

And the understanding, the wisdom that grows from that—that is what frees us. We can't free our own minds. It's not a doing. We cultivate the conditions. The learning, the wisdom grows, and the wisdom allows the letting go.

So let's sit together for a moment.

CHAPTER 107

Wising Up to Delusion

Andrea Fella · 1h05

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of delusion (moha), the third of the three unwholesome roots alongside greed and aversion. She begins with the Buddha's concise definition of freedom as the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion, emphasizing that this freedom comes through letting go rather than attaining anything.*
>
> *Fella examines delusion through three distinct layers. The first is simple disconnection—being lost in thought, spaced out, or enchanted by mental creations. Drawing on Shakespeare's observation of being "asleep with eyes wide open," she illustrates how we live in mind-created worlds without recognizing them as such. The second layer involves views, opinions, and agendas that filter our experience. Using the famous "invisible gorilla" study and the Buddhist parable of the blind people and the elephant, she demonstrates how selective attention and conceptual overlay create profound misperception. The third and deepest layer comprises the universal human delusions: perceiving the impermanent as permanent, the unreliable as reliable sources of happiness, and what is not-self as self.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is Fella's teaching on how delusion is embedded within greed and aversion—greed carries the delusion that obtaining something will bring lasting happiness, while aversion carries the delusion that eliminating something will do the same. She offers practical guidance for working with these patterns, including investigating what we're actually reacting to and exploring the process of believing itself. The talk concludes with honest reflection on how insights into delusion arise naturally through sustained mindfulness, and how even after seeing through delusion, conditioned patterns return—requiring patient, repeated observation.*

The definition of freedom in the Buddha's words—one of the most concise definitions for freedom—is the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion.

On my recent retreat, this definition became very meaningful for me to take in. I really started to see that there is nothing we can get that will create or allow that freedom. There's nothing to get to drop into that freedom. It's the letting go. And so a lot of our practice is exploring these things that are in the way of freedom.

We've been exploring greed and aversion a lot. It doesn't take much to turn and look at your experience to start to see greed and aversion. They're really obvious at times—the obvious wanting, the obvious "get this out of here, get me out of here"—to the more

subtle forms of greed, something more like perhaps expectation or anticipation, subtler kinds of wanting, leaning in, wanting to know. And aversion ranges from the more obvious kinds, which you're all quite familiar with, to the more subtle: dissatisfaction, feelings of boredom, a sense of "just by paying attention to this properly, I'll figure it out and it will go away."

We explore greed and aversion a lot and talk about it quite a bit. We mention delusion a lot but talk less about how it's actually experienced. What is delusion? How do we know delusion? Sometimes people even say, "How could it be possible to know delusion? By its very definition, wouldn't delusion be not knowable?"

Tonight I'd really like to explore this question. Can we get familiar with patterns that reveal how delusion works in our minds? I'd like to spend some time exploring various aspects of delusion, with a lot of stories from my own practice.

One of the more obvious ways we see delusion is that it can arise out of greed and aversion. If aversion is present, for instance—probably everybody has seen this kind of thing—if there's a state of mind of anger or frustration or some kind of dislike, often we see that it impacts the way we take information in. The state of mind can create a filter on our experience such that we take certain things in and not others. You're frustrated or angry, and then everything you see just confirms why you should be frustrated and angry. You're taking in the things that confirm that state and not taking in things that don't confirm it. This is a form of delusion. That filter creates a non-contact with aspects of experience or situation that perhaps would provide evidence to the contrary of the state.

So that's one way that delusion can manifest. And yet delusion is way more subtle than that. In fact, if delusion weren't present in our minds, greed and aversion wouldn't arise. Delusion is a component of greed and aversion, always. There's always a component of delusion within the very state of aversion, within the very state of greed. I'll come back to this piece later.

While delusion is at the foundation of greed and aversion, delusion can also arise in the absence of greed and aversion. So while delusion can arise from greed and aversion, greed and aversion may not arise when delusion is present.

Tonight's talk will basically offer some information that may help you uncover delusion in your experience. I want to talk about it from different perspectives—three main perspectives I'd like to explore, three ways that delusion comes up and is experienced.

The first is the most obvious form of delusion: a simple not connecting with experience, spaced-out states, things like that. The second is delusion based on our views, our agendas, our opinions.

And the third is a delusion that is, I'd say, based more on being a human being—the delusions we all share. So the middle level of delusion involves our own personal delusions around who we are, what we think, and what's important to us. And then this deeper level of delusion is a level of misperception that we all share.

The first kind of delusion, this disconnectedness, is simply not being here in the present moment. Not connecting to the present moment. Being spaced out, being lost in thought.

Shakespeare was a brilliant observer of humanity. In *The Tempest*, I found a couple of really beautiful quotes that point right to the state of delusion. One of them addresses this terrain of just being checked out, disconnected. In this part of the play, two characters are watching another character who's been enchanted by a magical being. In being enchanted, he's seeing all kinds of things that aren't there, fighting demons that aren't there. The two characters are talking about this person who's been enchanted, and they say: "This is a strange repose, to be asleep with eyes wide open, standing, speaking, moving, and yet so fast asleep."

This is actually a familiar state to us. How many times do we drive down the freeway and arrive at our destination with no memory of anything that happened? Standing, speaking, moving, and yet so fast asleep.

I like that in this scene from *The Tempest*, the person they're talking about has been enchanted. Because as I thought about this today, enchantment is essentially what happens to us. We get enchanted with our thoughts. We get enchanted with a world that's created in our minds, and we live in that enchantment. We sometimes wake up into a world of creation. This becomes obvious on retreat—we wake up into these three-dimensional worlds of mind creation. It's like, wow, where did that come from? The mind gets enchanted by them.

This term "enchantment" is actually significant in the unfolding and deepening of practice. The Buddha points to disenchantment—a letting go of being enchanted with the things we think will make us happy. We actually spend quite a bit of time in this enchanted place, so the moment of waking up, the moment of coming into mindfulness again, becomes important. I spoke about this the last time I talked. That moment of

waking up—we begin to get a flavor of that kind of delusion as we wake up into these worlds of mind creation. You begin to get a flavor of what that space of delusion is and see it as mind creation.

That's where the delusion is powerful—when we're lost in the thought of it. Certainly before I started practicing, I would be lost in worlds of thought. I had a partner with whom I had a rather contentious relationship, and I would have all these thoughts about things he was going to do. I'd be getting mad about those things—creations in my mind of things he would do in the future—and I'd be getting furious with him in my mind. I'd come out of that, and it wouldn't even occur to me that this was a creation of the mind. I thought, no, that's something he might do.

This is delusion.

At least here and now, in watching your thoughts and seeing—and this was a great gift of the practice for me—the worlds that we wake up to, we recognize: this is a creation of the mind. It has no inherent reality. The belief in the reality of the thoughts, that's really where the delusion is. The belief in the... I don't quite know what the right word is, because thoughts can reflect reality. So I don't want to say that thoughts are inherently not to be believed. But there's a process of believing and enchantment with those thoughts. That's where delusion slips in—in the process of believing and then becoming enchanted.

We can know thoughts as thoughts, and there the delusion can't take root when we see thoughts arising as thoughts.

There are other ways this kind of disconnection delusion functions. Some very familiar states—sloth and torpor, restlessness—these have a delusive component to them because when we're not aware of them, they tend to make it difficult to contact present moment experience. Doubt also has this effect.

The wavering quality of doubt—What should I do? How should I do it? Is this right? Is this the right practice? Can I do this? I can't do this—this kind of mind state has the tendency to keep us disconnected from the present moment.

The second kind of delusion goes a little bit deeper, actually, because this delusion is based in views, agendas, and concepts. We may be completely aware of what's happening, we may actually be present for what's happening, but not aware that we are seeing experience through a view, through an agenda, through a belief.

The views I'd like to explore right now are our personal views—kinds of societal conditioning, views about who we are, what our roles are, what we're capable of, what our states of mind are. When we're immersed in views like this, we're relating to experience from a perspective. Again, very similar to what I talked about with respect to greed and aversion—there can be a filter over our minds. When we look out at the world, we're taking in information in a selective way. Other views function this way as well. We're immersed in a view or an agenda, something that we're pursuing, and we gravitate to experiences or evidence that confirms it, but don't see things to the contrary.

In psychology, this is called selective attention. And actually it's a very useful process in our minds—it helps us navigate the world. Yet it's fed by delusion. Where the delusion really slips in is that we believe our minds are accurately recording experience. We go through the world and assume that our eyes are like cameras and our ears are like microphones, just picking up everything. But they're not. We are picking things up selectively, often based on our opinions.

There's a study that really captures how delusion works with selective attention. People were asked to watch a video with people passing a basketball between players wearing white shirts. They were asked to count how many times the basketball passed between people wearing the white shirts. Most people could do that—they got the right answer. So they were pretty good at the task.

During that video, they had a gorilla walk through the basketball court. At the end they asked, "Did you see the gorilla?" What gorilla? They play the video back, and when you're looking with the idea there might be a gorilla there, there's no way you're going to miss it. This gorilla is as big as the basketball players. It's not on the corners or anything—it's walking right in the middle, stops dead center, stands there for a few moments, and then walks off.

Such is the power of delusion that a good number of people said, "That can't be the same video." That is delusion. Selective attention we can understand—oh yeah, my mind will focus, it's amazing it can focus so much that it's not going to see the gorilla. But to deny it—"that can't be the same video, my eyes would have seen that"—that's delusion.

This study really points to just how much we can miss, the big things we can miss. It's quite stunning what we can miss in our lives. To have the idea that we're walking through life with our eyes and ears and sense apparatus just being like recorders—it's not the way our minds work. This is really helpful to know about our minds.

At one point my friends teased me because I kept making assumptions about things. They called me "Andrea the Assumer" because I would see little bits of information and then put things together, and they'd say, "You need to look at all the information." We have this tendency to be selective about taking things in. When we can start to see this tendency, we can at least be open to the fact that if somebody says there was a gorilla there, we wouldn't say, "Oh, there wasn't a gorilla there."

We have views about ourselves—about who we are, what we do. And in a way, these views of ourselves, and we have views of others as well.

This is another big piece that we see—the judgments, the views, the opinions we have about people. And when somebody is putting a view onto us, we really feel that. "You're the one who is always X." It's like, well, wait a minute. No, I'm not that. I'm not always that.

But we do that to ourselves as well. "I'm the one who's always miserable. That's me." That was a view I had about myself. And the identification with that was so strong that even when I noticed evidence to the contrary—like some happiness—my mind would go something like, "Well, yeah, I'm happy now. But I know that what I really am is miserable." Just kind of almost dismissing that.

So this kind of view that we have about ourselves—again, that's delusion to take that as who we are. This is an interesting area to explore in our practice, the area of views and beliefs about ourselves. There can be habits of mind, like "miserable" was for me. That one actually disappeared fairly quickly after I started practicing. But there was another pattern for myself of self-hatred that was quite a bit stronger.

Observing that pattern of self-hatred a lot, and then at one point really seeing the belief in it as just a belief—"This is just a thought. This is just a thought"—that seeing through the believing aspect of self-hatred had a very potent effect on the whole pattern. The thoughts of self-hatred—"you're no good, you're a failure"—still arose. And yet the belief in those thoughts didn't arise.

So one way to explore these kinds of views is to, when you see an opinion about yourself arise, check in and see how much do you believe it. Not to try to tell yourself, "This isn't true." That's actually trying to overlay something that's not happening on the experience. Often when these strong views arise, telling yourself the opposite just doesn't work. If my mind were telling me "you're a failure, you're no good," to tell myself "well, that's not true, you're good"—it's like that energy of "you're a failure" is so strong. It's like trying to douse a fire with a few drops of water. It just doesn't meet that energy.

And yet, to acknowledge that what's happening is there's the thought "you're no good" arising along with believing—that is a pretty potent effect on the mind. "Thought: I'm no good. Believing I'm no good is what's happening right now." This opens the mind to recognizing that believing is also a process happening right now, in the moment.

With particularly strong patterns of views that we hold about ourselves, views that box ourselves in with this kind of delusion—"This is who I am. I'm a failure"—recognizing how strong the belief is begins to undermine the process of believing by simply recognizing, "Oh, this is a process. Believing is happening right now." Explore that, play with that. See what happens for you.

Another way views get formed that have delusion embedded in them and create struggle, difficulty, and challenge for us: views can be formed based on our direct experience. Some views are formed based on things we make up entirely—not really based on much reality at all. But some views are formed based on our experience. And yet that experience may be, again, selective. We have that selective nature to our minds. So we take in some information and form a view based on that limited information.

The classic teaching story from the Buddhist texts about this is the elephant and the blind people, where the blind people each touch a part of the elephant.

I'm sure many of you know this story. I was actually surprised to discover that it came from the Buddhist texts, this particular teaching story.

Some people touched the legs of the animal, some touched the side, some the tail, some the ears. And then when asked, "What's an elephant like?" some would say, "Well, it's like a post." Others would say it's like the wall of a storeroom. Others would say it's like a broom. Others would say it's like a hose—depending on which part of the elephant they had touched.

In describing it, the teaching story goes, they come to blows, disagreeing about what an elephant is like. And this again is delusion. We hold to our views, believe our views, rather than asking, "Oh, you think it's like a storeroom? Where do you get that idea?" Rather than having a conversation about it, we get entrenched in our opinions because we have some direct experience that we've created our view out of.

The Buddha actually cautioned in a very strong way about our creation of views out of our meditative experience in particular. He said these views that come out of meditative experience can be some of the most deeply entrenched.

The classic example is somebody who goes into a deep state of jhana and has an experience of the world being completely infinite. And somebody else going into a meditative experience has the deep experience of there being an edge to the world. In having a conversation back and forth, the one who believes the world is infinite says, "Well, you just haven't seen past the edges of your world." And the other who sees there are edges says, "Well, you just haven't seen far enough out to see the edge." So they get this entrenchment in their beliefs.

We can have views created based on incomplete information—not necessarily that we're misperceiving, but that we're forming views and then putting that interpretation back, seeing the world through that interpretation. "That is the way it is." That's delusion. Not the perception itself. Feeling the leg of the elephant and thinking, "That's like a post"—that's an accurate description of the leg of an elephant. I could agree with that. A correct perception, but not a correct extrapolation to the bigger picture.

Then there are views that get created just because we're told things repeatedly. Commercials and marketing do a good job of this for us. Society does this—the kind of cultural norm of the United States, something along the lines of "America is a land of opportunity. If you work hard enough, you'll achieve your dream." We believe that to the extent that if somebody isn't achieving their dream, if we're not achieving our dream, something's wrong, or we're bad, or we're wrong. This is actually the root of what we could call the delusion of white privilege—we look out there and say, "Opportunity is there," without recognizing the whole infrastructure in place supporting one race and class but not others.

Another way that delusion can manifest is more subtle than these other views I was talking about. It's where we relate to our experience through concept rather than direct experience. Our concepts are created based on the way our minds work. We perceive experience. I look out at this room and very naturally I see people. I see walls. I see candles. I see statues. I see zabutans. I see floors. I see wood. And yet that's all concept. Actually, what the eye is perceiving is form and color—straight, curved, brown, white, light, dark. The mind puts together the objects.

We begin to relate to our experience through our ideas because concept is so closely intertwined with our views and opinions. It's very hard for us not to relate to our friends just as they are—we relate to them through our concepts.

This can be quite subtle in ways. There was one time I was in Burma, and I had a dorm room that was pretty close to the edge of the monastery. There was a wall, and the village noises came over the wall into the monastery grounds. Most afternoons at a particular time—I was meditating primarily in my room—around four or five o'clock, mid to late afternoon, I would hear a squealing noise.

My mind recognized that sound as "pig." That was the concept the mind applied to that sound. Hearing this sound nightly, my mind also began to have the sense that this squealing had a very distraught quality to it. My mind created the idea that what I was hearing was the nightly slaughter of a pig for the village.

Now, I could see that this was an idea. I did not actually know that. I could see it was a concept. I could see that the idea of a butcher doing the nightly pig slaughter was just an idea. But at the same time, that squealing sound and the distraught quality of it—it's like, well, some being is distraught. There was this feeling of compassion that arose based on that perception, that concept. Night after night, the same experience.

And then one night, instead of being in my room at that time, I was walking up and down in the monastery and began noticing that there were bats flying really close to me. These bats were squealing. In that moment, the whole thing—all of this compassion—vanished. These bats clearly were not in distress. They were having a good time flying around.

This is again the way we meet our experience based on concept. Perception very easily makes mistakes. Our perceptual process is very prone to error. And one of the delusions is that we don't acknowledge or recognize that tendency of our perceptual process to be in error.

Concepts are really useful. We need concepts. But it's really helpful to know that they are concepts.

It can be very interesting to explore an experience, particularly around greed or aversion. What is it that you're actually averse to? A lot of the time—for instance, you might be sitting in the meditation hall and hearing a sound. Maybe the sound of somebody rustling or doing something. There's the sound, and we think perhaps that we're averse to the sound, that it's an unpleasant sound. But when we actually start to look at what's going on, what we see is that our mind has created an idea, often something along the lines of "that person shouldn't be doing that." We're relating to experience through the concept, not relating to the actual experience.

So this is a great question to ask yourself: when there is reactivity, what is it that is actually being reacted to? A lot of the time, it's a concept. A lot of the time. And the delusion is believing that we're reacting to something out there, when what we're actually reacting to is a creation of our minds.

This is really powerful to see. When we start to see that what we react to is largely a construct of the mind, there's not much place to hold that reaction anymore.

The third kind of delusion is the more human delusion, the most fundamental kind that we operate with. I think we go through and see delusion in a layered way, and this level of delusion is at the deepest level, the deepest structures of our mind.

There are some basic distortions to our experience that we all share, and you'll recognize these. We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. We tend to take what is unreliable as being a place where we could find reliable happiness.

And we tend to take what is not self to be self.

One of my teachers has a definition of delusion. Sayadaw U Tejaniya says that delusion doesn't mask the object or the experience—and "object" is kind of a funny word—but delusion doesn't mask the experience itself. It masks the true nature of the experience. So with delusion, we can be mindful of something but still seeing it through a deluded filter.

Here's another quote from Shakespeare. Two characters are talking about a third character, who is observing all of these details in the environment. They've landed on this island, and he's observing all these things about the surroundings. One character comments, "He misses not much." The other says, "No, he doth but mistake the truth totally." Again, this is a different form—this kind of delusion. We see things, but not in alignment with truth. Not as they actually are.

So, seeing what is impermanent to be permanent. The most obvious example of this is seeing ourselves, our lives, as permanent—just the difficulty we have believing that we will die. Things are changing actually pretty rapidly, and this rapidity of change masks impermanence. The rapidity of change masks the impermanent nature of experience.

Actually, if you read anything about particle physics and quantum mechanics, they talk about things being so rapidly changing that the very rapidity of motion is what makes things seem solid in our experience. Something like pain, for example—pain can

have a very rapidly changing experience to it. When we get more mindful, we see how rapidly it's changing. But when we're not so mindful, it just feels like a block. It feels like a permanent, solid thing.

And so, exploring where we think things are solid—at one point, this was a big exploration for me. Anytime I felt like something was solid, I questioned it: Is it really solid? Concept also plays in here. Some of the solidity that we impute comes because we are seeing things through concept. Pain is an example of this as well. Check it out: if you are observing an experience like pain through the idea of pain, it has much more solidity than when you move into the actual experience and begin to see the dynamic, changing nature of that experience.

We see what's unreliable, unsatisfying, unsatisfactory as being reliable, being satisfactory. This is basically the belief that having pleasant experience is good—that this is where happiness will be found. The unreliability of sense pleasure doesn't really land on us. We may know that it's impermanent in a way, and yet as we're going for it, our mind is telling us, "Yes, this is what's going to make me happy."

I've seen this even with a piece of chocolate. I know how long chocolate lasts. Actually, on a recent retreat, I discovered the pleasure of chocolate lasted way longer than I thought it would. I put the piece of chocolate in my mouth and thought, "Let's see how long this lasts." And while it's there, it's like, "Wow, this is really good." It's really pleasant, feels really good. And even after the chocolate had fairly well vanished, there was a lingering pleasant feeling for like five minutes. I mean, it was amazing how long it lasted. And yet still—five minutes isn't very long. And yet while it's going on, the mind believes that yes, this is what's going to do it for me.

So that belief that this is where happiness can be found—in this world of sense pleasure—

puts us on a never-ending cycle of having to get the next bit of happiness, the next bit of sense pleasure.

We end up trying to construct happiness by stringing together bits of sense pleasure like beads on a chain. And that's what we think of as happiness—that's as good as it gets. If we could endlessly get what we wanted and avoid what we didn't want, that's as good as it gets. And we believe that. At some level, we really believe that.

This is where the delusion lies. This is where delusion is enmeshed with greed and aversion. The delusion of greed is that having that thing will make me happy. The greed itself just wants that thing; the delusion is that it's going to make me happy. Greed is not going to tell you that if greed goes away, the release from that greed will be a deeper

happiness. Likewise with aversion. The delusion embedded in aversion is that getting rid of this thing is what's going to make me happy. Aversion is not going to tell you that if the aversion goes away, happiness will follow. This is the delusion embedded in these states of mind.

So with this perception—seeing what is unreliable as reliable—we can begin to explore what we are relying on. What is it that we think is going to make us happy? Often this involves leaning into the future, even into just the next moment. "The thing that will make me happy is having an experience like I had in that last sitting." We're just leaning, leaning into the future like that.

The third misperception is seeing what is not self as self. We take so many aspects of our experience to be self. We take our bodies to be me. We take our moods and emotions—"I'm a miserable person" is an example of that. Yes, that was me. I am a miserable person. A little happiness comes along, but no, I am miserable. I am a miserable person. We identify with our emotions, with feelings, with our body. We can identify with knowing, with being the one who's choosing. This identification is like a creation of something solid within a flow of experience.

That example around being a miserable person—that was a creation of a solid idea that wouldn't admit the truth of impermanence or the flow of experience. Happiness arises? No, I am miserable.

With exploring our experience, we begin to really appreciate and see that there's nothing but a flow of conditions—causes and conditions, changing experience, one condition leading to a result. Cause and effect, cause and effect, cause and effect. It's a natural unfolding of process.

It's perhaps easier to relate to this in the natural world. We see trees grow based on natural law and conditions. There's an acorn that has the potential to become an oak tree given the right conditions. It's a natural law: if that acorn lands on ground where there's enough soil and moisture and proper sun, and there's not a deer coming along to eat the sprout, it will turn into an oak tree. It's a natural unfolding of cause and effect. There's not a being in there "treeing." It is simply a process.

Very similarly, the unfolding of our lives is a natural unfolding of cause and effect. Intention arises—something happens in the body, the bladder is full, there's pressure, unpleasant pressure. The recognition of what that is conditions the desire to relieve that pressure, which conditions the impulse to move. So one stands, finds one's way to

the restroom. It's simply an unending flow of natural cause and effect. And after the fact, we impute, "Oh, that's me. I decided to get up and go to the bathroom." We impute the self to that process after the fact.

So exploring, investigating what feels like me, what feels like I. This kind of observation can be elusive. I think a good time to explore it is when the sense of self is strong. Self-righteousness is a good one to explore this with—a feeling of being right. "I'm right. I'm right."

This was an exploration for me at one point on retreat. It was a three-month course, and someone in the hall was asking questions. I had an aversive reaction to that person and argued in my mind endlessly with them about the questions and the answers. One day in particular, I was doing walking meditation, and I finally got to see: okay, this is a pattern. This is the analytical, argumentative, being-right Andrea. And okay, I'll watch this. I'll get to know this pattern.

So I watched this pattern, got to know it over many days. And one particular day, something interesting happened. I was observing it and thinking I was clearly recognizing this as a selfing pattern. And yet, as I was walking—I was doing walking meditation right in front of IMS where there's a driveway—a delivery truck drove up. Made a lot of noise, doors banged, brakes squealing. And the mind actually did something you wouldn't expect. I certainly didn't expect it. The mind went: "It's a truck! Wow!"

I flipped in a split second from being this argumentative forty-year-old, being right, to this awestruck two-year-old. "Oh, it's a truck! Wow, that's so amazing!" Just in this rapture, the sound reverberating through my body.

These two experiences had no relationship to each other whatsoever. There was no connection. And this is an interesting thing to see—seeing the discrete nature of these senses of self. We begin to see that they actually are constructions of mind, conditions coming together. It's pretty powerful to see that.

So the absence of delusion is wisdom. And yet we don't *do* wisdom, right? We've been talking about this. We can't just say, "Delusion, be gone." As that example of observing my argumentative, being-right self shows, I was doing the best I could with that. And yet the mind couldn't quite see the clinging involved there. So it stayed stuck until this other event happened, and then it was like it vanished.

Non-delusion isn't something we can do. It's not something we choose, saying "delusion be gone." But we can begin to explore how delusion operates in our minds. Seeing through delusion is an insight—recognizing the opening to the ephemeral nature of experience. Seeing the arising of a thought and recognizing "you're no good" is just a

thought. The belief vanishing. Seeing through the delusive nature of our thoughts, the delusive nature of concepts. That happens as we begin to meet our experience, to touch into our experience with continuity of mindfulness. And it's an insight.

Insights, too, are impermanent. So that recognition—seeing that forty-year-old argumentative self vanish and realizing, "Wow, it was just an ephemeral construction of mind"—in the fact that it disappeared with that rapidity, didn't mean I never got caught in that pattern again. We can see through delusion at times. Sometimes we get that clear sense of seeing through and recognizing, "Oh yes, that's what it's like to not have that delusion operating." We see that clearly. And then the delusive pattern comes back because it's so conditioned.

And some of the deeper kinds of clinging—the clinging that there's got to be something out there that's going to make me happy—that one goes so deep.

The mind can see over and over and over again that there's nothing out there that's going to make it happy. But that's not going to stop it from trying. And we get to watch it try. We can try telling ourselves, "You're not going to find anything." And it just doesn't matter because the patterns are so deeply conditioned.

So over and over again, we see these patterns. And yet, having seen, having had those insights, having seen through the delusion at times, then we can really begin to recognize when delusion is operating.

That pattern of trying to find something that will make me happy—on this last retreat, that was something that happened over and over again. The mind would just search, search, search, search. And it's like I couldn't stop the mind. It's like, "Okay mind, if you want to search, if you want to find something, go at it. Have at it. See what you can find."

The mind was just so—I was watching at that deep, deep level, just the wish for something to be. "Oh, may there be something solid to hang on to, please." And the mind would create something that was better than the searching. It felt, "Oh, that's pretty peaceful." And then it would see the tension of that, and that would fall apart.

The ease and the peace of the falling apart was so peaceful, so easeful, that for like a few seconds the mind deeply understood: it's not about constructing anything. For like maybe a second the mind understood that—and then it was off again. "Oh, but there's got to be something."

Just watching that pattern over and over again. Seeing it, because the mind had seen the delusion of it, the mind could be there and just know: yes, this is a delusive pattern at work. And so the mind wasn't caught by that pattern. There was a way in which I didn't believe that I would find something. And yet it's like the mind just has to wear itself out trying to find something. It's got to figure it out for itself. I'm not going to be able to tell it that. I can know it up here, and the mind has got to see through that delusion itself. Over and over again.

So let's stop and sit for a moment. There's no need to remember anything that I've said. Just let it go. And meet your experience here and now.

CHAPTER 108

Factors that Hinder and Support Concentration

Andrea Fella · 57 min

> *In this concentration retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers practical guidance on navigating the mental factors that both obstruct and support the development of samādhi. She begins by distinguishing how we work with hindrances in concentration practice versus vipassanā—rather than turning to investigate hindrances directly, the first approach is to gently set them aside with a quality of "not now," staying connected with the breath while allowing distractions to remain in the background.*
>
> *Fella then introduces the five jhānic factors (jhānaṅga): vitakka (directing attention), vicāra (sustaining attention), pīti (rapture), sukha (happiness), and ekaggatā (unification of mind). She explains how each factor directly counters a specific hindrance—vitakka opposes sloth and torpor, vicāra counters doubt, pīti dissolves ill will, sukha releases restlessness, and ekaggatā overcomes sense desire. The teaching emphasizes that while we can actively engage with vitakka and vicāra through gentle effort, the remaining three factors arise naturally as results of practice.*
>
> *The heart of the talk explores the art of skillful attention—using receptive rather than grasping effort, allowing the breath to come to awareness rather than hunting for it, and maintaining just enough energy to stay present with half a breath at a time. Through the metaphor of a kick scooter, Fella illustrates how gentle, repeated connection builds momentum that eventually carries the practice forward with less personal effort, leading toward the "bliss of seclusion" from hindrances.*

I always like the second full day of retreat on the teaching side because I've had an opportunity to talk to you, to hear what's happening, and it really feels like the retreat begins to collect at this time. It was lovely hearing your experiences today and beginning to get a sense of what's happening. Sometimes as a teacher we're sitting up here speaking and not so sure what's actually going on. We can see you sitting out there and it can look so peaceful, but we know from the inside, from our own experience, it's not always that way on the inside. So it's really delightful to get to talk to you.

Tonight I'd like to talk about factors of mind that both get in the way of concentration and that support concentration. This is a lot of what people were talking about today, so it does feel like a fairly timely topic to be exploring with you tonight.

The practice of concentration is very much an expression of right effort—the classic understanding of right effort in the Eightfold Path, where we cultivate and maintain wholesome states of mind and we abandon and avoid unwholesome states of mind. This is what we're exploring as we sit down and explore being with the breath. We notice what gets in the way of that, what unwholesome qualities of the mind get in the way of that, and learn how to navigate that by cultivating and supporting the wholesome qualities. Exploring both sides of this supports our navigation of this terrain.

The Buddha was a great map maker, a list maker, and he did provide us with a list of things that tend to get in the way of concentration: the hindrances. I know you've all heard talks about the hindrances. Since we had attending Vipassana retreat as a prerequisite before this retreat, we partly wanted you to have some skill with working with the hindrances before coming here. So this is not going to be a standard hindrances talk—I'm not going to really touch on the specifics of hindrances. But they are understood by the Buddha as the five hindrances: sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt. Classically, these are defined as the states of mind that hinder concentration. This is their function, in a way—to get in the way of concentration. They actively counter our ability to settle.

There's another list that is not so much defined as a list in the texts, at least in the suttas, but these qualities are mentioned: five factors that come together when concentration is present in the mind. These are called the jhānic factors, the factors of jhāna. These five factors of jhāna directly oppose and counter the hindrances. In the process of cultivating the collected mind, these factors of jhāna begin to grow in our minds, and they actively work to counter the hindrances. We'll explore both sides of the equation tonight.

In terms of exploring the hindrances, what I'd like to do first is highlight how when we work with hindrances in our Vipassana practice, it's a little bit different than our first line of approach with the hindrances in concentration practice. In Vipassana practice we often are instructed to turn directly and meet the hindrance. We explore the hindrance with mindfulness. Often we are taught in the mindfulness practice that any object can be used as a place to cultivate mindfulness—and it's definitely true, it's my experience. Any object can be used as a place to cultivate mindfulness, and we can cultivate mindfulness by meeting the hindrances. The hindrances are not our enemy in any way in the Vipassana practice.

In the concentration practice we have a little bit more of an agenda: to settle and stabilize the mind on the experience of the breath, in this case with our practice here. So while I wouldn't say the hindrances are the enemy, we have a slightly different relation-

ship to the hindrances in concentration practice. I would say the first approach is to stay with the breath, if possible. If possible, set aside the hindrance and stay with the breath.

There are different levels of engagement with the hindrances depending on how strong the hindrance is and how strong our capacity for staying with the breath is. In talking to some of you today about the hindrances, sometimes it was pretty clear that you were able to just stay with the breath and let the hindrance stay in the background. This would be the level of meeting the hindrance that is the least engaged with the hindrance.

As hindrances arise, if it's possible—and we can just check this out—can sleepiness, for instance, just be in the background while you simply know the breath? There's the breath happening and just the sleepiness in the background, or thoughts, or maybe a little bit of aversion happening. It can be there, but you can stay with the breath. This can actually be pretty powerful to recognize this possibility.

On my first long metta retreat, I did a month of metta practice as a concentration practice, and got these instructions about how when aversion arises, you just stay with the metta. It was kind of a revelation, because in my

Vipassana practice, it had been like, oh, there's aversion happening? Ooh, let's look at that. And it had been like zeroing in on the aversion. And while that was useful and I learned a lot, it was quite a revelation to recognize, oh, there's aversion happening? You mean I don't have to put it under a microscope? I can just set it aside and stay with the phrases? It was such a relief. Oh, wow, this is a completely different way to engage with the hindrances.

So this is a skill that we learn—essentially a skill of setting aside. Sometimes I call this the skill of "not now." We recognize and acknowledge that a hindrance is there. Sometimes I even bow to it and say, "Yes, thank you for showing up. And right now, you can stay in the room with me, but I'm going to pay attention to the breath." Or I'm going to pay attention to my metta, which is what I was doing in that case.

There's a skill to this. This setting aside cannot be done with aversion. It's not a pushing aside. It's not trying to get rid of or repress. It's more of just a gentle acknowledgment: "Yeah, I see you." It's kind of like how you might give a toddler a timeout. Let the aversion have a timeout. It can sit over there, but you're just doing your thing, paying attention to the breath.

How this works as a skillful means is that essentially the hindrances feed on unawareness, and they feed on a kind of spiral or cycle of reactivity. You're all familiar with this—with aversion arising, thoughts of anger arise, and it kind of fuels the cycle. This practice of setting aside and staying with the breath doesn't allow that cycle to continue because we're not engaged with the hindrance. But we are also actively engaged in cultivating mindfulness and concentration on the breath. And so the hindrance doesn't actually have much nourishment to feed it. Setting it aside is one way that the hindrance can begin to dissipate. This was quite a revelation for me to recognize: oh, you mean I don't have to actually zero into it and figure it out? Set it aside and let it dissipate as you stay connected with the breath.

This level of engagement—this "not now," setting aside, letting the hindrance be in the background—works either if the hindrance is not terribly strong or if your capacity to be with the breath is pretty strong. If the hindrance is a little stronger or your ability to be with the breath is a little weaker, there may need to be a little more engagement.

The next level of engagement is something along the lines of breathing with the hindrance. You know there's the hindrance arising and it's like, "Yes, I see you, anger, and we're going to breathe together here." Or "Restlessness, let's breathe together." The hindrance has come a little bit more to the foreground, but hopefully it can be at a place where there's a balance between being able to stay connected with the breath and just knowing that the hindrance is there. Allow the breath to include the hindrance. Envelop the hindrance with the breath.

This can also work with exploring pain. We talked a little bit about this this morning. If there's pain, often there is an aversive reaction to it. But we can also, if there's an unpleasant experience that's challenging, breathe with that unpleasant experience, breathe through it—even having the sense of allowing the breath to infuse that state of mind or the place in the body that's feeling pain.

Another tool that I use sometimes, one that's broadly useful in a lot of different ways but particularly helpful with the hindrances, is just to remind myself: "Okay, yep, there's that frustration—and the breath. There's confusion—and the breath." Just continually reminding myself: and the breath, and the breath. So that there's this touchstone, a way to stay with the experience of breathing even as we know other experience.

Something you might also explore—and I say this with a little more caution, as this needs a little more exploration or context setting—is to use a kind of inquiry. Perhaps you're finding it's hard, you know the hindrance, but it's hard to find a way to be with the breath skillfully while that hindrance is there. You're trying. You see the hindrance and you know the breath, but it just doesn't quite feel like it's settled in together.

Sometimes you can explore just asking for wisdom—essentially asking for the body and mind to support you in this exploration. This is something that comes from my teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, this kind of inquiry that I have found incredibly useful. You just drop a question in: "What might it mean to attend skillfully to the breath with this mind state?" Not trying to figure it out, but just putting that question into the whole mix and then continuing to be present with the breath.

I tried this just the other day. There was some mind state and I was struggling to find a way to be with the breath with that mind state. And this question arose spontaneously.

And as I just continued to be with the breath, it was like I watched the mind and the breath adjust themselves to have a more relaxed, receptive relationship with that mind state present.

So this use of inquiry or this use of questions—if you find it sends you into thinking or trying to figure out or searching for an answer, just forget about it. Don't even go there. But sometimes we can drop a question into a meditation and a kind of wisdom begins to show up. Because the more we actually settle into concentration, the more wisdom is actually available for us. Sometimes we can use this kind of question or inquiry to encourage that wisdom to arise.

If the hindrances are even stronger, then we might need to actually let go of the breath and work more directly with the hindrances using our familiar tools. For instance, when the mind is sleepy, opening the eyes or standing up. Or perhaps with the hindrances of sense desire or ill will, turning directly to meet the hindrance with mindfulness. But this is kind of our last line of approach with the concentration practice. Our approach first is to try to stay with the breath, to try to meet the hindrance with the breath, to breathe with the hindrance. And then if it's not possible, or it feels like the hindrance is growing and getting stronger, then it might be time to begin to use our familiar tools, a familiar approach.

This is not a failure, by the way. This doesn't mean that you failed. It's just that these are the conditions right now. Conditions change. Sometimes it's easier to be with the breath. Maybe you've had a good night of sleep. Maybe sometimes the morning is your easy time, and then the day goes on and the mind gets a little more tired. So conditions change, and our responses to the hindrances need to be flexible.

As we cultivate the practice of concentration—staying with the breath, connecting in this relaxed way with receptive attention—the factors of jhana, these five factors, begin to grow and begin to counter the hindrances directly, encountering those forces that keep us from being present with the breath.

The five jhanic factors are—I'm going to use the Pali here, and I will translate this for you, but we tend to use the Pali for these terms for some reason. So I want you to start to get familiar with the Pali terms for these jhanic factors.

They are: *vitakka*, *vicāra*, *pīti*, *sukha*, and *ekaggatā*. *Vitakka* is directing the attention, aiming the attention, connecting to experience. *Vicāra* is a sustaining of the attention. Then there's *pīti*, which is rapture—interest, delight, delighted interest, rapt interest, that kind of quality of mind. *Sukha* is the Pali for happiness, a kind of contented, sweet flavor to experience. And *ekaggatā*: unification of mind, balance of mind, collectedness of mind.

Each of these five factors directly counters specifically one of the hindrances. And so as we cultivate the concentration, very naturally the hindrances start to reduce. They're actually suppressed in a way. These jhanic factors counter the hindrances but don't uproot them. It's not the kind of uprooting that happens, not the kind of elimination of hindrances that occurs when something is seen very clearly and released through wisdom. So it's a form of suppression—a skillful suppression of the hindrances.

As these hindrances are released through the cultivation of these factors, the mind moves into that access concentration where the hindrances are fully at bay. As the concentration develops, these five factors grow strong and the hindrances grow weak. And this, as Philip said last night, feels really good. The term for this is the bliss of seclusion. We are secluded from the hindrances for a time. It's a really powerful learning to begin to recognize what it is for the mind to not have these hindrances at work. When we get a taste of this, it begins to encourage us to keep going.

So I want to talk a bit about each of these factors, primarily about the first two: *vitakka* and *vicāra*, the connecting or aiming of the attention and the sustaining of the attention. Because of these five jhanic factors, these first two are the only ones that we have any possibility of engaging in personal effort with. The other three—*pīti*, rapture;

sukha, happiness; and *ekaggatā*, unification of mind—are a result of the practice. Essentially, the last three jhanic factors are a result of how we apply *vitakka* and *vicāra*. And so it's useful to take some time to explore: How do those two factors work? What is a skillful way

to engage with those two factors of jhana.

Essentially, this to me is the art of concentration practice—the art of any meditation practice, actually—how we engage with aiming and sustaining the attention. Can we cultivate a receptive, relaxed attention through the use of these two factors?

As a pair, these two work together. Sometimes they're described this way: the vittaka is like the hitting of the bell, and the vichara is the sustaining sound. As we connect with the attention, there's a kind of natural resonance or sustaining that happens as we aim and connect to experience. It depends on how we do it. If the connecting isn't done well, the resonance isn't quite as full.

And so that connecting—the way we connect—is actually one of the biggest areas of our exploration of effort. How do we connect? How do we aim the attention? The word "aiming" itself, the vittaka, the connecting to the object... often, at least when I first heard about this, I thought, "Oh, this means I go out to find the object. I grab onto it. I narrow my focus." That's the kind of idea I had in my mind about this factor, vittaka.

But there's a whole different way to aim. I've found through my own practice some perhaps gentler ways to aim the attention. So I'll share some of those with you, and some have already been mentioned. Sally mentioned the very first evening the notion of allowing the breath to come to you—settling back and receiving the breath. This is a form of aiming, but you're not going out to look for it. It's more a settling back, an intention: "I'd like to connect with the breath. May the breath come into the awareness."

Try that right now. Can you settle back? You can even use it as a request: "May the attention rest with the breathing." And then not so much try to do it. "May the attention rest with the breathing." Allowing the breath to come to you.

Sometimes when I'm exploring this receptive attention, I have a sense of wanting to counter that notion of narrowing. If I'm paying attention to something small—like the tip of the nostrils or in the abdomen—and we have this idea of the object being maybe the size of a quarter, then it's like we think we have to squish all of our awareness down into that little quarter-sized thing.

But a different approach might be: can you let that experience of the breath get as big as the awareness? Again, it's letting the breath come to you, but the awareness doesn't have a size or shape, really. Sometimes we can play with a sense of big awareness. Let the object get big. Let the breath get big to fill the awareness. This usually requires relaxation—relaxing the body, relaxing the mind—and then exploring this possibility: can the breath fill the awareness? Can I have the sense of the breath getting big in the awareness?

The breath can sometimes also be a delicate creature, kind of a shy thing. I've found sometimes that if I tried to turn and look right at it, I could hardly find it. But if I kind of snuck up on it from the side, then I could connect with it. It's almost like... I don't know if any of you have noticed with stars—I don't know what the stars are going to be like tonight—but if there are stars, you can check this out. If you look up at the stars, sometimes if there's a dim star, and you're looking right at it, it's hard to see. But if you look just off to the side, then you can see it.

Sometimes the breath is like that. If we're trying to zero in right on it, sometimes it's too much energy, and it just obscures the experience of the breath. If you just almost think of it as looking in the periphery of your attention for the breath—one way you might explore this right now: you're paying attention to what I'm saying. Notice you're hearing, but while you're hearing, let there be a little bit of a split attention. Be with the breath at the same time, but keep your attention on the hearing, and just notice—like from the side—you might be able to just kind of know the breath simultaneously.

Sometimes, and some of you actually reported this today, it's actually easier to connect with the breath when the mind also has another object in mind. If you find that, you can use it. You can connect to the experience of hearing, for example.

And then allow the attention to know that the breath is there. Again, a very gentle way of aiming—not this zeroing in kind of approach.

With vicāra, the sustaining of attention, I think with both vitakka and vicāra, we often have habitual relationships with those factors of mind that are bound up with our doing. "I'm going to get this done. I'm going to figure this out. I'm going to accomplish this." We have habitual relationships to these two qualities that often tend to be a little less effective in meditation than they are if we're doing something in our work, for instance.

Philip was talking about ordinary kinds of concentration, like holding a bottle under a tap. There we can focus in. But that kind of focus may not be the most skillful approach for concentration practice. It's possible—I certainly have gotten concentrated by grabbing on and holding on to the breath. But then I found that a kind of container was created that was tight and not so flexible.

So it's really well worth the time to be a little more patient with the vitakka and vicāra. Be a little more patient with this receiving of the breath and a gentle sustaining of attention. Let the way into the concentration be the kind of container in which concentration can naturally grow and deepen, as opposed to trying to hold on.

With sustaining also, we often have the idea of using force to sustain. We might sit down at the beginning of a sitting and think, "Okay, forty-five minutes, breath—let me be here for forty-five minutes." It's almost like we pick up the entire forty-five-minute sitting in that first second, trying to create and muster the energy to be present for that whole time right in the first moment.

Instead, a more helpful way to sustain the attention is just a very light touch. It's almost like noticing how that connecting or aiming of the attention—the way Philip was talking about connecting with the hand—we connect like this, and that connecting will have some lingering resonance, like hitting a bell. There will be some lingering sustaining of attention. We need to begin to get familiar with these two qualities together.

With just that gentle connecting, sometimes we need to simply connect, and there's a little sustaining, and then it's not that we're going someplace else, but the attention kind of floats a little bit, and you can just gently connect again. It sustains, then it floats, then you gently connect again. We use that gentle connection to create the sustaining.

It's just enough—just enough effort to stay with half a breath. When you sit down for that forty-five-minute sitting, that's all the effort you need to make in the first moment. Right now, half a breath. How much energy does it take to be with half a breath, an in-breath? And then do it again, an out-breath. And then enough energy for an in-breath. That's it. That level of energy is what constitutes a skillful sustaining of attention.

As we explore in that way, a momentum begins to build. We get familiar. We connect and we see, oh, there's a natural sustaining. We learn how to connect and have that sustaining naturally flow for a while. Then we don't have to keep connecting—we stay with the sustaining. We learn that sense of what sustaining is. And when it starts to weaken, we gently connect again.

I sometimes use an analogy for this pair, vitakka and vicāra. Kids sometimes ride these scooters, these Razor scooters—not motor scooters but kick scooters. You're standing on the bed of the scooter, holding on to the bar, and you have to put your foot down and tap the ground to get going. That tap is like vitakka. You're tapping, tapping, tapping. A gentle tap is very effective. You could put your foot down and push really hard, but mostly just a gentle tap, tap, tap.

And with that gentle tap, tap, tap, momentum builds. You can ride for a while. You get the feeling of what it's like to just ride—you simply hang out there and ride. And you become familiar with what it's like for that scooter to start feeling wobbly, sensing when you need to put the foot down again and tap.

It's a very similar experience with vitaka and vichara. We get familiar with that gentle connecting, receiving, that receptive, gentle connecting to the breath. We notice how long the vichara sustains, and then we learn essentially how frequently to keep that vitaka going. The more we practice, the more the sustaining begins to carry us. We don't need to put in so much personal effort. We don't need to aim so much.

Getting familiar with both of these qualities will support you in understanding the feeling of concentration as it begins to collect and gather.

The factor of vitaka, the aiming, counters the hindrance of sloth and torpor. If the mind is dull or sleepy, this is the factor that helps wake up the mind. You can actively use vitaka if you are sleepy. You can consciously use vitaka—consciously remembering. Connect. Connect. Maybe a little more frequently. Connect. Gentle connect. Maybe even a little more active. Sometimes it's helpful to use a little more precision to just track the breath. Just like, "Yep, there's the breath. Beginning, middle, end of the breath." Vitaka, vitaka, vitaka through the breath.

Vichara, the sustaining of attention, is the antidote to doubt. It counters the hindrance of doubt. Vichara is what connects us to the experience. We sustain the experience with the breath. Doubt feeds on being disconnected from experience, so as we sustain attention, there's no nourishment for doubt. The sustaining of attention supports the falling away of doubt.

With doubt, it's often helpful to just be willing to engage. Noticing, "Okay, yes, there's doubt here." If we're engaged with the questions of doubt—doubts in the teachings, doubts in the teachers, doubts in ourselves—then the mind is not connecting to experience. If we can simply say, "Yes, I see there's doubt, but I'm just going to see. I'm willing

to run the experiment and see. How about if I just try staying connected with anything? Let me just stay connected with a foot on the ground or my butt on the chair. Let's just see what happens."

Being willing to see, willing to run the experiment—this willingness is a form of confidence, a form of trust, a form of faith. And that also is a counter to doubt.

So that's vitaka and vichara, the first two factors of jhana. I'll speak much more briefly about the last three.

Rapture, or piti, is a delight, a joy accompanied by interest in the experience. It's often felt as physical, pleasant bodily experience. It might be felt as tingling or goosebumps or waves—pleasant wave-like sensations crashing through the body, almost orgasmic. There could be flashes of energy, flashes of light. You might feel like you're filled with water, saturated, or very heavy. Lots of different experiences arise.

The physical experiences are often one of the signs of rapture, but rapture is a mind state. It's the mind of delight and interest in the experience. It comes about as vitaka and vichara keep us connected with experience. As the momentum of vichara begins to sustain, the mind becomes much more interested in the breath. It actually starts to feel good.

The mind wants to stay with the breath, interested and happy to be there. As the rapture starts to grow, the practice begins to feel less effortful. Less personal effort is needed to keep it going, as the vichara is sustaining the practice on its own.

Sometimes the feeling of rapture has a quality of nourishment through the body, a mental refreshment as well. It's a very delightful state. And yet sometimes it can also get quite intense—the physical sensations can become rather strong at times. I'll speak about that in just a moment.

We have a tendency, because the sensations of rapture are often so pleasant—the physical experiences being essentially a side effect of the mental state—to get pulled into them, or into some idea of "Wow, this is so great." We tend to get pulled toward the rapture itself. See if you can stay with the breath. Let the rapture, let the physical sensations, be in the background if possible. It's almost like working with the hindrances—let the rapture recede. You're not trying to push it away, but neither are you directing attention toward it.

The rapture has come about as a consequence of staying with the breath. The conditions for rapture arising are staying with the breath. If you take your attention out of the breath and start paying attention to the rapture, wonky things can happen, and

you've removed the very conditions that were nourishing it. So it may just disappear entirely, or it can become unstable. See if you can let the rapture be in the background and stay with the breath.

The presence of rapture counters the hindrance of ill will. As the mind is contented, interested, happy to be with experience, ill will simply isn't in the picture. You can't even muster it up. Ill will? What's that? It's a very powerful counter. The mind just does not go there.

If the rapture becomes quite strong, the physical sensations can sometimes get intense. At one point, on a long concentration retreat, the rapture for me felt like being immersed in a bath of electrocution. That intense. Every single cell felt like it was vibrating.

Some ways to work with this: First, I reminded myself that this is a mind state, it's impermanent, it will pass. Then my teacher recommended allowing the energy of the rapture to flow down, putting attention in the hands and feet and letting the energy flow out through them. This was very helpful. I really suggest this practice. You might also use a request or exploration, as I mentioned before: What kind of breath would support calming this energy? What kind of breath would support tranquility? What would tranquilize the breath?

Sukha, happiness, the next factor, is a more purely mental pleasure. It does come with some bodily experience as well, but it's not so energetic. Sukha is very naturally a tranquilizing quality of mind. We really touch into the tranquility aspect of concentration through sukha. But it's also very, very sweet. I call it the "oh yes" state. It's like—why would the mind not want to be here? It feels like all my cells are aligned and pointed in the same direction. Just very sweet.

Again, both rapture and sukha, both piti and sukha, are not something we do.

We can support their arising through the aiming and sustaining of attention—these create the conditions for rapture and happiness to emerge. We can also incline in their direction by cultivating interest in the breath. Since interest is a component of rapture, we can simply incline toward being interested in the breath. If it's not possible, let it go. You don't want to be doing too much there. But sometimes we might ask ourselves: Is there a way to be interested in the breath? Then just let go of the question and see what happens.

We can also incline toward these qualities or create supportive conditions by encouraging a pleasure in the breath—breathing in a way that feels comfortable. This was one of the instructions my teacher gave me. Thanissaro Bhikkhu was my main jhana

teacher, and he said, "Breathe in a way that feels comfortable. You're welcome to adjust the breath so that it feels comfortable." Sometimes I would ask myself, "What kind of breath would be most comfortable right now?" And then just let the breath breathe at that point. Can there be some comfort in the breath?

As the breath becomes comfortable, the mind naturally begins to want to stay with it. That's really what supports the rapture and happiness arising—the sustaining of attention. But encouraging a comfortable breath supports the resting with the breath, and the pleasure of that also becomes a support for the arising of rapture and sukha.

Sukha counters restlessness. The mind is just really contented in that state. It is not interested in searching around for other things. So the hindrance of restlessness falls away as sukha gets strong.

We do have a tendency to cling to sukha—it is so pleasant. This is an area where we have to recognize that hindrances can come in; desire can arise around sukha. Fortunately, the next factor is the one that counters desire: unification of mind, balance of mind, *ekagata*.

It's in the vicinity of equanimity, but the mind also feels contented, balanced. There's a stillness. This is where the stillness of the practice really becomes strong, as ekagata becomes strong. The mind feels like there is no problem. Nothing it wants to change, just very balanced.

This counters sense desire because there's nothing the mind wants in that place of ekagata. No problem. The mind understands there's nothing that would make this experience better—which is exactly what sense desire is trying to do, to go out and get something to make something better.

The experience of unification of mind, all five of these factors working together, creates the state of access concentration. It shows us a happiness, a contentedness, a pleasure that is far beyond any pleasure that sense desire has to offer. As we touch into this possibility, it becomes much easier to let go of sense desire.

From the Dhammapada: "If by renouncing a lesser happiness one may realize a greater happiness, the wise one renounces the lesser, having regard for the greater."

We basically see that the pleasure related to sense desire is an inferior kind of pleasure. And the mind naturally begins to let it go.

So the hindrances start to fall away with concentration. Again, they're not uprooted with concentration—as the concentration state falls away, they can return. You may notice this sometimes as we go through cycles of concentration. Sometimes we find that as a concentration state falls apart, we are just overwhelmed with hindrances.

I remember on a metta retreat doing dishes one evening when the metta was a little bit weaker. I was doing the dishwashing and I was railing at the machine: "Who designed this stupid machine?" It's like, wow, look at this. Sometimes the hindrances can come back with a vengeance after a period of being concentrated.

So it's not like you've done something wrong. It's just part of this process. But we learn so much as the mind goes into these states, as we learn the conditions for the cultivation of concentration. We learn about our minds. We learn how our minds tend to want to gravitate towards the hindrances. We learn how to release them, how to set them aside, how to keep our attention in a place that leads to a greater form of happiness, in the service of liberation.

We really begin to appreciate a mind that is free from hindrances. And we have this wisdom—the mind wants to head in that direction. And so it starts to do that, and we start to want to cultivate the conditions that support concentration.

Again, we can't create the concentration. We can engage with our effort, our light touch, our gentle, receptive effort that creates a container for concentration to arise. We cannot create concentration, but we can nourish the conditions that support it. And those main conditions are relaxed, receptive attention and gentle connection.

CHAPTER 109

Concentration in the Service of Liberation

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella traces the Buddha's spiritual journey from his training with concentration masters through his ascetic practices to his ultimate realization that concentration serves liberation rather than being liberation itself. She illuminates the Buddha's pivotal insight: "Cultivate concentration. One who cultivates concentration sees things as they actually are."*
>
> *Fella distinguishes between two forms of concentration—one-pointed absorption (jhāna) and moment-to-moment concentration where awareness remains stable while knowing changing experience. She explains how the jhāna factors of vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, and ekaggatā manifest differently in each approach, and how insight requires attunement to change rather than the stilling emphasized in deep absorption.*
>
> *The talk explores the three characteristic marks that concentrated attention reveals: impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and not-self (anattā). Fella offers practical guidance on how to shift from stabilizing concentration toward insight practice—investigating the changing nature of the breath, opening to the flow of experience, and examining where we mistakenly seek lasting satisfaction. She emphasizes that this is a gradual path, comparing spiritual development to a rope slowly weathering on a beach, encouraging trust in small recognitions and the unfolding process of awakening.*

When the Buddha left home to search for the answer to his question—why do we suffer?—he sought out the main teachers of his day to help him find an answer. He sought out the teachers who had the most skill and studied with them. The teachers who had the most renown at that time were masters of concentration. They taught the very deep states of absorption.

As he studied with them and mastered their teachings—actually two successive teachers—he realized, "This doesn't answer my question. Their teaching doesn't answer my question." He reflected, "This dharma, this teaching, does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to nibbana, but only to the reappearance in the base of nothingness"—which is essentially the kind of concentration he was practicing with this teacher.

And so he understood that his question was different than what was currently being sought after. Somehow his question was a little different, and so he began to explore other possibilities, other paths. As Eugene mentioned the other night, he explored the extreme ascetic practices—kind of almost as a counterpoint to the blissful states of concentration. He went the other direction and really mortified the body. And he is said to have discovered, "This isn't the way either." That beautiful quote Eugene read: "Might there be some other way to enlightenment?"

On reflection, as Eugene mentioned, he recalled sitting under the rose apple tree, watching his father perform a spring ritual in the fields. He spontaneously entered into the first jhana, a state of concentration. It is said that he reflected at that point, "Might this be the way?" And then he got the response, "Yes, this is the way."

That has always been a curiosity to me, because he had explored concentration so deeply in his early exploration with his first teachers. He had explored concentration so deeply and determined that wasn't the way. And yet after all of his ascetic practices, he came back and touched into this recollection of entering into the first jhana and thought, "This is the way."

What I've been curious about—and there's not a particular answer that I can see in the texts about this question—but my sense is that he understood concentration can be used in the service of freedom. Concentration is on the path to freedom, but is not itself freedom. The times he talked to his other teachers, he said, "Is this all you teach? Is this the height of your dharma, these absorption states?" And they said, "Yes, this is it. Come and teach with me. You've mastered it as well as I have." But for him, that wasn't the answer.

My understanding is that he really began to see there is a place for concentration, but that it's on the path—it's not the goal. He said to his monks, to his monks and nuns, to his disciples, "Cultivate concentration. One who cultivates concentration sees things as they actually are." This points to the purpose for concentration. He didn't say, "Cultivate concentration—it feels really good." He said, "Cultivate concentration. One who cultivates concentration sees things as they actually are."

I'd like to talk about this tonight: What does it mean to use concentration in the service of liberation?

To explore this, I'd like to start by reviewing these two forms of concentration. Sally introduced them in the talk on the seven factors when she talked about the concentration enlightenment factor. She talked about these like two ends of the spectrum on concentration.

One-pointed concentration is cultivated using a single point of focus, the body and mind becoming very peaceful, quiet—essentially cultivating a stillness both of mind and of object. This is what we've been doing. This is the orientation of the practice we've been exploring for these six or seven days.

The other kind of concentration is what is called moment-to-moment concentration. This is a concentration cultivated with a stability of awareness even as that awareness knows changing experience. There's not necessarily a stilling of experience, but there is a stilling of awareness. The stilling of awareness means that whatever it meets, it knows fully and is non-reactive. It meets it, knows it, and then knows the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing. It might be a sight, a sound, a body sensation, a mood, an emotion, a feeling, a perception—just moment after moment, rapidly changing experience.

And typically with rapidly changing experience, we get hooked by some piece or other of that rapid flow. Some sight we see—"Oh, that's interesting, what about that?"—and we start thinking about it. Or we notice something we don't like: "How can I get rid of that?" And we start trying to control or fix or change. Our usual mind meeting changing experience is not terribly balanced. It's not very still. It meets something and shoots off. Philip talked about papañca the other day, this mind that is just proliferating around what we experience.

Moment-to-moment concentration is a kind of concentration where awareness meets what's happening and doesn't react to it, doesn't chase it, doesn't try to get rid of it. It knows it fully, meets it, understands it fully, and the next moment it's understanding the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing. Stability of mind, able to stay present for this river of what it is to be a human being.

The factors of concentration that we've talked about—vitaka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, ekaggatā: aiming, sustaining, rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness—are all present. As the mind collects, as awareness gets stable in this moment-to-moment concentration, perhaps we can understand vitaka and vicāra, aiming and sustaining, not as aiming and sustaining at one thing, but as meeting experience, meeting changing experience. Moment after moment, the aiming and sustaining becomes more about cultivating the continuity of awareness itself, of mindfulness itself. We keep checking in: Am I aware? What am I aware of?

With this gentle momentum of vitaka and vicāra in moment-to-moment concentration, the stability of mindfulness arises because of its continuity. As the mind settles and is able to be present, the hindrances fall away, just as in access concentration. There's a form of access concentration in moment-to-moment concentration where the

hindrances are at bay. Rapture arises, interest arises, happiness arises. And one-pointedness is understood as the mind fully meeting each new experience in a non-reactive way. Ekaggatā—what we translate as one-pointedness—is not a one-pointedness that meets the same object over and over again. It's a one-pointedness that fully meets whatever experience arises in this moment, and fully meets the next moment of experience. All of the factors of jhāna are present as the moment-to-moment mindfulness gets strong.

As Sally mentioned, all forms of meditation use both mindfulness and concentration. It's really a matter of where we are on a spectrum. Absorption practice, steady concentration practice, lies at one end, and open awareness lies at the other end of the practice spectrum. There are practices all through the range. So this is really just highlighting the two ends, but practices fall all over the place.

One of the most familiar practices that we have taught here at Spirit Rock and in this lineage is from Mahasi Sayadaw, where we direct attention to, for instance, the breath. When I practiced with Sayadaw U Pandita, I was taught to stay with the breath until I could remain with it for a full hour. Then I could open to all experience. But I was staying with the breath not in the way of stilling it—I was paying attention to all the little details, seeing the changing nature of that one object. To me, this kind of practice lies in the middle of the spectrum. It really cultivates concentration through focusing the mind on one object while getting genuinely interested in its changing nature.

This moment-to-moment concentration is extremely valuable, as you have all seen. I don't think I've talked to anyone who has said, "This is useless." Pretty much everybody sees just how useful it is.

The far end of the spectrum of one-pointed concentration—the absorption end, where we really enter into a stilled object and absorb into it—the understanding with that deep absorption is that while you're absorbed, there's not much room for insight to arise. There's room for insight as you go into that state and as you come out of it. But in the state itself, you're just absorbed. It's a steady state, no change. For insight to be possible, concentration needs to be attuning to change.

This is one of the key differences between concentration practices and mindfulness practices—whether the emphasis is on stilling or on noticing change. With the kind of concentration we've been practicing, to turn it toward being in the service of liberation, we need to begin turning toward changing experience. We allow the attention to begin picking up on change, as opposed to settling on the more stilling side. We've been emphasizing not looking at the detail of the breath, but more the rhythm or just a kind of flow, without a lot of detail.

So I'll talk in a little while about how to turn towards change, how we can take this practice and slightly shift direction. But first I'd like to explore what it is that we're opening to as we turn towards change. What is insight anyway? Insight into what?

The insight that is of interest here, in what the Buddha taught, comes back to the question he asked at the very beginning of his search: Why do we suffer? The insight the Buddha oriented towards, the exploration he undertook, was: How can I understand suffering? Is it possible to be free from suffering?

His exploration looked at that. And what he discovered—one way to frame what he said—was that one of the core reasons we suffer is basically because we want things to be different than they are. And we want things to be different than they are because we're not seeing things as they actually are. Remember, the Buddha said, cultivate concentration. One who cultivates concentration sees things as they actually are.

We want things to be different than they are. We don't like unpleasant experience. We want to get rid of it. We want pleasant experience to stay. We don't like it that pleasant experience changes.

The freedom that the Buddha found is most clearly described when he said: The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this is Nibbāna.

I like this definition. It's really simple. It's not describing some mind-blowing altered state. It's something I can envision living with in life. I can maybe have a kind of idea of what it might be like to live in this world without greed, without aversion, without delusion.

He goes on: Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims at neither one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and one experiences no mental pain and grief. This is Nibbāna. Freedom. Immediate. Visible in this life. Inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.

Again, an emphasis on visible in this life. The possibility of waking up, of freedom here and now. Here, now—this possibility, here, now. Not some afterlife of freedom. Not some transcendent possibility, but it almost feels like a sense of transcending through or with, rather than above.

Freedom is the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. The understanding is that what causes suffering is greed, aversion, and delusion. So the absence of those is what freedom is. Our exploration is looking into what creates, what holds the patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion in place.

Fortunately, we have some teachings of the Buddha to help us understand this. He pointed to a quality of ignorance, of not understanding, that is the root. I said a moment ago that we want things to be different than they are because we are not seeing things the way they are. This is ignorance—not seeing things the way they are.

Our usual definition of ignorance is something along the lines of not knowing something, a lack of knowledge. But the ignorance that underlies greed, aversion, and delusion is much more insidious than simply not knowing something. It's actually an active misperception.

The Buddha pointed to three primary misperceptions of reality that we could call human ignorance. We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. We tend to take what is unreliable to be a place where we might find reliable happiness. And we tend to take what is not self to be self.

These misunderstandings infuse the way we meet the world, inclining us—through the misperception of permanence—to think, "Oh, there's something that will make me happy. There's something out there I can hold on to that will make me happy." Really, the unsatisfactoriness of experience is a direct result of the fact that everything, everything, everything that we experience without exception is impermanent.

There is nothing in our experience that is stable even for a split second. And yet we misperceive this over and over again. We think we're finding something stable. We hang our hats on things. This misperception of permanence.

There are a couple of things that incline us as human beings to make this mistake. You're not alone in making it. One of the things that inclines us toward this error is that the change happening is occurring so rapidly. Our perceptual system is actually designed to piece things together so that there seems to be a coherence to what's happening.

We can perhaps do a thought experiment. Many of you may have seen, when you were younger, those Fourth of July sparklers. When I was a kid, we used to spin around in a circle with that sparkler and enjoy seeing the circle that appeared. We could create the illusion of a circle by waving the fire stick really quickly. This is the way our perception works—when something is moving and changing quickly, our perceptual system

will tend to create something as if it's there. Now, with the fire stick we know there's not really a circle in the air, but our perceptual system is fooling us into thinking it might be there.

This kind of thing happens in so many ways. We don't generally touch into the rapidly changing nature of experience. But through meditation, through concentration, the concentrated mind has the kind of precision to start seeing the rapidly changing nature of experience. This is one of the ways that concentration serves us—to help us see this rapidly changing nature. And why is that useful? Because without that understanding that things are actually changing, we are inclined to want to cling to them. As soon as we deeply understand that whatever is happening is impermanent—deeply understand that—the mind is not inclined to pick it up and say, "Oh yes, that's going to do it for me." Because it understands at a very deep level that it's impermanent. It's changing even as we think we want to pick it up. And so concentration can begin to reveal just how rapidly things are changing.

It also begins to reveal another familiar, human way that change tends to be masked: we tend to relate to experience through ideas rather than through direct experience. When we look at our body or explore our body, think about our body—and you may have noticed this some in the settling into concentration, feeling your body in a different way, feeling the vibratory nature of the body, the earth element, the fire element, the wind element. The wind and fire elements in particular are very dynamic. And yet as we think about our body, we think about it in terms of hand or foot or knee. We think about pain in the knee. It becomes a block of solidity. When we relate to our experience through concept, it tends to create something more solid. Those concepts, when we for instance think about a pain in the knee—if we just think about it as, "Boy, my knee really hurts"—it can feel like this solid mass. And yet when we actually start with concentration to explore the actual experience of the body underneath both the idea of knee and pain, we see a very dynamic experience that is not at all solid.

This was one of my early real understandings of just how helpful it was to see change—that as I saw the dynamic, changing nature of uncomfortable experience, the mind stopped relating to it as a thing and began just understanding it as something changing. I could see that as soon as the mind congealed around it as a thing, the pain shot up through the roof. But when the mind was just noticing the rapidly changing nature of it, there was nothing for the mind to react to, because as soon as the mind felt one sensation, it was gone. And then another one appeared and it was gone, and another one and it was gone. So there wasn't anything to be averse to. It was changing so quickly.

The concentrated mind begins to see this rapidity of change. Because things are changing so quickly, the mind also begins to understand that there's nothing that can possibly be a lasting source of happiness. This sense of taking something as satisfactory, this "this will do it for me, this is what's going to make me happy"—it's completely undermined. Through looking at our experience, looking at what we're holding on to, asking where we think we're going to find happiness—it comes in small ways, and it's kind of amazing just how powerful that delusion of greed is. Greed saying, "Yeah, if you get that thing, you're going to be happy." We know that a piece of chocolate is not going to do it for us forever. But that's not the way our mind works in that moment. It has jumped on that greed bandwagon and says, "Yes, I believe that chocolate is going to make me happy."

It's stunning. It's really amazing to see just how much our mind buys into this delusion. It's fascinating to look at it in small ways—small cravings, small places where we find greed. Maybe a second... we haven't had many desserts here, but a second chocolate biscotti, perhaps. Avoiding that, not doing it, just watching the wanting and seeing what happens.

Another side of this exploration is to really investigate—and this is actually one the Buddha recommended—what we think is going to make us happy, what we think is going to really satisfy us. He said to look at just how far that satisfaction actually extends. Pay attention to that.

So yes, you think that chocolate's going to make you happy? That second cookie is going to make you happy? Well, have your second cookie, but pay attention. How long does it actually make you happy? Are you even there for the happiness of the cookie?

I was talking to someone recently and I had encouraged her. I said, "Don't try to not go for the chocolate, but be there for the chocolate." It took her a while to get there. And then she began to see—oh, actually, that chocolate, it's very nice while it's there. It's actually delightful to be present for the sense pleasure of that. And when we're really available, sense pleasures can be very heightened when we are truly here. But it's heightened partly because we are not clinging to it anymore. And so we can really be there for that sense pleasure.

I did this myself. I was at the Forest Refuge and I would have a piece of Dove dark chocolate with a cup of coffee after lunch. And I paid attention to just how long the pleasure lasted. It lasted for way longer than I would have thought, actually. I'm told there's something about chocolate that generally makes you feel good—endorphins or

something. It did last for a couple minutes after I finished the chocolate. But it was a couple of minutes of happiness. The mind had bought into the belief that it would last longer than that.

When we start to look at this satisfaction, look at where we think we're going to find what we want, it's interesting not only to examine how long the pleasure extends, but also to ask: what is it that we're actually wanting? What is it that we actually want?

Sometimes we want a particular sense pleasure, like really wanting that chocolate. But when I really look at it, more often what I discover is that what I want is some idea. This was really clear to me at one point. I was sitting the three-month course and I heard descriptions of certain kinds of meditation experience—seeing things rapidly arise and pass away, sometimes called the arising and passing. I heard these descriptions, and I suffered a lot wanting that experience.

I could feel the wanting, I knew the wanting, I knew I was wanting it. And at one point I really just felt into the wanting. I was watching and observing that wanting. And at some point when I was observing it, what I noticed was that what was happening in my mind while the wanting was occurring was that I was envisioning telling my teacher that I'd had the experience. That's what I wanted. I wanted my teacher to recognize me for having had some experience. I had no idea what arising and passing actually was. I didn't know what I wanted. I just knew that I wanted to tell somebody that I'd had it.

This is the kind of thing—what we want is actually a construct of our own minds. That's rather amazing. When we start looking at this process of where we think we're going to find satisfaction, not only is the suffering of the wanting produced by the mind that's doing that, but what we want is created by our own minds. It's not any more substantial than a thought. Look at it in your own minds to see this.

And not-self. We take what is not-self to be self. We can do whole talks on this topic—it's huge. So I'll just say a few things briefly about this. Essentially, this is again a misunderstanding. We are interpreting

We're interpreting some experience, or some aspect of our experience, as being me or mine or I. There are many varieties of ways that we claim I or me or mine. Sometimes it's an aspect of feeling like I'm in control—I'm the one that decides things, I'm the one that chooses things. Or sometimes it's more a feeling of ownership: this is mine, this belongs to me. Or sometimes it might just be a sense of I'm the one who experiences

things, I'm the one who feels things. Or it might be an identification with emotions—I'm the one who's miserable all the time. We identify with a whole range of things that are just processes unfolding.

This pointing to not-self is really a pointing to the fact that everything happening to us is a kind of tumbling of causes and conditions. There's something happening here. A process is unfolding—a very cohesive process is unfolding. It's like a tree grows. There's a very cohesive process about that tree growing. An acorn falls to the ground. It gets enough nourishment, water, light. The conditions are such that it's one of those oak trees down there with a cage around it, so a deer doesn't come along and eat it. It has conditions that allow it to grow. There's no entity directing the process of growing a tree. It's nature. It's just causes and conditions.

And very similarly, the unfolding of our human life is nature. It's a process of causes and conditions. I think that part of the reason why we attribute self is because of this very interesting process that's a part of human nature—that is self-aware, that is self-reflectively able to know what is happening in this process. This process is aware of itself. This is just a part of being a human being, that this process is aware of the process itself. But that very reflective kind of process aware of itself—that's where the belief in self enters in. And so there's no entity in here, in the control tower, guiding, deciding. It is a tumbling forward of process.

We can start to explore this too, just looking at what it is we take to be me. What is it that we take to be me? The teaching on not-self is sometimes used as a spiritual bypass. We might say to somebody, or somebody might say to us, "Oh, get over it, you're just identifying with it." That's not what this teaching is about. There's a very famous saying by Zen Master Dogen: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."

This path begins by studying what we think of as self—not by bypassing it and pretending we don't believe that we have this sense of self. We have to understand how that misconception happens, so that it's not an overlay of "Oh yes, I believe there's no self." That's not even what the Buddha said. Beginning to explore our experience, the changing nature of our experience, as we turn and direct concentration towards the changing nature, we begin to see into these core misperceptions, these human misperceptions.

I've talked in this exploration of these core misperceptions about how we turn towards—basically, we turn towards change. We turn towards looking at what we think should make us happy. We look at where we think we're finding satisfaction. We turn towards looking at where these misperceptions are operating. What is solid in your ex-

perience? Turn towards that and see: does solidity really hold up? Is it really solid? Turn towards what we think is going to be satisfying. How long does the satisfaction actually last? Turn towards what we think of as I or me or mine. What do we see when we do that? So we can begin, with a concentrated mind, to investigate these.

misperceptions and begin to understand for ourselves that they are misperceptions.

But more directly, I'd like to talk about what you've been doing here and how this concentration that we've been cultivating is used—has been used during this time—and can be, going forward, used in the service of liberation.

In my own exploration of concentration practice, I found that just in the creation of the state of concentration, there was a lot that I learned. So much. We learn about what we cling to, where we get stuck, what's hard to let go of, where we start clinging to pleasure. We learn about our habits of mind in the very first days of the practice of just coming to the breath over and over again. Learning about our tendencies, our own personal habitual tendencies of where our mind tends to go. This is an understanding, a learning that we're gaining about our own minds, the habits of our own minds.

Also, something that some of you have talked about is that as the concentration deepens, there's this cyclical nature to it. It's not like this ever-descending deepening or steadying of mind. We go through a lot of cycles. And sometimes what happens is what one teacher, Michelle McDonald, calls the purity-purification cycle.

The purity cycle is the settling into the stillness, the hindrances being at bay. The mind gets a taste of purity there. It's very beautiful. You've all touched into at least some measure of this purity. For moments, as Philip was talking about, for moments we get tastes of this purity. And sometimes what happens is we get long tastes of this purity and we think, "Oh, I figured it out." I had one time when I was sitting in the dining hall and had a kind of opening to concentration just while I was sitting there, and all my pain went away. I was in this great state of bliss and I thought, "Wow, I figured it out. I'm never going to feel pain again." I believed that. So we go through cycles—the concentration collects, gathers, unifies; there's that sense of purity—and then the concentration falls apart.

Sometimes what happens, and some of you have talked about this, is that the purity has created the conditions for something that's been deep and held, not able to be touched into or met. That purity gives space for that to come up and arise, to come to the surface. This too is a part of the learning. It's not a mistake. It's part of the process—the process of learning how our minds cling, learning where the holdings are, the old patterns of holding. Purity, purification. We go through these cycles.

On this retreat, you may have gone through one or two of these. On a long retreat, a six-week retreat, you go through it over and over again. It's not that you somehow lose everything. The first few times I went through it, I felt like I had to start all over again. And because I thought I had to start all over again, I did have to start all over again. It's the idea that we have to start all over again that makes us have to start all over again.

But if you're staying with the process, with the purification as it happens, actually as that begins to soften or loosen or let go, the presence with that can support you to just move right back into a purity cycle.

We've talked about malleability of mind. The mind is way more malleable than we think. And with concentration, we can move in and out of states of concentration way more quickly than we might expect. So if you have the idea, "Oh, it's going to take me forever to get concentrated again," just know that's just a belief. Check and see if it's that thought itself.

I remember one time during a three-month course—somebody had fallen down in the meditation hall on Halloween. They had pumpkins lighting the hall so it was really dark in there, and somebody had fallen over and hurt themselves. I was the only other person in the hall, so I went into the staff office to let them know that somebody in the meditation hall needed help. And they were having a Halloween party in the staff office. I walked into the Halloween party and it kind of blew me away, after six weeks of silence.

It did take me a couple days to settle down, but the reason it took me a couple days to settle down was because it went something like this: "Oh, breath. Oh, that party. It's going to take me forever to settle down." Breath. Breath.

Oh, why did I have to go into that office? It's going to take me forever to settle down. Over and over again, that thought arose. That was what was taking me forever to settle down—the insertion of that thought.

I now know that a concentrated mind can have a very dynamic interchange, very engaged, fully normal, and then within minutes be back to concentration. So we learn about this malleability of mind as well. We learn about cause and effect as we explore creating the state of concentration. We begin to understand the conditions. What gets in the way of concentration? What supports concentration?

We've talked about this. We've talked about the jhanic factors that support concentration, we've talked about the seven enlightenment factors, and the fact that we cultivate certain ones of these and the rest arise as results. We engage with vitakka and vicara. Piti, sukha, and ekagata are the results. We learn how to cultivate the conditions. So we begin to understand the cause and effect nature of the processes of the mind.

This is actually a pointer to not-self—understanding that our system, our organism, is this process of cause and effect. And there is agency in this system. This process that knows itself, this process can make decisions. This process can choose to cultivate mindfulness. This process hears about mindfulness and can choose to cultivate it, seeing the results of that. And then we attribute, "I did that." The sense of self is an afterthought, basically.

So in terms of shifting, tomorrow morning in the guided meditation we'll offer a guided meditation about this shift. And then it's your choice whether you continue over the next two days to deepen in the concentration, or perhaps from time to time explore the power of concentration to see into things as they are. There's a really unique opportunity you have here to see just how powerful the mind can be when it's concentrated.

We'll explore this a little in the morning, but just as a description: when we're in one-pointed concentration, we can shift to change in different ways. One of the most straightforward, perhaps the most comfortable given what you've all been doing—most of you have been really right with the breath—would be to shift how you are paying attention to the breath. Becoming more interested in the changing nature of the breath. Looking at what is the sensation that lets you know the in-breath is beginning. How do those sensations change? What are the changes of sensation as the breath continues? What about the ending of the breath? How do you know it ends? Just noticing the changing nature of the breath itself.

This is a subtle shift in the way you're paying attention. It doesn't have to be dramatic. But it begins to orient the mind towards this exploration of change, beginning to see the breath as a process.

The breath is a great object of meditation because it breathes itself, basically. We don't have to try to breathe. And in this process of witnessing, again, we see the not-self nature of breathing. There's this process going on, this process of breathing taking care of this life. That's really a beautiful thing—this process that breathes, that wants to breathe to keep itself alive. It's like metta in action.

So that's one way we can turn towards the changing nature of the breath. Another way would be to let go of the breath entirely. For moments, you could play with releasing the focus on the breath and just opening—perhaps to the whole body, or opening to the body and hearing, and just seeing what's changing. This flow of being a human being, the dynamic experience of changing sounds, body sensations.

Even just right now, let your attention be broadly connected to your body. What are you experiencing? Pulsing, tingling, hardness, coolness, softness.

Opening to the changing nature of experience, we also become aware that attention itself picks up on different experiences. Attention connects with something, and then that attention connected with that object goes away and another attention comes. We start to see that process as well.

So insight deepens over time. It starts from hearing a description—the Buddha's pointing. If the Buddha didn't point these things out, the likelihood that we would see them is so small. And so hearing this, we may start to be curious and investigate. We start to get little tastes, little tastes of insight, just as we get little tastes of peace and ease. We get little hints, little pointers to seeing clearly.

I used to think there was going to be some big mind-blowing insight after which I would be happy forever. And what I really have seen so much is that the practice and the insights are really gradual. The Buddha actually described the unfolding of practice through an analogy—practice unfolding very gradually. He said it's like a rope from a shipwreck, the rigging that lands on the beach. Day by day, the sun, the sand, the wind wear away at that rope. If you were to go to that beach and look at that rope day to day, you're not going to see much changing. But six months, a year later, you go back, you try to pick up that rope and it will have fallen apart.

And so with the small recognitions—sometimes we don't even see them. Sometimes we don't even see the changing understanding that's developing. So a lot of this involves trust. Trust on the side of the small pointings that Philip was talking about, the small pointings to peace, to ease, as being the indication that we're on the right path. And likewise with insight—just small pointings, small recognitions. Oh, I see how wanting a piece of chocolate actually isn't satisfying. Small things.

It really is a gradual path. And so, trust in that gradual unfolding.

CHAPTER 110

Satipaṭṭhāna and Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · 54 min

In this opening talk for a monthlong retreat, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive introduction to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), the Buddha's detailed instructions on cultivating mindfulness toward liberation. She explores the mysterious quality of mindfulness itself—how it functions as both a mental factor and an embodied sense of intimacy with experience. The talk distinguishes between ordinary awareness and the transformative perspective shift the Buddha encourages: turning toward experience as phenomenon rather than reacting outwardly to change circumstances.

Fella examines both translations of satipaṭṭhāna—"foundations of mindfulness" (emphasizing what we attend to) and "establishing of mindfulness" (emphasizing how we attend). She guides practitioners through each of the four foundations: body (kāya), feeling tone (vedanā), mind states (citta), and dhammas, highlighting their progressive refinement from simple bare recognition to contemplating the conditioned nature of experience. The Buddha's instruction to know "the body as a body" points toward an impersonal understanding even while dwelling intimately in direct experience.

The talk unpacks the key phrase repeated throughout the sutta: "one abides contemplating... ardent, fully aware, mindful, free from desires and discontent." Each element reveals qualities essential to practice—abiding as relaxed dwelling, ardency as wholehearted yet balanced commitment, and the active process of freeing oneself from reactivity. Andrea emphasizes that this practice naturally leads to wise response rather than passive acceptance, opening practitioners to act from wisdom and compassion rather than automatic reactivity.

For the talks during this retreat, in the first portion, we as a team decided to explore primarily the Buddhist teachings on the four foundations of mindfulness, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. This teaching includes some of the Buddha's most clear and detailed instructions about the practice of mindfulness. That's what we will be exploring for the first few weeks.

We'll follow that later in the retreat with talks on one of the lists that's actually mentioned in the Satipaṭṭhāna. Towards the ending of the sutta, there's a list called the Seven Factors of Awakening, which is a set of qualities that we both actively work to cultivate and that naturally grow and develop as we practice mindfulness—qualities that

lead us towards freedom, towards awakening. In the second part of the retreat, we will go in depth into those qualities of supporting your cultivation in the direction of freedom and liberation.

Tonight I'd like to focus on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta itself, this teaching on the four foundations of mindfulness, and a little bit about mindfulness itself.

I think we all kind of feel like we know what mindfulness is. We've all been doing it a lot—you're here on a mindfulness retreat. And yet sometimes when we really start to explore, it becomes more mysterious. I've been practicing for twenty years, and the more I explore my mind and explore this quality of mindfulness, the more mysterious it seems. The more I'm not really sure I can give a clear definition. But we'll try. We'll explore that a little bit tonight.

There are some rough definitions we can work with. Often mindfulness is talked about as the state of being present or being aware, or an experience of witnessing what's happening, or perhaps the simple recognition of knowing what's happening while it's happening. Yet some of those definitions have a sense of a mental factor, a mental functioning. And it is mental—the quality of mindfulness is understood to be a mind state, a mental factor. Yet it can also create something more embodied, a feeling kind of experience of being connected with experience, intimate with experience. Those words—intimacy, connection—have a different quality to them than being aware or knowing what's happening while it's happening. So mindfulness has this quality of connectedness. Last night, Philip used the phrase "the felt sense of experience."

The mindfulness that we cultivate for our meditation practice, for the understanding of our hearts and minds and the exploration of what's going on in here—it's based on a completely ordinary, normal functioning of mind. It's just a natural part of being human: this self-reflexive capacity of the mind to know that we know. This is the basis from which mindfulness grows. The fact that we can know that we know. Be aware of our experience.

We have this capacity to know what's happening in the present moment while it's happening. Yet so often we are not aware of that. Actually, there are times when that simple quality of being aware of what's happening while it's happening occurs to us throughout the day, quite naturally. In fact, I like to think that without this simple capacity, we wouldn't even be able to walk out the door. There's some part of our mind that's aware of where our body is in space, some part that's able to navigate the world. Some of that has to do with this ability to recognize what's going on.

But a lot of times what happens when we become aware of what's happening in the present moment is that we immediately start to do something with it. We might see some trash on the ground, and rather than recognizing, "Wow, I've become aware of trash on the ground"—which is very useful, I mean, it's useful to recognize the trash and do something about it, to pick it up—we don't often recognize that we have recognized that. We don't notice that mindfulness has arisen.

This, I think, is one of the pieces I'm so grateful to the Buddha for. He talked about this really simple, ordinary quality of mind and said, "Hey, this quality is worth looking at. This quality is helpful to cultivate." And as Philip mentioned last night, it's helpful to cultivate in a particular way—towards this question of what it means to move towards freedom from suffering. I'd like to explore that question of the perspective we bring when we cultivate mindfulness on the path of freedom. What does that mean, as opposed to just being aware of what's happening?

If we think about perhaps the way we were before we started meditating, or just the way we understand an ordinary person we might meet on the street—if we meet someone who's having some kind of reactive emotion, say anger, and we ask them the question, "Hey, do you know that you're angry?"—they're going to look at you kind of funny.

"Yeah, I know that I'm angry." It's not a surprise to them. And yet, to ask them at that point to just notice that they're angry—it doesn't have a lot of traction. Either they don't quite understand what you mean, or just noticing that they're angry has the function of basically amping up the anger. Because for most people, noticing that you're angry means thinking the thoughts about what you're angry about.

This is the terrain of the perspective shift that the Buddha is asking us to make. We need a new perspective around our experience. Often when we have something arising—a reactive emotion—we may be oriented outwards towards whatever it is we're reacting about, thinking about that thing. What do we need to do about it? How do we fix it? How do we change it? And that very process, if we're not also aware that reactivity is happening right now, will fuel the reaction. It's like we've got our foot on the gas pedal of that reactive emotion, and so it exacerbates the reactivity.

What the Buddha is asking us to do—and what seems to be repeated throughout the Satipatthana, which I'll explore in a few minutes—is to see if we can turn towards just what we are experiencing, rather than being oriented outwards towards what we should do about it. Oh, there's anger happening. What is it? What is the experience of anger happening here and now? We recognize what's happening as happening in this body, in this mind, as a phenomenon, as experience arising here.

That perspective shift creates the conditions for something different to happen. You all know this. You've done quite a bit of practice, and you've experienced that shift. So I want to highlight this piece of mindfulness practice: it's not just about being aware. It's about being aware and understanding that what we are aware of is a phenomenon—a human phenomenon, let's say, because we are human beings. In exploring mindfulness, we are starting to explore what is the experience of humanness.

That includes the whole range of humanness: all of our reactivity, all of our beautiful emotions, the states of concentration that come as we collect and gather our attention, the bodily sensations that happen as we walk down the hill, the feelings that arise as we lie down in bed at night, the experience of coolness as we take a drink of water. Everything that happens to us, we can recognize: this is the experience of being human right now.

That shift—towards this recognition and away from "what do I need to do about this experience?"—is crucial. Because I think you're all familiar with the tendency, as we meet our human experience, to think, "Well, this flavor isn't exactly what I want right now. It's not the flavor I would really choose in this moment." And so we ask ourselves how we can go about getting something a little more pleasant, or how we can get rid of these unpleasant things, or how we can space out and just ignore the whole thing.

Rather than being curious and interested in the experience of humanness, we're trying to adjust it to be some other way. And that is where a lot of our suffering happens—in that wishing our experience were some other way than it already is in this moment.

As I talk about this, I always think it's important to clarify: turning towards the experience of being human, recognizing that anger is arising right now—this is not to say that we never act. Sometimes as we talk about mindfulness and being with experience as it is, people get a sense that meditators are just passive, that we don't take action, we just sit there and let experience flow over us without doing anything about it.

In my experience, what being mindful does—when we actually meet experience and open to the reality of being human with an open heart, not a contracted heart, when we meet experience with interest and curiosity—is that it creates the conditions for a wise response to arise, as opposed to an automatic reaction.

That automatic reaction is our usual approach. At least I know in my own life, that's been my usual approach when something happened to make me angry: I need to do something about this. And it's kind of knee-jerk—something unpleasant, got to get rid of it, got to figure out how to fix it.

With mindfulness practice, responsiveness actually grows. We begin acting from a completely different place. Rather than acting out of reactivity, out of confusion and greed and anger and aversion and frustration, we start acting out of wisdom and compassion and generosity and kindness. There's a whole host of beautiful qualities of mind that inspire action in our lives and in the world. Mindfulness opens us to that place where we can touch into being motivated by these beautiful forces of mind.

And yet, as we're exploring this, as we're practicing with this, of course there are going to be times when we feel that contractedness and yet we still have to act.

You know, if you're in a situation of danger or a situation of abuse, to just sit there and wait until you have a completely non-reactive response before you take action is not necessarily so helpful. And so we have to learn to navigate it—to honor the arising of our strong reactivity, to meet it, to recognize it, and in that simple recognition, at least we are aware that we may be acting from it. We have a little bit of a chance, a little bit of a choice point to perhaps bring in a reflection on compassion or wisdom even as we are recognizing.

Even just recognizing: yes, this is an abusive situation, and boy, do I hate that person, and yes, it is compassionate for me to get away from this. To recognize that it's a process of purification really—purifying our minds.

And so the teaching of Satipaṭṭhāna is really the Buddha's encouragement for us to cultivate this quality of mindfulness from a perspective that points us towards freedom.

Satipaṭṭhāna, this word, contains sati, which is the Pali word for mindfulness, and the second part of the word, paṭṭhāna, which is translated in a couple of different ways that I think shed some different light on what is being pointed to.

One very common way of translating Satipaṭṭhāna is "the foundations of mindfulness." There are four areas offered, and so often the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is described as the teachings on the four foundations of mindfulness. In this way, the four areas are body, feeling, mind states, and dhammas—and I'll talk about that in just a minute in more depth.

This translation of "foundation of mindfulness" emphasizes that there are aspects of experience that are helpful to pay attention to. It emphasizes what we are paying attention to in order to support this cultivation of mindfulness. The term "foundations of mindfulness" encourages us to think about what we're noticing.

Another translation for this word Satipaṭṭhāna is "the four establishments of mindfulness." To me, this points a little bit more to the establishing of mindfulness—that we explore how to create the conditions to allow mindfulness to flourish. This points more to how we bring our attention to experience as opposed to what we are paying attention to.

Those two translations—the foundations of mindfulness and the establishing of mindfulness—I think it's important to recognize that both what and how we pay attention are important.

So if we explore what it means to establish mindfulness in these four areas, mindfulness of body is the first establishment of mindfulness. This is exploring, opening to the physical sensation level of experience. Philip was pointing to this in the guided meditation this morning—the feelings of heaviness and weight, and so many different sensations of pressure, vibration, tingling, pulsing, just this felt sense of the body.

This is a great foundation for mindfulness because it is so obvious in so many ways. Although I have to say, when I first started practicing mindfulness, it wasn't very obvious. It's kind of like I was experiencing my body from the neck up. I was really in my head, and even though I was a dancer and could control my body, when people told me to feel into the feeling of the body, I was kind of mystified as to what that meant. And so it took some time to begin to explore and feel into all the different sensations of experience. It's almost like we have to learn the language that the body is communicating with us with.

The exploration of the body is one of the more obvious areas. I can call your attention, for instance, to the sensations of your hands, and probably you can feel that. Or just noticing the sensations of your hips against the chair or cushion or bench. There's some obvious sensations in the body. And so as a place to begin mindfulness, to me this points to some of the wisdom of the Buddha—to start with something that's pretty easy. We start by connecting with experience that's obvious and easy.

It also begins to help us tease apart what is the experience of the body and what's the experience in relationship to the body. If there's pain in the body—this is a kind of unpleasant, strong unpleasant sensation in the knee or in the back—there's that sensation. There's unpleasantness in the body, and probably sensations of burning or sparking or aching or dullness or throbbing. So there's that sensation level of experience. And then there's the whole host of "I can't stand this, I hate this, I have to fix this, I have to change this." There's a whole host of reactivity to that experience.

What we see as we pay attention to our experience with mindfulness is that the juxtaposition of those two things—physical pain and reactivity—makes the entire experience way worse. It almost seems like the physical pain is worse when we are reactive. There's this really tight feedback loop between body and mind, and in ways that are surprising, we almost confuse an experience of the body with the experience of the mind.

So as we start to get familiar with the sensation level of experience, we can begin to recognize: oh yes, there's that burning sensation, and oh, I really don't like it, and ooh, feel how that burning gets stronger as I don't like it. We can start to see how the mind influences the experience of the body. This is an important part of beginning to recognize what the experience of the body actually is, as distinct from our relationship—our mental relationship—to it.

In particular, in the first three foundations of mindfulness, and especially in the foundation of the body, there's a strong encouragement to simply take experience as it is. There are places where it says: when you're breathing in, know that you're breathing in. Breathing out, know that you're breathing out. When you're walking, know that you're walking. When you're reaching, know that you're reaching. It's really simple—just a very straightforward encouragement to know what's happening with the body while it's happening. When there's the experience of pressure, know that the experience of pressure is there. It doesn't say notice the experience of pressure and do something about it. It says notice the experience of pressure and be aware of that.

Breathing in, know that you're breathing in. Breathing out, know that you're breathing out. That's actually a great meditation instruction to work with. It's so simple. You don't have to get all close and figure out what the breath feels like. It's like: yeah, breathing in—I know I'm breathing in. That's good enough. Breathing out—yeah, I know I'm breathing out. That's good enough. That's one of the first meditation instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta. Really simple, just this bare knowing of what's happening with the body. And that kind of simplicity is repeated for these first three foundations in particular.

The second foundation, the foundation of feeling, is an encouragement to recognize pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. Just whatever's arising has some flavor of being pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. And this goes on all the time. While you were eating your meal, this was happening with every single bite. Flavors arising: ooh, tofu—hmm, not liking tofu. Ooh, tahini sauce—liking tahini sauce. There's that kind of fluctuation of pleasant and unpleasant all through our day. We walk down the hill seeing things, liking things, not liking things. We take certain things as pleasant, certain things

as unpleasant. This is a feature of every moment of experience—it's got this flavor of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. And again, the Buddha's encouragement with this foundation of mindfulness is: when pleasant experience arises, know pleasant experience is arising. When unpleasant experience is arising, know unpleasant experience is arising. Again, very simple instructions.

The third foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of mind states—being aware of what our mind is doing, essentially some of these relationships with experience. This section is again very simple. The teaching highlights a few straightforward areas: know whether aversion is present or absent, know whether greed is present or absent, know whether delusion is present or absent, know whether concentration is present or absent, notice whether distraction is present or absent. There are eight or nine states that are encouraged—notice whether these states are present or absent. Again, if aversion is arising, know aversion is arising. That's the instruction in the Satipatthana Sutta. It doesn't say notice aversion arising and then try to figure out how to get rid of it.

So these first three foundations in particular have a strong emphasis on the simplicity of noticing human experience, being aware that feelings are arising in the present moment, that body sensations are arising in the present moment.

Mind states are arising in the present moment. Just this simple. This is what human experience is.

This—what we might call bare recognition of what's happening right now—is a feature of this perspective of mindfulness that the Buddha offers for heading us in the direction of freedom.

The fourth foundation is a little more complex in its structure. It's called the mindfulness of dhammas, and I like to think about it as awareness of our experience through the perspective of the Dharma teachings. How do we apply what we learn in the Dharma to our direct experience? This foundation explores various lists, and one that we'll talk about in a day or two is the hindrances—those states of mind that tend to catch us up often: desire, ill will, doubt, restlessness and anxiety, and sloth and torpor. These are the states of mind that tend to get in our way.

There's an encouragement in the fourth foundation to notice if one of those hindrances is arising or if it's not arising. Even just that simplicity: Is doubt arising, or is doubt not arising in this moment? This very simple exploration covers every moment of experience. Either doubt is present or it's not. We can simplify and look at our experience in this way.

So the fourth foundation is asking us to explore these teachings of the Buddha. And in this foundation, there is an encouragement to begin to recognize that the hindrances tend to get in the way. We're encouraged to recognize what helps us let go of the hindrances. What is it that gets us caught? How do they come to be? How do they dissipate? We're encouraged to see the conditions that lead toward the creation of the hindrances and those conditions that lead toward their release.

There are other lists also in this fourth foundation—different Dharma perspectives through which we're asked to look at our experience and begin to explore how we might apply each teaching to this moment of experience. In particular, there's a lot of curiosity in this foundation about the conditioned nature of experience. How does this experience arise in the mind? What are the conditions that put it together? What allows it to fall apart? What supports the continuance of wholesome states? There's this encouragement to reflect on the conditioned nature of experience and the impersonal nature of experience.

In this fourth foundation, we are exploring whatever's happening in the present moment through the lens of the Buddha's teaching, the Dharma. We'll explore these foundations together over the course of the next few weeks. This is really just to give you a sense of the direction or the flavor of where this teaching as a whole points. It points to a kind of mindfulness that is a non-judgmental, non-interfering awareness of what's happening while it's happening—and yet an understanding, a curiosity about what states help me move toward freedom and what states are in the way of that movement.

Early in the sutta, the Buddha offers a phrase that gives a sense of the way it's helpful to bring our attention to experience. What I just went through was really about what we're noticing, and a little bit about that non-judgmental exploration of mindfulness around what we're noticing. This phrase that the Buddha offers at the beginning of each of the foundations gives us a flavor of the qualities of mind that will help support mindfulness.

The phrase is: "One abides contemplating our experience." It's repeated for each foundation. "One abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world. One abides contemplating feelings as feelings, ardent, mindful, fully aware, free from desires and discontent for the world. One abides contemplating mind states as mind states, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."

This phrase adds a richness to what we're doing—how we're doing it, really. I'd like to look at this phrase a little bit. What does it evoke for us? These words are actually quite potent.

Even just the first two: abides contemplating. As you explore right now, what does it feel like when I say the word "abide" with your experience? What does that evoke? Abide with the body. To me it conveys a sense of dwelling, a sense of home, a sense of resting, of contentment. Abiding in the body. Abiding, contemplating.

The contemplating part is not just abiding and spacing off into the netherworld, but abiding and contemplating the body. We actually gather that abiding around an area of experience. To me, these two words together—abides contemplating—encourage a relaxed,

Open, receptive meeting of experience. One abides contemplating the body.

How does that feel as you let that phrase land? Abide contemplating the body. Just with a simplicity—there is a body. Or abide contemplating an in-breath. Abide, knowing an out-breath.

One abides contemplating the body as a body. That's an interesting phrase. The body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states. What might that mean?

I think this is bringing in some wisdom to this contemplation. We are recognizing the body in and of itself—recognizing the body as a body, not me, not my body, but just: this is a body as a body. So it begins to bring in something impersonal, even as we connect and dwell right in the middle of it.

There's almost a paradox just in the speaking of it. But as we feel into it—abide contemplating, there is a body—can there be a landing in that, and yet a knowing of the fact that this body is here? There are so many conditions for this body that are not my doing. Well, that's not completely true. We eat a certain amount and it influences whether we gain or lose weight, so it's not entirely beyond our influence. But the conditions for this body to come into being, this body made of the same stuff that the rest of the universe is made from—this is the perspective that the body is just stuff, elements.

There's one teaching that I love that comes from an unexpected source, perhaps—from Carl Sagan, the astrophysicist. He teaches us that every single atom in our bodies, every single particle of physicality, was forged in the heart of a star. We are star stuff. It's not mine. It doesn't belong to me. It's really just the universe expressing itself.

Abides contemplating the body as a body. Abides contemplating star stuff as star stuff.

Ardent. This word brings in several pieces. It brings in the heart quality—ardent has a sense of wholehearted, heartfelt connection with experience. It also brings in a sense of commitment and diligence to practice. So it includes both the heart qualities and the sense of "I'm going to do this." There's a level of needing to commit to being present, opening to abiding with moment after moment after moment.

This is a delicate balance, this area of ardency, of diligence, of persistence—because it's so easy to have that turn into forcing, pressing, overdoing it. There's a way that this teaching encourages us to abide *with* ardency. So it's bringing in both a sense of relax and commit. They're not opposites, those two. And so there's a delicate dance that happens right in the present moment. We commit to just enough ardency to meet this moment—no more than that, because that's all we can really do: meet this moment. And then we do it again and again and again.

Right now, how hard is it to notice the sensation of your hips against a chair or cushion or bench? How about now, to notice the sensations of your hands? How about now, to notice the sensations of your feet? Or your lips contacting each other?

As I name each thing, often it's pretty... it's not a lot, right? It's not a lot to notice that in that moment. There it is. That meeting of experience in that moment—for that moment, that's enough.

But we have to remember to do it in the next moment too. And so that's the dance—enough commitment to be present for this, and then do it again, and again, and again. And we'll forget. In the moment when you remember, it's just, okay, here I am. Can I be with this, and this, and this?

Joseph Goldstein sometimes talks about the secret teaching of the half breath. Just enough energy is necessary to connect with half a breath at a time. How hard is it to know an in-breath right now? Just enough—that's all you need to do, know this in-breath. And then this out-breath. That level of effort, repeated, is how the ardency is expressed.

The next phrase is "fully aware." Abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware. Here too, I think the context in which this is used brings in the clear understanding of things as they are—fully aware that whatever experience is happening right now is impermanent. It's arising and ceasing. Experiences arise, they may stay for a moment or for a little while, they stay however long they do, and then they cease. Just knowing clearly, fully aware, that phenomenon is rolling on—the impermanent nature of experience.

Some teachings also include in this area being fully aware of the purpose towards which we are doing this practice. This really brings in the intention that Philip was talking about last night. Why are we doing this? It's not simply something we just do. It takes a lot of commitment to come here for a month. So you all have some connection with your purpose for this practice. Remembering that purpose infuses the practice with more heart. I think it infuses it both with heart and wisdom, to understand why we are engaged in this practice.

The last phrase, "free from desires and discontent for the world"—it sounds like you're supposed to be done with desires and discontent, the way it's phrased in this particular translation. And yet, we're not going to be able to get there right away. Whatever's arising, probably there are going to be desires and discontent arising around it. So there's pain arising in the knee and there's frustration. There's discontent with that pain. And yet, what we can do, what we can begin to do, is to recognize: okay, yes, there is the pain and there is the frustration. We recognize that mind state itself. Right there, we are starting to move in the direction of freeing ourselves from being caught by that frustration.

Actually, I believe it's been pointed out that this phrase "free from desires and discontent for the world" could be expressed not in the past tense but in the active tense: freeing oneself from desires and discontent. So we engage. We abide contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world. It's a process that we engage in, one that begins to allow us—this very process of meeting desire and discontent begins meeting it in this way of, "Oh, discontent is arising right now." That is the step that begins to move in the direction of freedom.

We're not going to be able to flip a switch. We see discontent arising. We see frustration, anger, aversion arising. We know it. We'd like it to stop. It would be great if we had a switch we could flip and say, "Oh, anger, that's not useful. Let me turn that off." How successful are we with that? I'm not very successful with it.

But what's really useful is that there is a kind of turning towards: "Oh, that's anger. What's that like? That's frustration. Ah, what's that like?" And the experience that we find in that moment—rather than being caught by it, tied up in knots wondering how to get rid of this—it's more like, "Oh, let me see what it's like." There's a huge difference in the experience there. And the felt sense of that is an understanding of how it does start to free us from that state.

So, this practice of mindfulness the Buddha points to encourages us to abide contemplating our experience with heart, with diligence, really understanding the impermanent nature of experience and exploring what it means to turn towards those feelings of desire and discontent rather than being driven by them. This process is the process that will very naturally lead us to freedom.

And that is the promise of the Satipatthana Sutta. It says at the beginning that this path is the direct path to freedom. At the end of the sutta, there's actually a kind of promise. It says if you engage in this for seven months, you will have freedom. Not to speak of seven months—if you engage with it for one month, you will find freedom. Not to speak of one month—if you engage with it for seven days, you will find freedom. Now, that's really continuous practice for seven days. But the Buddha points us right to freedom through this practice of mindfulness.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 111

Attitude and Delusion

Andrea Fella · 1h02

> *In this talk from a month-long retreat, Andrea Fella offers a penetrating exploration of the third foundation of mindfulness (cittānupassanā), focusing on how we can investigate not just obvious mind states, but our underlying attitudes and relationships to experience itself. She introduces the practice question "What's my relationship to this experience?" as a tool for uncovering hidden mental attitudes that often operate below conscious awareness.*
>
> *Fella outlines four primary flavors of attitude we might discover: greed (ranging from obvious craving to subtle excitement or leaning in), aversion (from anger to subtle dissatisfaction or agendas to make things go away), delusion, and balance of mind (equanimity, calm, curiosity, loving attention). She emphasizes that mindfulness of unwholesome states naturally creates conditions for their weakening, while awareness of wholesome states strengthens them—making this investigation directly supportive of liberation.*
>
> *The talk offers an especially thorough examination of delusion at multiple levels: gross disconnection and non-mindfulness, the filtering of experience through unrecognized perspectives and views (including cultural conditioning), and the deepest level where we mistake the impermanent for permanent, the unreliable for reliable, and what is not-self for self. Fella shares a personal example of mindfully investigating spacing out during breakfast, discovering that even states we assume are inherently non-mindful can be known with awareness. This teaching connects directly to the Buddha's definition of nibbāna as the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion.*

Tonight I'd like to continue exploring the third foundation of mindfulness—mindfulness of mind states, mindfulness of mind. We've been exploring this for several days, but it just seems to me like there's so much there. I wanted to bring in a slightly different perspective, which I understand Nikki introduced yesterday morning in the instruction period.

This involves exploring the third foundation of mindfulness not only as kind of exploring the obvious mind states that come up as we meditate, as we meet our experience. Of course we're going to notice mind states of frustration or anger or confusion just as we're going through the day. Thoughts come by and we'll react to those thoughts, and of course mind states come up in that way. We've been exploring how to meet those

states, explore them, open to them, and be with them—not with the agenda to get rid of them, fix them, or change them, but more with the curiosity of what is this? What does it mean to be a human being experiencing this state of mind?

Another way that this foundation can serve us is as an exploration not only of the obvious states of mind that come and go during our day, but also in terms of exploring how we relate to experience and how we are relating to practice itself. These kinds of mind states may be more hidden, below our conscious awareness. They may be in the background, hidden from us a little bit. I'd like to explore how we can use this teaching on mindfulness of mind states to begin to explore our relationship to experience.

Every single experience we have—whether it's seeing a sight, hearing a sound, or feeling a body sensation—there is some relationship that our mind has to that experience. Our mind has a relationship to all of the experience that comes through our physical senses and all of the experience that we have in our mind as well. We have a relationship to the experience of thinking. We have a relationship to emotions that arise.

A simple example, and this is an obvious one that you've all explored and worked with: if you're sitting here and feeling some kind of physical discomfort in the body—pain in the back or pain in the knee—the pain is one thing, the physical discomfort is one thing. It's an unpleasant experience with its elemental qualities of sensations—perhaps pressure, pulsing, burning, stabbing. So there's the experience of the physicality of it and then the feeling tone of it. But based on those experiences, there's usually some relationship that we have to that pain. Often there's an aversive relationship. Occasionally there's a balanced relationship. But in any case—and I've sometimes seen this as I get really into the mindfulness that can see things in detail—there can even be a greedy relationship to that pain. It's like, "Wow, that is so cool! Let me really dive in there and look at that and see all the sparking sensations." So there can be a kind of greedy relationship to it as well.

Whatever the experience is, there is always some mental relationship, some attitude that the mind has in relationship to that experience. It may be so subtle that it's not noticed at times. Sometimes we don't particularly recognize the experience of a balanced relationship, for instance. If we're exploring the way sounds come and go, we may be very interested in the coming and going of the sound but less aware that interest is arising in the mind, that there's a relationship of interest, a relationship of non-reactivity, a relationship of calm perhaps.

So the exploration I'd like to make tonight is beginning to look at what our relationship is to whatever is happening moment to moment. We are often not consciously aware of this relationship. If we are not consciously aware of a relationship of aversion,

for example, or of greed—if we are relating to experience through a relationship of aversion and we're not clearly aware of the aversion—then there is a kind of reinforcement of the aversion happening. When we have a relationship to experience that is unseen, and it's an unhelpful relationship, we're actually tending to reinforce the habit of that unhelpful relationship when it's not seen. If it's a helpful relationship like curiosity or balance of mind and we're not consciously aware of that, we're actually missing the opportunity to strengthen it.

Mindfulness has this wonderful property: when we turn our mindful attention to states of mind that are not helpful—those states of mind based in greed, aversion, and delusion, three of the states clearly highlighted in the third foundation of mindfulness—when we turn our mindful attention to greed, aversion, and delusion, when we are mindful of them, it creates the conditions for them to be diminishing in our experience. We learn something about greed when we pay attention to it. When we bring our mindfulness to greed, when we bring our mindfulness to aversion, we see that it actually doesn't feel so good. That very mindful attention begins to help give our minds an education that greed, aversion, and delusion are not really the way to go in terms of heading towards well-being.

Very fortunately, when our system, our organism, gets good education, it wants to move towards well-being. It really just needs good information.

in our experience, our system begins to understand very viscerally that this is not helpful. And so it begins to create the conditions for a weakening of those states.

Likewise with wholesome states—helpful states of mind, states of curiosity, of kindness, of equanimity, of calm—when we turn our mindful attention to those states, it creates the conditions for them to strengthen. The very mindfulness of these qualities gives our system, gives our organism, the information that these states do lead towards well-being.

So mindfulness itself is a very supportive aspect of our minds that begins to help us let go of states based in greed, aversion, and delusion, and to cultivate those wholesome states. When we are unaware of what our relationship is, we're missing the opportunity to weaken the unskillful states. We're unwittingly strengthening those unskillful states and losing the opportunity to strengthen the wholesome ones.

Another way to explore this relationship to experience is through the question: How am I with this experience? My teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, uses the question: What's the attitude of mind with respect to experience? For me, the phrase "What's the rela-

tionship to experience?" or "How am I with this experience?" feels a little more natural. We can actually use this question from time to time to begin to uncover attitudes and relationships of mind that may not be so clear or obvious to us.

This is a little technique, a tool we can use just from time to time. I would definitely say from time to time rather than making this something you're doing every few seconds—we can kind of make ourselves crazy with this question. But from time to time it can be very useful, and some good times to check in or ask this question are when it feels like there's some struggle, when it feels like you're butting up against something or fighting with something. That's a good time to check in: What's my relationship to experience right now?

Now, with the dropping in of the question, I have to be careful about this sometimes. It's not that you're trying to find an answer or figure out an answer or think about an answer. You're dropping in the question and then just continuing your practice. Often—or I'd say some percentage of the time—there can be a kind of response. It's almost like we're ringing a doorbell with that question, and then some mind state answers the door. We don't have to go looking for it. We don't have to find it. We just drop in the question and see: Is there some relationship that hasn't been obvious? Just by checking in, just by asking the question, sometimes those relationships can come forward, offering themselves to be seen more consciously.

When there's a feeling of struggle, that's often a good time to check the attitude, check the relationship to experience. Another really helpful time to check your relationship to your experience is if it feels like things are going really, really well. Because sometimes there's a little bit of leaning in, a little bit of greed, a little bit of "Oh, I figured it out, I've got it right." Again, that's a relationship that may not be noticed if we don't kind of open up and check in, ask that question.

So this practice question, used just from time to time, becomes a way to explore something that may be behind the curtain, behind the scenes. Sometimes we have mind states running the show that are having us engage in our exploration of experience without our being consciously aware of them. If you have a kind of attitude of resistance while you're looking at pain and you're not aware of that resistance, then that very resistance is informing how you are exploring the pain. It's influencing how you choose to explore that experience.

When we become aware—okay, there's pain and there's resistance to it—at least at that point there can be a sense of recognition: "Oh, there's pain and I don't like it, I'm resisting it." We can begin to see perhaps that we're bearing into that experience of

pain, or maybe pulling back from it and bracing ourselves around it. We can just see that more clearly as we begin to open ourselves to this question: What's the relationship to experience?

There are roughly four flavors of attitude you might come across as you ask this question, and these connect very directly to the third foundation of mindfulness. There's the attitude of greed—of wanting something either to continue or wanting to have something, wanting to be someone. That movement towards, that wanting, that greed. There's the attitude of aversion—of not liking, of wanting to get rid of something, wanting to pull myself away from it or to actively push that thing away from me. There's the attitude of delusion, often experienced as a disconnection or a not-knowing. And then there's the attitude I'll call balance of mind—the relationship of "it's okay," the relationship of "no problem." This is in the terrain of equanimity, that beautiful quality.

When we look at the first half of the third foundation of the Satipaṭṭhāna, it talks about looking at the presence or absence of greed, the presence or absence of aversion, the presence or absence of delusion, and then contraction and distraction. Contraction and distraction I actually think of as flavors of delusion in a way. Noticing the presence of greed, aversion, and delusion—including contraction and distraction as flavors of delusion—and then the absence of those, which is essentially balance of mind.

When greed, aversion, and delusion are not present, the mind is not reactive. It's not doing a push-pull dance with what we're experiencing. It's okay with what's happening.

So I'd like to explore these flavors a little bit and talk more about attitude in general.

Let's start with greed. You're all familiar with greed—it's a common one that we begin to see as we look at our experience. It has obvious flavors: the really wanting, a feeling of neediness, a feeling of "have to have," that sticky pull towards some sense pleasure or some state of mind. We can crave states of mind. We can want and have greed about states of mind. We can have wanting about being seen, being mirrored, being heard, wanting to be seen in a particular way. These are the more obvious forms of wanting that we're familiar with.

Some more subtle forms of this flavor of attitude might be things like expectation, excitement, or even possibly amusement—subtler kinds of leaning towards something that's delightful or pleasant.

Now, one of the really important explorations with states of mind is to recognize and remember—remember, remember, remember—that when we see a state of greed, something subtle like expectation or amusement, we're not somehow trying to stop it or get rid of it. We're bringing mindfulness to it so that it can be known.

Subtler states of greed, like expectation, excitement, and amusement, often have a blend with joy or curiosity. There's a way in which those are beginning to move towards the wholesome states of curiosity, joy, interest, delight. And yet, as you begin to explore, just bring mindfulness.

Some of you have talked in our meetings about feeling excitement as you begin to recognize what's going on inside. It's pretty cool sometimes to start seeing things that are happening in there and be okay about it, to be non-reactive about seeing some of the stuff that's going on. This can bring some Dharma joy, and that Dharma joy can shoot into excitement, sometimes into restlessness or mental proliferation. "Oh wow, that's so cool! I'm never going to have to worry about that one again—I figured that one out!" The mind has moved from the pure rising of joy into a little bit of restlessness around it, a little bit of leaning towards it.

This isn't something to judge as "excitement bad"—like we should just cut it out, try to excise it. Rather, we want to be aware of it. As we open to "what's the attitude here?" and recognize that excitement is the attitude, we might begin to feel the rising of joy and its purity, but also feel something a little shaky or agitated around that joy. Excitement has a slightly agitated quality to it. And that part is extra—it has a little bit of the leaning to it.

But we're not going to understand which aspect of the experience around Dharma joy and the excitement that follows—which part is the beautiful, the wholesome, the Dharma joy side, and which part is the agitation—without just opening to it. "Oh, there's this recognition of understanding, and excitement is happening." The mindfulness and the interest together, the curiosity about what it's like to be a human being feeling excitement—this mindfulness begins to help us tease apart which aspects have a little bit of that gripping and which parts are the wholesomes.

A subtler form of wanting is a leaning in, a trying perhaps to make something continue, a wanting it to continue—just a subtle "ah, mmm," reaching toward experience. The subtlest kind of leaning in.

In my own practice, I have seen all of these flavors. And again, I want to emphasize that the learning comes with curiosity and opening to these flavors, not labeling them as "Oh, leaning in—it feels like I'm leaning in. Andrea said that was greed, so how do I get rid of that?" What I'm hoping to encourage is opening to it. "Oh, leaning in—that's what's happening. What does that feel like? What is that like?"

Likewise with aversion, there are more obvious and more subtle flavors. The more obvious ones include dislike, anger, fear, hatred—those more apparent forms of that quality of mind. Subtler forms might be just a state of discontent, dissatisfaction—just "meh." It's okay, but could be better. That subtle quality almost isn't something we recognize consciously because it doesn't feel like it's getting in the way of being present with whatever it is. And yet it's really helpful to acknowledge

Yeah, "it could be better." So I'm looking at this thing that's going on here, but it's really kind of boring. Or it's just not as interesting as it was yesterday. So it's okay, but... there's just a subtle dissatisfaction, a subtle sense of something being off, not quite what you want it to be. It's got a subtle feeling of not wanting this to be what's happening—a subtler flavor of aversion.

Or another level of subtlety: the thought that by paying attention to this thing, it'll go away. We can have a sense of interest in paying attention to something in order for this unpleasant experience to disappear. So again, these more obvious and less obvious states.

Checking the attitude like this, checking our relationship to experience, can reveal an emotional relationship to experience—something's happening and there's an emotional storm around it. But it can also reveal subtle agendas in the mind. Agendas around the meditation, like "If I pay attention to this in the right way, I'll get this great state." Or "If I pay attention in just the right way, this unpleasant thing will go away." These have less of an emotional quality and more of an agenda quality. These agendas can also be relationships to experience.

I'd like to talk about delusion in a moment—I'd like to cover delusion in a little bit more depth. So I'm going to skip delusion for now and come back to the fourth kind of attitude: this balance of mind, the relationship of balance of mind.

Sometimes when we check in—"What's my relationship to experience?"—it doesn't feel like there's much there. This might be because there are very subtle kinds of greed or aversion happening, or very subtle kinds of delusion. But you're present, and it doesn't seem like there's much going on. If it feels like nobody answers the door when you ring the doorbell, then don't go looking for anything. It might just be that what's happening is a little more subtle than you're familiar with. Or actually, it could be that you're not familiar with checking in and recognizing that calm is what's happening right now. Calm is a pretty subtle state. Peace is a pretty subtle state. Sometimes you check in and think, "Oh, nothing seems to be happening." You could try that on. You could just say, "Well, is it calm? Is it peace? Is it okayness? Is it no problem?"

This flavor of balance of mind as an attitude has many different possible manifestations, many different ways it might be experienced. Calmness, peace, a sense of "I don't mind this." One of my dear friends—she died a few years ago, but she had a really deep practice. I learned so much from her just talking about her practice. She said she was recognizing a subtle difference in this balance of mind shading into aversion. She said, "If my mind's going 'I don't care,' it's got a little bit of aversion. If it's saying 'I don't mind this,' that's more equanimity." That's the balance of mind. So checking into the attitude, if it's an "I don't care" kind of feeling, there may be just a little bit of aversion there.

This balance has flavors of "I don't mind this," calm, peace. It can also manifest as heart qualities. Philip this morning mentioned loving attention. It can have a feeling of love, of compassion sometimes, of friendliness to experience. Sometimes when we check in to our relationship, it might just feel friendly or loving or compassionate. It might have a flavor of delight, of curiosity, of interest—just subtly different ways that we experience these states. It might be a feeling of gratitude. Or it might have more of a sense of equanimity, of tranquility, or happiness.

So many different flavors when the mind is non-reactive, and opening to those flavors will support their nourishment. Actually recognizing, "Yes, happiness is here"—

This is the human experience of happiness. It's supportive for our movement towards freedom.

So I'd like to come back and explore delusion a little bit. Often when we explore this foundation of mindfulness and talk about delusion, people say, "But how do you see delusion? Is it even possible to see delusion?" And it is possible to see delusion. It's possible to know delusion, to know it's operating in our minds. What I'd like to do right now is take a little time to give you some information about ways that delusion functions, which may help you begin to see it.

Delusion often functions like a veil of some kind. We're seeing through a veil, and sometimes that veil is so cloudy that it feels like we're just disconnected—like we're not even connecting with experience. This is what I'll call the first level or layer of delusion: a flavor of lack of awareness. The non-mindful state is a state of delusion. A state when we're lost in thought is a state of delusion. And we can begin to get familiar with this.

Now, we cannot know what it's like to not be mindful in the moment of not being mindful. But in the moment when mindfulness returns, we can be curious about what that's like right there. In that moment when mindfulness returns—at least in my experience, when I've been really lost, when my mind has been in some constructed reality, lost in that world—as the mindfulness returns, there's a lingering memory of what it

was like to be lost. We can begin to explore some of these disconnected states by being curious when mindfulness returns, curious about what's here when mindfulness returns.

Mindfulness can begin to connect with certain states that we think are inherently non-mindful. This is another piece I like to point out, because sometimes we have this assumption—like the state of spacing out, sleepiness, dullness, falling asleep. Often we think it's just not possible to be mindful there. But we can begin to be curious about those states, often in the moment when we're kind of waking up from being lost, being spaced out.

I'll give an example of this, because sometimes it's a little more helpful to tell the story. I was having breakfast one morning and trying to be mindful of eating—trying to pay attention to all of the eating, all of the movements, just trying to be particularly mindful of the physical sensations. And I kept noticing that I would be doing that and then suddenly I'd be spaced out. I would bring myself back to being mindful of the eating, and then at some point I'd be spaced out again. I would just recognize, okay, I wake up, I'm spaced out. And I would keep bringing myself back.

Then at some point, because I was trying so hard to stay with the experience of eating, I kind of noticed when the mindfulness—it's almost like it said, "Enough of this. I'm going to go someplace else." There was a sense of seeing the mindfulness leaving, letting go of paying attention to all the physical sensations. Rather than saying, "I've got the agenda, I know what I'm supposed to be doing, pay attention to those physical sensations," I explored: "Oh, okay, I'm seeing the mindfulness let go of that. Let's see where it goes."

At that point, I could watch the mind move into a state of spacing out, which felt like it was hovering up above my head, a little to the right, hanging out up there. And I just stayed with it, mindful in that state. In being mindful in that state, there was a recognition—not so much a verbal recognition, but just this knowing: "Oh, the mind is tired. It's needing rest. And it's taking its rest in this state of spacing out." I could do that mindfully. I could be present for that mindfully.

Then the next surprise was that within maybe thirty or forty seconds, that spacing out just kind of—it's like the mist cleared. And then I was present for my body and present for seeing and present for chewing. In some ways, I had been fighting that spacing out because I had some other agenda.

I had an agenda of what I thought I needed to be doing. And when I allowed, or got curious about, the state of spacing out itself, I discovered that spacing out is not inherently non-mindful. There are many, many states of mind in which we have a habit of not being mindful. But we can begin to be curious about them.

At this point, if there's any state that I think might not be possible for mindfulness to go there—some state of confusion or cloudiness, low energy or dullness—and my mind is telling me, "Can't be mindful right now," I just don't believe that thought anymore. I just get curious. Okay, let's just see. Is it possible for mindfulness to infuse that too?

So this kind of obvious level, this gross level of delusion—states in which we're habitually non-mindful—just being curious about the possibility of beginning to wake up in those states.

At another level or layer of delusion, that first layer is kind of a disconnected layer. That's the most obvious way that delusion manifests—we're just not attending to what's happening. At another level down, a more subtle level of delusion, we are knowing what's happening. We do know what's happening in our experience, but we know it through some kind of filter, some kind of perspective. And so that perspective influences how we take information in from the world.

A simple example of this: if we have some kind of an agenda to do something, to look at something, to find something. The way the mind works, when we get a project in mind, some kind of agenda, the mind organizes around that project and begins selecting things out of the environment that are useful to that project while ignoring things that are not useful. This is called selective attention in psychological terms. And it's a very useful function of mind. It allows us to focus on things and tune other things out.

When I was a kid, I had a very strong capacity for this. I would be reading a book in the living room, completely into that book. That was my world. And my dad would come up the stairs and say, "Hey, it's time for dinner." I would not hear him. I just did not hear him. He actually had to come up to me and touch me to get me to come out of my selective attention.

So sometimes we have this capacity to screen certain things in and other things out, based on an agenda, based on something that we're doing. This is a useful function of mind, and yet the place this shades into delusion is that we think in some way our minds are kind of natural—like our eyes are cameras and our ears are microphones, and they just record everything, and we're seeing the world out there as it is. That we're seeing what's actually going on out there.

But when we see the world, we are seeing certain things and not other things based on perspectives. And when we're not aware of those perspectives, we mistakenly think we're seeing things accurately.

So this is just the way our minds work, but we need to begin to recognize when we have agendas, even a simple agenda. Many of you have probably heard the story about the basketball and the gorilla study. I'll just briefly review it for those who haven't heard it.

It was a study where people were asked to watch a videotape and count the number of times a basketball passed between players wearing white t-shirts. During that video, a person in a gorilla suit walked across the stage, across the basketball players, stood there for a while—it wasn't like he was hiding—standing there in this gorilla suit, and then walked off.

After the tape was played, pretty uniformly people could accurately say how many times the basketball passed. But a good sixty percent of the people did not see the gorilla. There were a few people who were like, "Wow, was there a gorilla in that video? What was that?" A lot of people just did not see the gorilla.

Now, that's not a problem right there. That part is not a problem because that's the way our minds work. Certain people's minds can really focus in and really take in: "Okay, this is the agenda. Count the number of basketball passes."

That's what we're doing. The other information is simply not taken in.

The place where delusion comes in is that in that study, when people were told there was a gorilla and shown the video—and you can't *not* see the gorilla when you're looking for it—they denied that it was the same video. Some number of people were so convinced that the gorilla could not have been in the video they saw, because surely they would have seen it. This is delusion. This is the danger of the way we think we're seeing things accurately. This kind of thing happens all the time.

So that's a pretty subtle form of delusion. This kind of thing also happens culturally. We're told something over and over again, and we begin to believe it. "America is the land of opportunity. Anyone who works hard enough can achieve their dream." We start to believe that. This leads to, for those people in more privileged positions, basically not seeing that there are cultural conditions that support some to achieve their dreams and don't support others—conditions that actually get actively in the way of others achieving their dreams. That delusion of white privilege. Again, it's this perspective we're holding and not seeing, basically, that the system is rigged.

We can also create views based on incomplete information. I was thinking about an example around this, and I thought: every single one of us standing on this planet—it sure feels like we're standing still. It sure looks like the sun is moving across the sky. It sure looks like the moon is rising and setting. It doesn't feel like we're hurtling some massive number of miles an hour around the axis of the earth, and besides that, hurtling through space. That's not our experience, right? It sure feels like we're sitting still.

We know we're not sitting still. And sometimes I can even play with that—like when I watch the sunrise or the moon rise and know that it's the earth that's turning. But it's kind of effortful. We have to bring in the information we know. If we just operate with our physical senses, the feeling is that the earth is still and everything else is moving around us. That's incomplete information. And Galileo, when he said, "No, the earth is moving—the earth is moving really fast," the church said this was heresy and put him under house arrest for the rest of his life. This perspective of incomplete information has an impact on how we relate to each other. This kind of thing happens all the time. Delusion is shot through our day.

Now, don't despair. We can start to recognize—I think the first place to begin, since a lot of what I'm talking about here is views, perspective, views that we have—we can begin to recognize, "Okay, there's a view happening here." Some views are harder to see through, like the view that the planet is still. The feeling of the truth of that is much harder to penetrate when the information is not available. And yet many of the views we function with, we can begin to recognize—the views in particular that we function with interpersonally and within our own being.

When there's something happening in your experience and there's some kind of struggle, often there's some kind of "you" happening there. The question I like in those moments is: *What's being believed right now?* These beliefs, these views, are often not so obvious. But we can begin to be curious about what views we have. That question—what is being believed right now?—can begin to infiltrate this.

The third, most fundamental kind of delusion is another form of view, a deepest level of delusion. It's not so much the views that we deal with based on our culture or our families or just how we've navigated the world—those agendas and views that we live with in our daily life. Rather, these are human views that we share, partly because of the way our minds and bodies are put together. We tend to have views, we tend to misunderstand experience as being permanent when it's impermanent. We misunderstand it as being

reliable when it's unreliable. We take what is impermanent to be permanent. We take what's unreliable to be reliable. We take what is not self to be self.

This is a whole dharma talk in itself, this exploration of delusion. But we can begin being curious. Again, not trying to somehow skip over or tell ourselves, "Okay, I'm taking this to be permanent. I'm feeling like this thing is really solid and I know it's impermanent." Rather, we investigate. When it feels like something is really stable, when it feels like something is rock solid, just begin to explore: What's the solidity there? Is it really solid? How does it feel solid? Curiosity about that.

And likewise with what we think is reliable—where we think, "Yeah, that's where I'm going to be happy. That's what's going to make me happy." Noticing the feeling of that, and what is it that we think is reliable about it? In general, this sense pleasure, this worldly pleasant we've been talking about, is so unreliable. And yet that's where we think we're going to find happiness.

So we investigate. One of the explorations, which Nikki touched into the other day, is this exploration of gratification, danger, and escape. When there's pleasant experience, we ask: How is this feeling gratifying? And then what the Buddha instructs is: How long does it last? How far does that gratification extend? So that we begin to be very consciously aware that this thing we think is going to do it for us has limits.

On retreat, we really can see this. I've actually recognized that the mind truly believes this piece of chocolate is going to do it for me—it's going to make me happy. And it does, for a moment, for thirty seconds. Actually, it lasted way longer than I thought, the happiness of chocolate. It was quite impressive. It lasted, I don't know, a couple of minutes. But it faded.

This is curiosity: How long does that pleasure last? I was playing with that. Okay, there is that feeling of, "Yeah, chocolate's going to do it for me," but how long does it actually do it for you? In doing that exploration, I discovered, "Wow, actually, I got to enjoy the chocolate for a really long time." And then it faded. It faded. And because I was there for it, there wasn't the sense of needing to grasp after another piece of chocolate or trying to find the next thing.

And then there's seeing what is not self as self. I'm sure we'll talk about this more as the retreat goes on. But just beginning to explore—it's not so helpful to try to put on the identity of not-self. We do that sometimes. What's much more interesting is to begin to look at what am I taking to be self?

Sometimes this is really obvious. Sometimes these senses of self come up quickly, obviously. And when that happens, you can just receive it. "Oh. Here's the argumentative self." That lasts for a while. "Here's the frustrated self." That lasts for a while. "Here's the interested self." That lasts for a while. And we begin to see this changing dynamic—no solid thing there.

So exploring, exploring the identities, exploring what feels like me.

As we become aware of these kinds of delusion, we can begin to notice when they're happening. We can begin to recognize, "Yeah, I'm feeling a sense of me here."

It may not feel like delusion, but you can know, okay, that's something to be curious about.

And then you might have a moment, or a few moments, where suddenly the sense of impermanence is so clear. Or the sense of the way that you had been holding onto something as reliable is suddenly so obvious. And it's like you see really directly: there's nothing that's reliable in the way I thought it was. Everything's just slipping through. And there's a moment where it's just so clear. It is so clear and it feels so obvious. Wow, there's nothing to hold on to.

And then a few moments later, we're holding on again. Delusion is back.

In exploring this, we have moments when delusion falls away and we see something clearly. But that's conditioned. That's an insight, and it's conditioned. And it's impermanent too. The conditions for the obscuring to return will arise again.

And yet, because you've seen it otherwise—because you've seen what it's like to not have that particular delusion—it's like then you can really clearly know: ah yes, this is delusion. The absence of delusion highlights delusion when it's present again.

The trick there is to not feel like you failed when delusion comes back. It's not a failure. It is simply the conditions.

So—noticing greed, aversion, delusion. Noticing the balance of mind. Checking the attitude. This is a direct pointing to what the Buddha said is freedom. He said freedom, nibbana—one of his clearest definitions—was the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion.

And so this practice is helping to reveal greed, aversion, and delusion that were kind of below the radar. It's good news to have it revealed. Because when it's below the radar, it's kind of reinforcing itself. When it comes into consciousness, there's a possibility for transformation and release and freedom. Even small tastes of that letting go can be really freeing.

CHAPTER 112

Wisdom is Happening

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this talk from a month-long retreat, Andrea Fella offers a deeply practical exploration of paññā—the wisdom that frees the mind from suffering. Drawing on teachings from her teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who encouraged her to "notice when wisdom is happening," Andrea describes the three progressive levels of wisdom found in the Pāli Canon: sutamayā paññā (wisdom from hearing), cintāmayā paññā (wisdom from reflection), and bhāvanāmayā paññā (wisdom from direct meditative insight).

Through vivid personal examples, Andrea illuminates how wisdom actually functions in experience—from recognizing that a thought is simply arising in the present moment, to watching reactive patterns weaken and fall away, to the startling moments when difficult mind states simply vanish upon investigation. She shares her transformative early practice experiences with anger and loneliness, demonstrating how mindfulness creates the conditions for wisdom to see the constructed nature of our suffering and naturally release it.

This talk offers encouragement for practitioners at all levels, emphasizing that wisdom grows incrementally and often works in the background. Andrea invites us to recognize and appreciate these small moments of freedom—when resistance drops away, when we see thoughts as just thoughts, when familiar reactive patterns simply don't arise—as pointers toward the possibility of liberation that can sustain us on the path.

It is so delightful to have this privilege to serve you, to sit here now just looking out and seeing your faces and feeling the collective momentum of practice that's in the room. The other night I explored the topic of delusion for a good part of the talk, and tonight I'd like to explore the other side—that quality of mind that we are cultivating here with the practice of Satipaṭṭhāna. The quality that dispels delusion. A quality that really does the work of letting go. And that is wisdom.

Whether you know it or not, whether you feel it or not, wisdom is growing in you. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says that the whole purpose of our practice is to cultivate this quality of wisdom, because it is wisdom that frees the mind. Sometimes we might feel like we do something that allows us to let go, but what we're exploring here are practices that support a perspective of mindfulness that creates the conditions for wisdom to blossom.

When I first started practicing with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, he used this word wisdom a lot. At one point he said to me, "Notice when wisdom is happening." And I thought, how do I do that? What does that even mean? Over the course of my time with him, I've developed an understanding through experience of what it means when wisdom is working. He would say, what does it mean for wisdom to be at work? This talk has really grown out of that exploration, and so I'd like to talk about wisdom in a very practical way tonight—to point to ways that you may already be experiencing this quality, seeing its growth, seeing its blossoming.

The word wisdom perhaps has some connotations in our language that may not necessarily connect with what it means in the sense of paññā, the Pali word usually translated as wisdom. We can have knowledge and wisdom about many things in our lives, but the wisdom of the Buddha, the wisdom that the Buddha was pointing to, the wisdom that frees our mind, is a particular kind of wisdom. It's related to dukkha. It's related to how we suffer, why we suffer. The understanding that we're cultivating here is the understanding around suffering.

This points to one of the great teachings from Joseph Goldstein. I love this one. He says we want to understand dukkha, we want wisdom in dukkha, about dukkha, without experiencing dukkha. And it doesn't work that way. So it's not a mistake in your practice if you're meeting dukkha. That's where wisdom grows.

When I first thought about this word wisdom, I thought of it as something really grand, big. I kind of thought, well, if I work and practice really hard, if I really pay attention to my experience, maybe someday I'll have that big bang wisdom. And then I'll be floating down the streets and people will know that she's enlightened or something—some silly image like that. That's what wisdom was, some big bang kind of experience. And yet what we come to understand with this practice is that there's an incremental development of wisdom. We can begin to recognize this incremental development and take some confidence in that, recognizing, "Oh, this is wisdom." That's what Sayadaw pointed me to—noticing when there's wisdom in the mind.

There are some classic definitions of wisdom in the Pali canon. The most common, perhaps, or most cited definition of what it means to have wisdom is to understand the Four Noble Truths. This is not an intellectual understanding but a deep practice understanding—that understanding of the Four Noble Truths that frees the mind. Understanding suffering, understanding that suffering arises, understanding that it's possible for suffering to cease, and understanding that there's a path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

There are some other definitions of wisdom I'll mention as well, other aspects of the practice and kinds of wisdom that relate to this waking up and freedom. Embedded in the Four Noble Truths is an understanding that there are certain actions of mind, certain qualities of mind that will keep us caught in suffering, and certain qualities of mind that will begin to loosen the clinging and craving, loosen suffering. There's an understanding of which states—those states that are keeping us caught in suffering—are often called unwholesome, unskillful states, and those states that help to move us in the direction of freedom are wholesome, skillful states. The path of practice can also be understood as expressed in the Eightfold Path of Wise Effort.

Finding ways to let go, exploring letting go, abandoning the unwholesome states and exploring the cultivation of the wholesome states.

When we follow through on a mind that is filled with wholesome qualities, it leads us towards more and more freedom, more and more happiness. If we follow through on those states of mind that are connected to greed, aversion, and delusion—those unwholesome states of mind—then that will create the conditions for us to suffer more. This is a very simple understanding about what qualities of mind are helpful to cultivate and what qualities of mind are not so helpful to cultivate. This too is an expression of wisdom in the Buddhist teaching.

Connected to this is an understanding that acting on wholesome states will lead in a certain direction, while following through on unwholesome states will lead in another direction. This is an expression of the lawfulness of the way our experience unfolds. Anushka talked about this lawful quality to our experience, and coming into alignment with this lawfulness helps us to relax. When we're fighting that lawfulness, we struggle.

There are these kinds of what we can think of as almost intellectual definitions of wisdom that we can talk about. We can talk about cause and effect. We can talk about the conditioned nature of experience. We can talk about greed, aversion, and delusion, and how acting on those leads to suffering. We can then start to explore this in our experience and start to find that it's not just a good idea, but that our practice, our experience, begins to bear out these teachings.

There's an understanding of wisdom as having multiple levels to it. What we could call the first level of wisdom is the level where we hear information, where we take in teachings of the Dharma. This is called *sutamayā pañña—suta* meaning hearing and *pañña* meaning wisdom. The wisdom connected with hearing the Dharma.

This is what we're doing here together—sharing the teachings, orienting the mind in the direction of noticing with mindfulness that experience is simply an arising in the present moment. The practices that we are exploring here, and all of the teaching that we're doing, but the simplicity of the practices already embeds a perspective that encourages us to move in the direction of wisdom. That simple practice of noticing in this moment what's present and knowing it as something that's present. A thought arising in the present moment. Knowing it as a thought arising in the present moment, as opposed to believing it.

We will believe our thoughts, we will follow through on thoughts, but there's a big difference between blindly following through on a thought because we take it to have a reality and understanding that a thought is arising in the present moment and then being able to have some discernment about whether it's a useful thought or an unuseful thought. Huge difference there.

That very simple practice around thoughts, around mind states, around bodily experience—right there, that practice includes a direction that heads us towards the cultivation of wisdom. Because we are curious about our minds, curious about what's going on in here, rather than simply blindly reacting to what's going on.

So there's this hearing the teachings, and then beginning to put them into practice. This is a second level of wisdom. It's called *cintāmayā paññā*—the wisdom related to or connected with reflection, or thinking about.

We hear the teachings. We take them in. This practice would never start—the likelihood that you ever would have discovered something in this direction without having heard something first is so small. And so the condition of your hearing the teaching already puts you on the path. That's a condition. Think back: how did you hear about this in the first place?

For me, it was somebody who sent me a book. I was suffering, and somebody said, "Hey, do you mind if I send you a book about something I've been finding really useful?" That was a condition that entered this mind stream and altered the course of my life. I'm forever grateful to that friend who sent me that book. It was just the right medicine at the right time.

So we hear the teachings. We take them in and start reflecting about them. Does this make sense?

Is this something to engage in? Because the invitation of these teachings is not simply to sit there and learn all the lists and memorize all the different factors of the Eightfold Path and be able to give a Dharma talk on the twelve parts of dependent origination. That's not what this teaching points to. The teaching points to: come and see. Try it for yourself. Engage.

And so the first place of that engagement is in reflecting about what you've heard. Is this something that makes sense to me?

Sometimes, in my own experience when I got that book—people often ask, and the book that the person sent me was *Everyday Zen* by Joko Beck, my first real entry into the Dharma. I read the book, and a lot of it didn't make much sense. I was not interested in meditating. She talked a lot about meditating in that book, and I thought, "I don't know, my friend's gone off the deep end here." She talked about going on daylong retreats and meditating for a whole day. I was sure she was in a cult of some kind.

So I didn't really trust the meditation side. But fortunately, the book was also exploring and interested in looking at: well, why does your mind do what it does? That I was interested in, because I felt like I'd hit bottom in my life—so much reactivity, so much just being whipped around by my mind states. I would find myself frozen in front of my computer, unable to function. Really pretty strong states of mind that were uncontrollable.

And the one bit of wisdom that I pulled out of that book, which actually didn't make any sense to me at the time, was: try knowing that a mind state is. Knowing that anger is arising and being aware of what that feels like. Just be aware that this is happening. Know what that's like. I read that and thought, "What good is that going to do? Be aware of my anger—isn't that just going to make it worse?"

But in this case, I heard this teaching, and I had hit bottom. Nothing else I had tried had worked. So it was kind of like, okay, my friend says this works, this book says it's a good idea, I have no idea how it's going to work, but I'm willing to try. And even that little bit of taking in the information and saying, "Okay, I'll try this"—that's what set me on the path, that willingness to try.

Hearing the information and then starting to engage, starting to explore, actually beginning to practice with the teachings—that's the second kind of wisdom. We start to pick up the tools of the practice and apply them to our experience.

This cintāmayā paññā can be in this terrain of willingness to engage and just beginning to explore the practice. It can also serve us—all of us here having done quite a bit of practice—this wisdom of reflection can serve us a lot of times on our path. We can

use Dharma reflection as a skillful means, as Dharma wisdom when we feel at times that we're struggling or caught or confused, and yet we have enough presence of mind to recognize that. When we're caught in the midst of something, we can sometimes bring in some wisdom, some of the classic forms of wisdom that can support us in this way, as a reflection, actually dropping it into the mind.

"This is impermanent"—when you're caught in a kind of storm, just reminding yourself: this is impermanent. Or "this is unreliable." Or "this is nature." That's one of my favorite wisdom reflections to drop in, from Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He uses this one a lot. As he talked about this reflection—"Oh, it's all just nature"—what that began to point to was the understanding or the reflection that everything happening right now is just conditions tumbling on.

A tree grows because an acorn has fallen on the ground and the conditions have been right for that acorn—not eaten by a squirrel, not rotting out because it's gotten too much rain. Just right, just the conditions, just right. That acorn has the nature to become an oak tree.

But it won't necessarily become that oak tree unless other conditions are present. It needs to have soil and water and be protected from animals that want to eat the shoots—or just be lucky enough not to be eaten by an animal. So there, it's just conditions. It's conditions coming together for this tree to grow.

And whatever mind state is arising in this moment, whatever experience is arising in this moment—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, states of mind—whatever is arising in this moment is conditioned. That being caught frozen by anger in front of my computer, that was conditioned. I had practiced anger so much in my life.

So the reflection "this is nature"—to me, it brings that whole understanding of almost like, *of course* this is what's happening. These are the conditions that are unfolding, the conditions that are ripening in this moment. And just reminding oneself that the conditions unfolding are not self. They may create a feeling of self in that moment, but in and of themselves, they are just unfolding. That reminder—"this is nature"—I used that reflection a lot when I was practicing in Burma. So helpful.

So we can bring in wisdom reflections. Sometimes we have our own understandings. In talking with all of you, I've seen that you've had many understandings developing. And sometimes if we can articulate our understanding to ourselves, just that simple recognition—"Oh, it's helpful to just notice this is what's arising right now. It's just this, just this"—if we can find our own way to articulate the wisdom that we have known.

I think I said the other day that delusion falls away sometimes. And when delusion falls away, wisdom is present. Then conditions change and delusion re-arises. Wisdom diminishes. This quality of wisdom is a conditioned phenomenon too. It's a conditioned mind state. It comes and goes.

When wisdom is present—and I'm going to talk in a few minutes about different ways we might experience that—this third kind of wisdom, bhavana maya pañña, the wisdom of insight, the wisdom of direct understanding. That wisdom comes and goes. But when it's not there, sometimes it's kind of amazing. It's like we see something so clearly, and it's just so obvious. How can I not see this? And when you're in that space of seeing, that wisdom is so obvious and so clear, the mind just cannot even fathom not understanding it. Because it's so obvious.

And yet, the nature of delusion is that it comes back, wisdom diminishes, and then it's like, "What was it? What was it that I thought I knew?" And I guess maybe it wasn't so obvious after all.

So sometimes when wisdom falls away, one of the tricks, one of the things we have to encourage ourselves about, is to not doubt that wisdom was present. Not to doubt that we had that experience, but to understand these cycles of wisdom appearing and falling apart, delusion arising, delusion passing away. If we can understand this as cycles, then rather than feeling like we've done something wrong or made a mistake when wisdom goes away, we can draw on that wisdom through reflecting. "Oh, I understood. It was all conditioned. It was all just nature. Just things tumbling on." And as we're feeling ourselves caught in these conditions, we can remind ourselves, "Okay, that was an understanding. It's just conditioned."

Sometimes if we bring those thoughts in, those dharma understandings into our minds, it can create a little bit of space for the mind to be less reactive about that presence of delusion again, about that reactive mind state. So I encourage this use of wisdom consciously—consciously using wisdom to support a kind of relaxing with whatever is, whatever you might be struggling with.

So this third kind of wisdom, bhavana maya pañña, wisdom at work in the mind—this is when wisdom is arising and there's a direct experiential understanding of something. There are so many ways this happens. I'm just going to describe some that I've experienced. You may recognize some of these. And this is part of my hope—that you recognize these descriptions, some of them at least, and recognize that wisdom is already taking root, already growing.

I think one of the first kinds of wisdom to appear is

when we, through this curiosity, this practice of mindfulness—of just asking, what is this right now? What is the experience? What is the human experience of frustration arising? What is the human experience of wanting arising?

As we start to turn and meet that experience with mindfulness, one of the shifts we can see is a dropping of resistance to a state toward which we've had some reactivity. Frustration, for instance—we don't like frustration. We want it to go away. It doesn't feel good. Frustration is unpleasant vedana, and we tend not to like unpleasant vedana. So we resist it.

But as we turn toward it, we recognize, "Oh, there's frustration and resistance." We might start to see, "Oh, it's just frustration." And there's some space. A little bit of space, and it's kind of like, "Wow. It's not a problem. It's just frustration." That feeling of "this is just some state of mind"—that's wisdom at work. Wisdom actually allowing the release of the resistance, opening to "this is what's happening."

Or it might also be, "Oh, there's frustration and there's resistance, and—oh, that's what's happening. There's frustration and I don't like it. Oh, that's what's happening." Again, some space around it.

I sometimes liken this to being in a car that's going really fast. You're in the driver's seat, your foot on the gas pedal, speeding down the freeway. That kind of momentum is what our minds do when they're caught in some state. And if we want to slow down, one of the most organic ways to do so—especially if we're on a freeway with other cars around us—isn't to slam on the brake. Someone would slam into us from behind. A safer way might be to simply take your foot off the gas pedal, put the car into neutral, and then steer, hopefully steering the car to a stop.

Sometimes wisdom functions in just this way—it puts the mind into neutral. Instead of keeping the foot on the gas pedal of frustration's momentum, where the gas pedal is all the thoughts about that frustration—"That person shouldn't have done that, and I'd better figure out how to tell them what to do and why they need to do it this way and not that way"—we can recognize it, step back, and know: "Ah, this experience here and now, this is frustration."

Taking the foot off the gas pedal doesn't mean that experience of frustration will just come to a stop—like taking your foot off the gas pedal in a moving car. But if you don't keep putting your foot back on the gas pedal, it will come to a stop. Just watching the momentum with this sense of "this is just"—the wisdom of "this is just"—can witness a pattern weaken, slowly fall apart, and maybe even end.

Another kind of wisdom we might experience is when we truly begin to recognize that something arising—a thought, perhaps—is just a thought happening in the present moment. Many of our thoughts, as Philip mentioned last night and this morning, relate to past and future.

The difference between recognizing a thought as just a thought is profound. A thought about the past—the past doesn't exist. All there is, is now. Our minds create the past by creating these thoughts and believing them. Our minds create the future by creating these thoughts and believing them. There's no more past. Now, there were conditions that led here, so certainly we're not living in an isolated moment. But the past doesn't exist anymore. It's gone. Those thoughts arising about the past are arising now. That's what's happening in the present moment—a thought of the past arising now. Or a thought of the future arising now.

So we see, we begin to see that what's going on—the only thing that's going on—is something that's happening now. This is kind of a mind-blowing version of reality. That is the truth. Wisdom helps us to see this.

And again, it helps us to then have a skillful relationship. Not to say that we're not supposed to think about the past and remember what happened, but that we recognize it's a thought happening now. That's the wisdom piece of it. When we recognize the experience as something happening now, there can be a more skillful relationship with it. There's some level of choice we have about how or whether to engage with that thought. So wisdom creates that space for us to know: this is just happening now.

And with that we also can start to see not only a thought happening now, but that a whole complex of stuff often arises based on something like a thought happening now—that creates whole patterns of suffering.

I had an example of this in my early days of practice, in my early months of practice. I don't think I was doing much in the way of meditating, but when I first started practicing I was interested in exploring the patterns of my mind, and so I started doing that in daily life. I started watching anger come and go in daily life. That was my very first mindfulness practice. And I started being curious about states of mind that were pretty habitual. Loneliness was a really powerful one for me.

So I noticed at one point that loneliness was arising every night as I went to bed. And I just got curious about it, just noticing it—okay, loneliness, that's what's happening now. After some nights of that, I began to recognize, to my surprise, one night I noticed

when I picked up my alarm clock to set it, that's when the loneliness started. I was like, what does that have to do with anything? I just kept noticing. This pattern continued for a few more nights.

And then one night, while I was setting the alarm clock, I had a memory of my ex-partner who had broken up with me. This was the source of this anger—this ex-partner had broken up with me. I had a memory of being together with my partner at Disneyland, looking up at a marquee that had a digital clock on it in Tomorrowland. So there was a connection. I could see a connection between what I was doing, the physical experience of setting the alarm clock, and the memory that arose about being in Disneyland with my partner. And then I saw that the loneliness was arising in dependence on that memory. "Oh, I'm going to be lonely forever, the rest of my life. I'm never going to get to do fun things like that again. Nobody's ever going to love me again." The loneliness was coming up based on that thought.

So this is what we start to see—and actually that was mind-blowing to me, just to see that. But what was even more amazing was the next night when I set the alarm clock. I of course remembered that thought. It had been clearly seen. But the loneliness didn't come up anymore. It was like seeing that the mind had constructed the loneliness out of a thought that arose. The mind just stopped doing that. I didn't have to do anything. I didn't have to say, "Oh, I'm not going to be lonely," or "I'm going to try to let go of loneliness." That was wisdom. That's wisdom that does that. Wisdom had seen that the mind was reacting to a thought, constructing something based on a thought, and then feeling bad about what had been constructed.

This kind of thing happens all over the place. And we can start to see it. When we can start to see a thought arising—we're walking down the hill, we see somebody, we see a thought about that person—we might see that thought and then realize we get all kinds of views and opinions and agendas and ideas about that person based on that thought. When we see that, we can recognize: wow, maybe we're thinking that that person is thinking something about us. And we see, wow, that's all just constructed in the mind. We have no idea what's going on in their mind.

So seeing that—a moment of a thought arising and how our mind constructs things based on just arisings—that too is wisdom. We see the way human minds work. It's awesome. And it's humbling.

Sometimes wisdom operates in a really startling way. When mindfulness is particularly clear, or there's a certain momentum of mindfulness, we're present for something and we get curious.

I had this happen at one point. I was feeling abandoned by my teachers between part one and part two of the three-month retreat. My first-half teachers left, much as they do here, and the second-half teachers were arriving. I felt completely abandoned by my teachers from the first part.

So I was feeling that abandonment and noticing it, and I'd been taught that you can hold yourself with compassion for these feelings. I was envisioning myself as a four-year-old because it felt like a four-year-old kind of abandoned energy. I was holding myself in my mind with this energy, and at some point this curiosity arose: What is this feeling of abandonment anyway? I turned to look at it—and it was gone. It had just vanished.

When I went to describe this to my new teacher who had arrived, I said, "I don't know how to investigate emotions because here's what happened. I was holding myself with compassion and feeling that abandonment, and then I got curious, and I couldn't find it. So I must not know how to investigate emotions."

And she said, "Does that feel like you don't know how to investigate emotions? Or was that just what happened?"

I said, "Well, that's what happened."

She said, "Trust your experience."

That was a great lesson for me. Trust your experience. That was wisdom—the kind of mind that gets curious. *What's this?* Some of you may have experienced that. *Wow, what's this?* And suddenly it's not even there to look at anymore. That's wisdom at work. Unwholesome states of mind, met with strong wisdom, can simply vanish.

And yet I want to say, it's not that you're doing anything wrong if when you turn to investigate something—turn to investigate abandonment—it doesn't just vanish. There are many, many times when that happens too. I'm just describing some of the ways this can be felt, can be experienced.

Another way that wisdom functions, that wisdom operates in our mind, is by being present such that unwholesome states don't arise at all. We've talked about paying attention to the presence and absence of our states of mind. In the fourth foundation of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta, particularly in the exploration of the hindrances, it talks about noticing when the hindrances are not arising. So not only the absence—it says something like noticing the non-arising of the un-arisen state of ill will. Something

like that. It's that quality of the state simply not arising. When wisdom is present, some of these unwholesome states don't arise, and we can begin to recognize the non-arising of these reactive states of mind.

So what are some ways that we can notice that? Sometimes the recognition of a reactive state not arising is more of an understanding than an actual experience. Keep that in mind here.

Sometimes we understand that a reactive state is not arising because we see conditions happening in our life—and some of you have talked about this. Conditions happen on retreat where, in a previous retreat or if this thing were happening in our daily lives, we know that we would be reactive. But it's not happening. It's that space of, *Wow, this feels different. I know that if somebody had jumped in front of me in the lunch line last week, that would have been a problem. There would have been a lot of aversion. But now it's just—seeing is happening.*

That too is wisdom at work. The wisdom is present, supporting the non-arising of reactivity.

defilement of that reactive state.

Sometimes we can also see more directly a kind of momentum towards a familiar habitual pattern, and then watch that momentum simply wither.

An example might make this easier to describe. This practice of watching my anger, noticing it early in my practice—I was spending a lot of time simply noticing the presence of anger, noticing when it arose. One day I was doing something quite ordinary. I wasn't even particularly trying to be mindful. I was in my kitchen preparing a meal, cutting an apple. At some point while cutting the apple, I noticed a thought about my ex-partner—being with my ex-partner at a fruit stand.

Again, noticing this connection, seeing the conditioned nature of experience, seeing that this thought was dependent on the fact that I was seeing an apple while cutting it. And when that thought arose in the mind, there was this urge to jump on it, to think more thoughts, to get angry. It felt like momentum, this force of habit—whenever my ex-partner had arisen in my mind, anger had been so close on the heels. There was so much connection that it was like a force of habit.

But the mind was pretty present, and it saw this momentum. In that moment there was a recognition: anger's not present, but there's this urge to get angry.

That itself was a kind of mind-blowing moment. Why on earth would the mind *want* to get angry? Because having understood, in the previous several months of noticing anger, wisdom had begun to recognize that anger doesn't feel very good. Anger is suffering.

So in that moment when the mind saw the momentum to get angry, and knew very deeply from all those months of paying attention to anger and feeling the suffering of it, the mind recognized: that way lies suffering. And it just let go. It was like reaching for a pot, feeling the heat, and withdrawing because you know it's dangerous. The body just knows. The body does that automatically. It was that kind of letting go. That way lies suffering. Don't go there.

Again, it wasn't something I had to try—"Oh, let go of that thought." It was wisdom itself that said, "That way lies suffering. Don't go there."

That was a very direct recognition of the non-arising of anger. That moment I just described—that was the moment I got hooked on this practice. That was a faith moment. Actually, I kind of sank to my knees. The mind can see that happen and let go, not be whipped around by that pain of anger? This practice can do that?

I'm in. I'm in. I'm in.

So again, that's wisdom. That's wisdom at work. Wisdom saw the anger not arise, very directly saw the anger not arise.

Wisdom can operate in these obvious ways—seeing something and watching it fall apart, or seeing and feeling space around it. And sometimes wisdom operates more slowly, in the background.

I've had experiences of simply working with a pattern. Again, anger—I worked with anger for years at the beginning of my practice. Years of noticing it. And for a period of time, I recognized that trying to bring mindfulness to that anger was actually sinking me into the quicksand of the anger. At some point I recognized: this isn't helpful, trying to be mindful of the anger. So I see you, anger, and I bow to you, but I'm going to put my attention somewhere else. You can stay in the room with me, but I'm going to put my attention on my feet.

I'm going to notice my hands, I'm going to notice here—just something to step aside from the anger.

I did that for a couple of years with this particular pattern, this anger toward a particular person. Very strong anger. And over those couple of years, that pattern just grew weaker and weaker and weaker. Every now and then the anger would come, and I'd notice it: "Oh, I see that anger." Okay, just set it aside. I did that over and over again for a long time.

And then one day I thought, "Wow, I haven't experienced that in a long time. I wonder what happened to it." And I couldn't find it. Even reflecting on the person I had been so angry with—it was gone. I could not even conjure it up anymore. It disappeared when I wasn't looking.

This too is a way that wisdom can work—this very gradual, almost in-the-background kind of wisdom. We don't have to bore into all of our patterns, figure them out, pull them apart. Sometimes we can just let them be, and wisdom can do its work that way too.

So these moments, these small moments of seeing, of wisdom—as we recognize them, they're a pointer for us. They're a pointer to the possibility of freedom. They're heading us in that direction. So let yourself acknowledge them. Acknowledge these patterns, these little moments of freedom. Appreciate them.

As we see this, it can begin to inspire a sense of confidence that yes, there is value to this practice. Recognizing the value of the practice is probably the single most important quality that will help you stay on the path. It can serve you when it feels like nothing's happening. Remembering, reflecting back—how was it five years ago, and how is it now? Wisdom has changed things.

These recognitions support us to carry on.

CHAPTER 113

The Mindfulness Factor of Awakening

Andrea Fella · 52 min

In this talk from a month-long retreat, Andrea Fella offers a nuanced exploration of mindfulness (sati) as the first of the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga) as taught in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). Rather than discussing how to cultivate mindfulness, she invites practitioners to investigate mindfulness itself—recognizing its presence and absence, understanding how it arises, and noticing how it strengthens into a powerful force for liberation.

Drawing on insights from her teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya and the writings of Nyanaponika Thera, Andrea presents the seven awakening factors as an interconnected flow: mindfulness, investigation (dhammavicaya), and energy (vīriya) constitute the work of practice, while rapture (pīti), tranquility (passaddhi), concentration (samādhi), and equanimity (upekkhā) arise naturally as fruits. She distinguishes between "prompted" and "unprompted" mindfulness from the Abhidhamma, highlighting the spontaneous re-arising of awareness as a powerful doorway for investigation.

The talk offers practical guidance for daily life and retreat practice: using moments when the wandering mind returns as opportunities to feel mindfulness re-arising, noticing habitual patterns where awareness gets lost, and recognizing how deepening practice can create unfamiliar territory that temporarily destabilizes attention. Andrea emphasizes the nonjudgmental quality of the Buddha's instructions—simply noticing presence and absence—and how this curiosity about awareness itself naturally orients the heart toward freedom and well-being.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, we've been talking about the various Dharma perspectives that are offered and the frameworks through which we can know our experience. These frameworks essentially help to point us in the direction of freedom.

One of the frameworks offered in the Fourth Foundation is the seven factors of awakening. This is a beautiful list of wholesome qualities that we could say are supports for awakening. The list consists of mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture—also sometimes framed as rapt interest—tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

These qualities are cultivated as we practice wise mindfulness. We can see how some of this works in our practice: just the meeting of experience with wise mindfulness, exploring "What is this? What is this?" In some ways, this practice of mindfulness is a practice of equanimity—learning how to be balanced, non-reactive to things as they are arising. And this, of course, cultivates concentration, stillness of mind.

There are different ways these factors are understood. One that I particularly appreciate comes from my teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He says that they flow one to another. If we start with wise mindfulness, begin meeting our experience, we naturally investigate what's helpful and what's not helpful, what leads to ease and peace and what leads to more contraction and suffering. This is the second factor of investigation. And these two together begin to arouse energy in the direction of practice. A sense of confidence arises and the direction of our minds orients towards the Dharma. The energy that arises around practice directs us to the practice.

My teacher says that these first three factors are the work of our practice. We engage with mindfulness, investigation, and energy. The rest of the seven factors are the fruits of the practice. We can't make them happen so much, but very naturally, as we investigate and have energy directed to the practice, a sense of delight and rapt interest begins to arise around our experience. We get really curious about what's going on. The stability of mind begins to create a base of tranquility. But it's not that we necessarily say, "Be tranquil." We don't do tranquility as much as it arises. Concentration arises as a result of mindfulness and energy coming together, stabilizing mindfulness over time. And all of them together—the mindfulness, the energy, the tranquility, and the concentration—create the conditions for equanimity to arise.

So in a way, the first three factors are our work, and those three create the conditions for the others to arise. That's one way to understand the seven factors. Yet it is also possible to do practices to support all of them. Later in the retreat we will be exploring equanimity practice in the Brahma Viharas, consciously orienting the mind towards equanimity—in particular, equanimity around relationship. And Philip was pointing the other day to perhaps, for just short moments of time, being able to incline the mind towards tranquility, letting thought fall away for even a few seconds at a time. That may be a way to orient towards this enlightenment factor of tranquility. So both they are results of the practice, and we can incline and orient towards their cultivation.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the instructions around these seven factors are pretty simple. I'll read the section about mindfulness. As is usual for these lists, the instruction is repeated for each of the factors. So I'll read the instructions for mindfulness, and you can understand that this applies to all seven:

"There being the mindfulness enlightenment factor present, one understands, 'There is the mindfulness enlightenment factor in me.' Or there being no mindfulness enlightenment factor present, one understands, 'There is no mindfulness enlightenment factor in me.' And one also understands how there comes to be the arising of the unarisen mindfulness enlightenment factor, and how the arisen mindfulness enlightenment factor comes to fulfillment by development."

Basically: noticing the presence or absence of mindfulness, noticing its arising, and noticing how it becomes strengthened—how that enlightenment factor becomes powerful. I'll describe a little bit of my understanding of the distinction between simple mindfulness and the enlightenment factor of mindfulness.

One of my favorite authors is a monk who died some years ago, Nyanaponika Thera. He wrote an article called "The Power of Mindfulness." It was very inspiring to me that as mindfulness strengthens, it's not something we do so much as it becomes a state that we are living in, one that orients us towards the Dharma, towards understanding and wisdom. It really becomes a power in us. And to me, when it becomes continuous and stable, that is when it becomes the foundation for awakening.

And so these simple practices: Is the factor present? Is it absent? How does it arise and how does it come to fulfillment? Again, this kind of highlights the non-judgmental nature of the practice the Buddha taught. He says notice when it's present, notice when it's absent. The very noticing of that begins to instruct our hearts, really. Begins to teach our hearts what's helpful and what's not helpful.

As we sit here in this room practicing together, I think you all know when mindfulness is present and you are in the place of just witnessing. Maybe it's witnessing something really painful and challenging, and yet the heart doesn't clench necessarily around it when mindfulness is strong. When mindfulness is strong, when there's curiosity and balance of mind, the heart can feel relaxed, even if something difficult is happening. We can notice this.

And when there is a struggle, we can also be aware of that struggle and perhaps recognize, "Oh yes, this is caught. Caught is happening." We can be aware when the factor of mindfulness is not as strong as it sometimes is—not as a way to beat ourselves up or flagellate ourselves and tell ourselves we're a poor meditator, but simply to begin to recognize: What leads towards awakening? What leads towards freedom? And what leads towards dukkha?

The language in these texts is so balanced. Notice it's present. Notice it's absent. Very naturally, as we notice its presence and absence, the mind begins to orient more and more in the direction of freedom.

I think this is partly the way we just work as organisms. When we turn our attention with mindfulness to challenge and feel the heart relax around that with mindfulness, the heart moves in that direction because, I think very inherently, very deeply, our organism wants to orient towards well-being.

And kind of poignantly, our strategies—and Greg was talking about this last night—all of our strategies of how we are in the world, well, they're trying to get us to well-being. But because we're not seeing clearly, because delusion is present, we mistakenly think that these patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion will somehow be what leads us towards well-being. But when we with mindfulness begin to open, with wise mindfulness begin to open to what's actually going on, the heart begins to understand at a deeper level what lies in the direction of ease and peace and deeper well-being, and what lies in the direction of more suffering.

I think the instructions in this teaching on the four foundations of mindfulness are really counting on this very natural process—that as we turn our attention with mindfulness to our experience, our heart gets the lessons of well-being and begins to very naturally move in that direction. It's a wonderful thing. It's a really wonderful thing.

So tonight I don't want to try to go over all of these seven factors of awakening. I'd like to just explore the practice of mindfulness. What does it mean to recognize the presence of the mindfulness factor of awakening? What does it mean to recognize it's not present?

This is a different level, in a way, of a talk on mindfulness. Often when we talk about mindfulness we're discussing how we pay attention, how we cultivate this capacity to be attentive to our experience. Here what I'd like to explore is: How do we recognize mindfulness itself? How do we know this quality itself? This is what the Buddha is suggesting. Recognize mindfulness. Get to know mindfulness. Get to know what happens when it's not there. In a way, this is encouraging us to investigate mindfulness itself.

I will give a heads up on this talk, because very often in my own language—I'd say influenced by Sayadaw U Tejaniya—I often use the word awareness as synonymous with mindfulness. So I may slip between those two. In this talk, I mean the same thing. I'm not using them in a different way. When I say awareness, I mean mindfulness.

One of the ways to investigate or be curious about mindfulness in this way of noticing its presence and absence is to basically begin to explore both sides of a phenomenon that's really common. You have all experienced this many times today.

The wandering mind is essentially mindfulness going away. When the mind returns from wandering, mindfulness is back. And so we can look at the wandering mind—we can flip it around. Instead of thinking of it as an issue or a problem, we recognize that the wandering mind is helping us explore the presence and absence of mindfulness.

I've actually used this to my advantage. Anytime the mind wanders and I wake up again, I reflect, "Oh great, I've got an opportunity to see mindfulness re-arising." This is what the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta instructs us to do: notice mindfulness arising.

There's a lot we can learn about our minds as we explore mindfulness coming and going. First of all, we see the patterns that tend to stick us to them so that we lose mindfulness. We get familiar with the common ways that we get stuck. We also see—in spades—that the mind is out of control. It's not our fault. It's a process unfolding. Sometimes mindfulness is present, sometimes mindfulness is absent.

And yet there are conditions that can be inserted into this stream—one of them being sitting here in the room listening to a dharma talk on exploring mindfulness coming and going—that will create the conditions for curiosity, investigation, exploration of what's going on. And things change. It feels like I'm doing the practice, and yet really it's a process tumbling on, informed and conditioned by many other situations, conditions, phenomena.

We sit down to meditate and we try. "I'm going to be present." If there's an "I" in there, that "I" wants to be present, at least some of the time. When we sit down particularly, it's like, "Yes, I'm going to do this. I'm going to stay present." But how long does that last? If there were an "I" who had control, we wouldn't lose mindfulness. It's not self. And so we see this.

This exploration of watching mindfulness come and go—at least for me—has really helped to lessen the judging mind around the fact that the mind does wander. The moment mindfulness returns, that's an opportunity to see mindfulness re-arising. When I began reorienting around that as a practice—asking, "What does it feel like for mindfulness to come back?"—I found that moment to be really amazing. It's like, who did that? Again, that too is not self. You're just sitting there lost, and suddenly mindfulness comes back.

If there can be an interest in what it feels like for mindfulness to re-arise, then there's less of a tendency—at least I found for myself—to be frustrated or judge myself for having gotten lost in thought. It's like, "Oh, another opportunity! Can I see mindfulness re-arising? Can I see what happens?"

For me, this is one of the best places to begin exploring mindfulness itself: the moment that we remember. We've been lost in thought and we remember mindfulness. Actually, mindfulness remembers itself. It's not that we remember it. Mindfulness arises spontaneously, effortlessly. It's fantastic. We don't have to do it. It's just there.

In that moment, what is that like? I think I mentioned the other day that in the moment of mindfulness re-arising, it can take some time to attune to this investigation. When I started exploring this, I would be back, and I'd already be back with the breath before I even recognized that mindfulness had returned. It was as if there was this automatic thing happening—the mind came back into mindfulness, and some knee-jerk process of practicing mindfulness with the breath had already taken me back to the breath before I even noticed, "Oh, I'm aware." That's kind of an amazing thing too, isn't it?

So I began being curious. Wherever it was that I woke up, recognizing mindfulness is back, I was just curious: What is it? What is it like to be aware now? What is that experience?

And as we explore it, particularly in the moment when mindfulness comes back, the more we get curious about that moment itself—that moment of mindfulness coming back—there's a contrast between what it's like now for mindfulness to be present and what it was like just a moment before when we were lost in thought. We can begin to get a flavor of the difference, that difference of the light coming on, of mindfulness re-arising. So just beginning to notice that, getting a sense of that quality of awareness, of mindfulness itself.

We usually cultivate mindfulness with what I might call prompted mindfulness. There's a phrase in the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, describing two different ways mindfulness operates. One is called prompted mindfulness, and one is called unprompted mindfulness.

Prompted mindfulness is when we're already mindful and we're reminding ourselves: be aware, pay attention, know what you're paying attention to. That's a lot of the way we think cultivating mindfulness happens, and it's a lot of what we do here. When we are aware, we gently incline towards continuing awareness, often by attending to some specific experience like the breath or connecting with an object of atten-

tion. We prompt, we remind ourselves to be aware. The noting practice is a kind of prompting practice in a way, just reminding ourselves: aware, being aware. Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses those reminders: Am I aware? What am I aware of? Those are prompts for mindfulness. We don't even remember to ask the question unless we're already aware. So there's this prompted mindfulness.

Unprompted mindfulness is the spontaneous arising of mindfulness. And this is a way that we can begin to also cultivate mindfulness—to recognize this quality of mindfulness re-arising. What we see as we start to get familiar with that, what I've seen in my own practice around this, is that getting familiar with the moment of mindfulness returning begins to point out to us that it happens way more than we think it does. It's happening all over the place. It's just that frequently what happens as those little bubbles of mindfulness come up is that mindfulness will re-arise and then it'll land on something. We see a bird and then we start thinking about birds and what kind of bird it is. There's been a moment, a little flash of awareness, and then very quickly it goes because we're not so attuned to feeling that moment of mindfulness arising. Yet when we can start to get attuned to it, the familiarity with it makes it kind of point itself out to us.

This one practice is my favorite daily life practice: simply noticing mindfulness returning over and over and over again. As we begin to see how much that actually happens, it weaves a thread of little blips of mindfulness throughout our day. And here, we actually have an opportunity to really string those together into a strong, powerful continuity of mindfulness—the awakening factor of mindfulness.

So in that moment of remembering, just see if you can be curious about awareness. What is this awareness? Get familiar with that.

It's also useful, I find, to explore when you know that you're aware, being curious about what that's like. You could play with this from time to time. If you are in a place where you're with the breath or attending to a flow of experience, you're knowing pretty clearly that there's a momentum, just check in. What is awareness? There's awareness and there's what's known in awareness. These are different sides to the equation: the awareness and what's known. Often in our mindfulness practice we can emphasize what's known and not be quite as familiar with the awareness itself.

And so the practice that Sayadaw U Tejaniya suggests of just asking, "Am I aware?"—as I said, if you ask that question, you are already aware. When I teach this, I often get the question: what's the point? Why bother? You're already aware, why bother asking the question? The point of asking the question is to highlight or be curious about awareness. What is aware? We don't often get curious about what awareness actually is.

We're oriented to be curious about what we are aware of, not that we are aware. And that question—"Am I aware?"—highlights or encourages a curiosity about awareness itself. So you could play with that. Maybe the question could be something like, "What is awareness?"

Or sometimes I just use the simple word: aware.

When I first started practicing with this, I knew I was aware. It was clear—I knew I was aware. But I did not know how I knew I was aware. What I'd like to suggest, and this may happen for you also, is that you not try to figure out how you know that you're aware. Rather, simply know that you're aware and take it in. "Yes, I know I'm aware." It's kind of mysterious. I know that I'm aware. Just take that in—that you know that you're aware.

If you explore this over and over again, there begins to be a recognition or an understanding of what awareness is over time. I often suggest it's not like turning around and looking at awareness. It's not like turning back. It's more like stepping back. "Aware—what is aware?" Stepping back and knowing that you are aware, and just getting familiar with that experience.

Right now, do you know that you're aware? Just know that. That's enough right now. Do you know that you're aware?

So the exploration of mindfulness itself can happen in that moment when we recognize mindfulness returning. We can also be curious about the other side of the equation: Where does mindfulness get lost? Where does it go out? Where does it get hooked? There are so many ways that we get lost. We probably each have some very familiar, habitual ways that mindfulness gets lost.

Getting curious about how you lose awareness—how it happens, where it happens, when it happens. This curiosity is not about trying to force some kind of continuity. In fact, it's very different. It's more about recognizing, "Oh, I'm losing awareness in that situation. Let's see if we can understand what happens there, that awareness goes away." A kind of curiosity about how we're mindful and then the sand dribbles out of the bucket. How does that happen?

We can start to recognize perhaps places or locations. One thing I began noticing in my retreats is that there seemed to be particular activities or places where I would lose awareness. Washing dishes, maybe, or going into my room. If I had a single room—if I had a double, it was actually an incentive to continue mindfulness in the room because my roommate might walk in at any moment. But when I was alone, I could close the door and go, "Whew!" What's that about? What's going on there?

You may find that the bathroom is a mindfulness drain, or your yogi jobs, or if you decide to take a walk instead of doing the formal walking meditation. Just notice for yourself what aspects of your day you tend to lose mindfulness. Not to judge it, but rather as we start to notice the areas or places or ways that we lose mindfulness, then as we're heading into that activity or place, we can bring some attention.

I'll tell a story from my own practice. On one retreat, I was doing this kind of practice—where do I lose mindfulness?—and I kept noticing that I was waking up staring at myself in the mirror. I had lost mindfulness, but I was waking up while staring at myself in the mirror. Okay, for some reason I lose awareness here.

So I just started being curious about that. Not trying to force myself. This is not about doubling down and trying to force yourself to stay present while you're in front of a mirror, or wherever it is, in your room. It's more about curiosity. What is it that happens here?

I just explored this, and it took a long time—well, a long time on a month-long retreat. It probably took a week or so for me to really begin to see what was going on. And it wasn't some deep-seated longing to be seen or anything like that. It was just that I had a habit of looking at myself in the mirror and I was unaware.

At one point I recognized the place where I really saw this, as I was being curious about being in the bathroom where the mirror was. And of course the mind will blame things. At first I was blaming Spirit Rock for putting mirrors everywhere. It's their fault that I'm losing mindfulness! And then I began to just recognize, okay, this is in the mind here. What's going on?

I would notice that I was washing my hands and I hadn't yet looked up at the mirror. And then I would notice I was staring at myself in the mirror. Oh! Wow, look at that. Missed it again. Wow, isn't that amazing? So again, it was just the curiosity, the amazement of seeing that within a space of three seconds, I could lose mindfulness.

And then one day while I was washing my hands, I noticed the intention to look up. That was where I just saw this was a habit—just a habit to look at myself in the mirror while washing my hands. When I saw that, when I was able to see that intention, I don't know exactly how it worked, but it just created the conditions for more continuity in that place.

So curiosity about where you lose awareness, what happens there—this is powerful practice. We also often lose awareness in states of mind: boredom, depression, anger. I think we each have our favorite patterns that we tend to get lost in. And again, there's a possibility of being curious. The pattern of exploration here is to begin to see: where do we go out?

First, the practice is noticing where do we wake up. We learn about our familiar patterns of getting lost because we find ourselves waking up over and over again—in a fantasy that was meant to counteract boredom, or in a low-level grade of depression, or fighting with somebody in our minds. We see our patterns over and over again as we wake up. Just that beginning to get familiar—waking up into depression, or waking up into a fantasy that's pulling us away from boredom, touching into the boredom—as we get familiar with those states of mind through waking up into them, then we can start to see how they have a sticky quality. We can begin to see them arising.

This is in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: the teaching around the hindrances is to notice when they arise. And so getting familiar with the way boredom arises—one of the things I found around boredom in my own practice is that sometimes experience would get really ordinary. It's not so special anymore. Kind of neutral. And the mind would just sink a little bit.

When we notice we're in the terrain of one of these familiar states, we can increase the curiosity, kind of like I did with the practice around the mirror. Just increase the curiosity. What happens? Why is this so sticky? Investigating where there's a pull to get lost in this. And as we get more familiar with what it's like to be mindful, we can begin to feel mindfulness weakening. We can get curious about that. What's happening there when mindfulness is weakening?

Let me offer one more example of exploring mindfulness getting lost. This one I really want to bring in because at this point in the retreat, this is happening for some of you.

I've heard you talking about this in the meetings. As the practice starts to deepen, sometimes awareness gets lost—not because we're losing interest or motivation to practice, but because the practice is deepening. Sometimes the conditions become unfamiliar enough that mindfulness gets lost. I'd like to describe a couple of ways this can happen.

One is what we sometimes call the purity-purification cycle. There are times, and I know several of you have described this, when you have a few hours or an afternoon, maybe even longer, of just this flow of awareness and open heart. It's one of those great

stretches where you think, "How can I not just see this? Why would the mind do anything else?" You're just in that flow. And then suddenly anger comes back. Something happens in the dining room and everything explodes. What's going on?

This kind of pattern is very common, so if you've experienced it, you're right on track. One of the things that happens is that as the heart opens, it sometimes creates the conditions for those more latent tendencies underneath to arise—things that we've had a lid put on for a while. They sense that there's some room to come out. In effect, the purity has created the conditions for something that's been buried to come into our awareness. And we've been learning that it's the mindfulness, the coming into consciousness, where it can be freed, where it can be released. So it doesn't have to be a problem. This is simply the flow: purity, purification.

Another way I've seen mindfulness get lost as the practice settles is that we become familiar with how mindfulness feels with particular kinds of experience, particular kinds of objects—like being in a flow where you're effortlessly noticing sights and sounds and smells and body sensations, and another sound. It's a nice flow of experience, and there's a flow of mindfulness there.

Yet what often happens as mindfulness gets more continuous—and I'm going to use a hand gesture here, so if you have your eyes closed you might open them—is that mindfulness is meeting objects, and as it gets more and more continuous, it seems as though the mindfulness gets interested in new things, a different set of stuff, maybe some subtler level of experience. The mindfulness has actually dropped down to be interested in something else. But our agenda has us up here, looking for those familiar things, remembering how much fun it was being up here. Mindfulness will get lost because we're not tracking what it's connecting with.

I'll give an example. I was paying attention to the breath, and I could see that the attention was right with the breath. Then at some point I began feeling like the mindfulness weakened and left the breath. There was enough presence of mind, seeing the mindfulness weaken, that I thought, "Oh, come back to the breath." It would weaken again. And again the agenda: "Oh, come back to the breath."

This happened quite a few times, this weakening of the attention to the breath. At some point I recognized the attention was weakening with the breath, but the mindfulness was there. I didn't know exactly what it was doing, but I knew I was aware. Instead of having the agenda to say, "Okay, come back to the breath," it was like, "Well, I'm mindful—let's see what it's doing." And it dropped into a different level of experience. Until that point, I had been mostly attending to and knowing very simple, precise ob-

jects like breath and body. What this opened me to was vastness—a different kind of experience the mind was being drawn to in that continuity. And my agenda had me wanting to come back, come back, come back.

So sometimes, as the mind begins to weaken its attention to something, we can be curious: What is it doing? What's happening there?

There are different experiences we can have when mindfulness is strong. And this is another piece: if we find our way to a certain kind of clarity of mindfulness, really clear and precise knowing, we can have the sense or idea that that's it, that's what we're supposed to be doing. And that's one way it feels when mindfulness is continuous. I don't know how many ways there are that it feels as mindfulness is continuous, because I've experienced many different ones now that I've let go of trying to find a particular state. Rather, I've become curious: "Oh, awareness is here. What's this? What's this?"

Those vast states or foggy states or states of low energy—awareness can be very clear of something that is very fuzzy. And so it can have a very different feeling than what we might normally think of as clarity.

Exploring the mindfulness itself, the coming and going of mindfulness, getting familiar with the quality of mindfulness itself, really begins to support the continuity. It supports that stability of mindfulness, which is what creates the power of mindfulness. That's where it becomes an enlightenment factor—mindfulness joined with wisdom, steady. The steadiness of that.

And that is onward leading, because the perspective of wise mindfulness has that kind of alignment with our organism of wanting to head towards well-being. It's onward leading to these other factors of awakening and to freedom.

There's so much to see. Sometimes Joseph would say, "The Dharma is vast." It's amazing what we can see if we let go of our ideas of what it's supposed to be like, or how I'm supposed to be doing anything, and just be curious. Aware of what? What's here?

So let's sit for a moment. Are you aware? What's awareness?

CHAPTER 114

Deepening Trust

Andrea Fella · 46 min

In this profound talk, Andrea Fella examines the evolution of trust (saddhā) in meditation practice, drawing on Gil Fronsdal's teaching that "the present moment is trustable if we are present for it." She frames this exploration through the five faculties (pañca indriya)—faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom—showing how they form not a linear progression but a deepening spiral where each quality reinforces the others.

Fella traces how trust transforms through practice: beginning with "borrowed faith" from teachers and teachings, moving to trust in our own direct experience of wisdom, and eventually expanding toward trusting the unknown itself. She explores several edges of trust that practitioners encounter—the shift from doing practice to simply being present, the challenge of watching mindfulness slip away without doubling down on effort, and the willingness to open to vague or unfamiliar experiences rather than clinging to what feels known and precise.

The talk offers practical guidance for navigating the waves of wisdom and delusion that characterize practice, emphasizing the importance of discerning when the mind is trustable (when mindfulness and wisdom are present) versus when we need to step back to more foundational supports. Fella concludes with the image of standing at the edge of an abyss—each moment unknown—and the discovery that as we step into not-knowing, we simply arrive at the next moment's edge, ready to trust again.

This morning, the question came up about trust and how perhaps the practice can be seen as ever-expanding circles of trust or widening spheres of trust. And that was precisely the topic that I had in mind for my talk this evening, so that is what we will explore together.

Fairly early in my practice with, at that time, my teacher Gil Fronsdal—now my colleague—he said something about trust and the trustability of practice that has been an ongoing exploration for me. This ended up in his book, so I'll quote it from there: "The present moment is trustable if we are present for it."

For me, early on in my practice, this wasn't so intuitive. And certainly for many of us at various times in our practice, the present moment doesn't feel terribly trustable. If we're caught in anger, caught in confusion, it doesn't feel very trustable. And yet the full quote says, "The present moment is trustable if we are present for it."

Exploring that, what we do begin to see is that if some kind of reactivity is arising in the mind, if we bring wise mindfulness to it—this pairing of sati and pañña—to whatever is arising in the present moment, then the experience is trustable through the mindfulness. It's the wise mindfulness, the mindfulness and wisdom together, that carry the trust. And yet this is an evolution in our practice, an evolving understanding, and not necessarily in a linear way.

Philip was talking the other night about practice unfolding in uneven ways. Sometimes we gain some wisdom in one area and not in another. It's similar around trust. There are ways that we learn to trust some aspects of our practice at certain times, and then at other times we have to begin to discern when the mind is not so trustable. Exploring this evolution of trust, I like the sense of a deepening trust—that the trust gets more and more rooted in us.

There's a teaching the Buddha offers where trust—the Pali term I'm using is saddhā, sometimes translated as faith, confidence, or trust—appears at the very beginning of a list called the five faculties. These are five qualities of mind that in a sense describe the evolution of our practice, the arc of our practice. And yet to me, it's more of a spiral than an arc.

The first of these five qualities is faith. The very way we step onto the path begins with some kind of faith or confidence or trust in something that we've heard, a teaching, some wisdom. We hear that, some part of it resonates with us, and that inspires us to engage with what we've learned.

This is the second of the five faculties: energy. A sense of confidence in some aspect of the teaching inspires an energy to engage with these teachings. And that leads to the cultivation of mindfulness, which is crucial in the wisdom. The wisdom teachings of the Buddha really are framed around understanding our experience through mindfulness practice. So the engagement is towards mindfulness—we engage with becoming aware of what's happening in the present moment.

As we do that, that's the third of the five faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness. Energy and mindfulness together with a sense of direction to the practice lead to the fourth of the five faculties: a stability of mind, concentration.

With that stability of mind, again from the perspective of the exploration that we started with, we had to start from somewhere—hearing some kind of teaching. Turn towards your experience and see what it is like to be a human being having that experience. Perhaps this is a very basic way to frame some of the fundamental wisdom of the Buddha.

As we explore faith, energy, mindfulness, and concentration, then the wisdom—the fifth faculty—begins to arise not as an idea, not as something that somebody has said to us, but as direct experience. We start to really get it. Oh, I see why it's useful to do this. I see why it's helpful to turn and watch anger, to watch confusion, rather than just being lost in the story of it. We directly experience some sense of release or freedom around that state, even as it's continuing to arise. This is some of the wisdom that I spoke about a few talks ago.

We begin to directly experience the wisdom, and this supports our sense of trust in the practice. It encourages us to engage more, which leads to more energy, more directing the mind towards mindfulness, concentration, and more wisdom. These deepen in a spiral. We begin somewhere—we have to begin basically from just hearing the teachings. Yet as we engage, which is so crucial to our practice here, faith is what inspires that engagement. Faith is a stepping onto the path, a sense of trust that, well, maybe this will be useful.

And so this is a kind of description of how our practice evolves through these five faculties—faith being the seed from which the practice really flowers.

It can be helpful perhaps to explore a little, to reflect on this quality of trust or faith or confidence. I know for myself that the word *faith* was not so evocative. In my upbringing, it was connected with believing in something that was not possible to know. And that just didn't really work for me. So the word faith has been something I've had to play with for a while. The word *trust* is a little more evocative for me.

What is it that we trust? In our usual lives, what is it that we trust? We trust so many things that are not so reliable. We place our trust on having things—that's what will make me happy, that's what will be reliable. If I have things, if I've accumulated things, if I can arrange my world to be filled with what I want and arrange it to not have things I don't want, that's what will be reliable. But that's not such a helpful place to really place our trust. As we see here, things are quite unreliable.

We place our trust on being someone, on having things, on having people hold certain opinions about us. We try to live our lives such that people will think a certain way about us. And we've seen our own minds—how reliable is it for somebody to have a certain opinion about you? It's not very reliable.

Sometimes we place our trust in our emotions. Not that we'd necessarily do this consciously, but in effect, as we are living our lives and perhaps lost in a reactive emotion, when we're acting out of that reactivity, some part of us has placed trust in the beliefs of that emotion—that acting on this is what is going to bring happiness in some form or other.

It's quite humbling to see what we place our trust in, how unreliable it actually is.

And so the exploration of trust in the practice is beginning to look for perhaps a place that might be a little more trustworthy. This takes some honesty in our own exploration of where we place our trust, beginning to recognize that the usual ways we have approached finding trust, placing our trust in the world, are not reliable.

In my own experience, I was in such a state of dukkha, of suffering, and at some point someone sent me a book that gave me some orientation around the teachings. This was my first real opening to the Buddha's teaching, even though I had read some of the Buddha's words fifteen years earlier.

It's interesting, I think, how the conditions of suffering—at least in some of us—are really needed to be able to hear the hard medicine of the Buddha: that placing our trust in things of the world is not reliable, and that turning to experience, cultivating mindfulness with a perspective of *what's this?*, with the understanding that stress and suffering are not inherent in what we're experiencing but that the reactivity of the mind is what creates most of our suffering.

There is going to be unpleasant phenomena in the world, of course. And yet the way we've been engaging so much before we really step into the practice is through adjustment—trying to adjust the world for our own minds to be at ease. And thank goodness that's not required to have the heart really at peace.

Yet as we've said over and over again, that heart at peace doesn't mean that we don't then step into action in the world to address injustice, to address things that cause suffering. In fact, that very opening of the heart leads us to want to act to alleviate suffering in the world. And yet this medicine of turning toward our own heart, seeing where we are clinging, where we are struggling—we have to hear this teaching. And sometimes we have to be suffering in order to hear it.

That was the case for me at least. I had read the teachings of the Buddha fifteen years earlier and thought, "Oh, that's a good idea. I'll try that." And it just never really landed. Then when I was really struggling, when I felt like—as it says in the suttas

sometimes—"Does anyone know a way or two out of this suffering?" At that point, when you hear something that points you in the direction of freedom, you might be willing to actually engage with it.

And so that's a kind of beginning level of trust in a way—that we hear the teachings, and whether or not they make sense to us, whether or not it makes sense to think about paying attention to anger, bringing attention to reactivity, whether or not that makes sense, perhaps we're willing to try. We're willing to run the experiment, willing to engage. And that is really the place where trust begins.

All of you here on this retreat, I would say, are well beyond this level of trust. You would not come on a month or two-month retreat without this sense of willingness to engage. And so there it is—there is some sense of trust in the practice.

And yet, there are times when we forget. We forget about why we're doing this. Breathing in, breathing out—what does that have to do with anything? We forget. And then we remember. And we forget, and we remember. So even this level of trust is not always so even. We have to remind ourselves: this is the value, this is the purpose of the practice.

Something calls us to engage, something calls us to explore, to try to put these teachings into practice. And this is where the next level or unfolding of trust begins to happen. We start to engage. We begin to see little moments of wisdom arising, like I described a week or so ago—the seeing of how turning towards experience with mindfulness, a reactive experience, leads to a sense of, "Oh, this is just frustration. I can watch this." And what a difference in experience between being caught by frustration and knowing it. Or we see the arising of a pattern, a conditioned pattern, a habitual pattern. And just in the seeing of it start to get put together, the mind understands that way lies suffering, and it lets it go.

So we see directly, very experientially, the value of what we've been engaged in. The wisdom starts to grow. And this back and forth—actually, I see this deepening of trust, this ever-expanding trust, as a kind of flow between wisdom and trust, wisdom and trust, wisdom and trust. As trust deepens, wisdom can deepen. And then trust can deepen and wisdom can deepen.

The direct experience of understanding the value of this practice begins to deepen the wisdom, which inspires trust. We have a direct recognition: it's not just words, it's not just a good idea. It's actually useful. It's actually helpful.

At this point, trust can become less about a sense of a leap of faith. And there are times in this practice when I think faith is an appropriate word for this quality of trust, especially early on at the beginning of the practice. There's a sense of not being sure how this is going to work, or why this is valuable, but we've heard somebody that we respect say, "Yes, this has been really helpful to me." Or we see in a teacher something, and they say this transformation in this being has come from this practice. And so we think, well, there are some examples out there. Maybe that's worth trying.

At first it is a kind of borrowing the faith of others—borrowing that sense from my friend who sent me that book in the first place. She said, "This has been really helpful to me. Try it. It'll help." It's like, okay, I don't know, but she said it worked. So just kind of borrowing that trust.

And yet it doesn't take very long once we actually turn to engage before there's a sense of understanding directly how it's useful, how it's helpful. Trust begins to be more in our own system. We understand. We trust our own experience. We're no longer having to borrow from somebody else.

And yet that deepening of trust, that unfolding of wisdom—as I talked about in the talk on wisdom, those wisdoms come and go. Wisdom, then delusion returns. We have a deepening of trust and then suddenly it's like, "What? Did I really experience that? I must not have experienced that. I must be fooling myself." At that point, we may need to draw not only on the trust from our friends and our teachers, but we can begin to draw on something else. We can begin to recognize coming in and out of that wisdom-delusion cycle. When we've seen that cycle happen multiple times, we begin to recognize: oh yes, wisdom comes and goes.

And so when delusion has come back, we can borrow trust from ourselves. We can remind ourselves, "Yes, I know this is being caught by a reactive emotion right now. That's what's happening. It's impermanent. It's unreliable. It's causes and conditions. It's not forever." So we begin to recognize the coming and goings and can draw on our own experiences of trust to help us continue the practice.

In a way, over time, the trust in practice shifts from trusting what others say, to trusting our own sense of capacity to engage, to trusting wisdom—a kind of letting go of even identity in the trust. We begin to trust wisdom itself.

There are some edges to trust. Some of my own edges I'll explore with you; you may have different edges. But I have found that there are places or times where it's like, "I've trusted this far, but I don't know if I can go any further." There are places at the edges of our practice where we wonder, "Can I really? Is that really practice?"

As the mindfulness starts to get more continuous, as there's a steadiness and a sense of capacity for the practice itself, we learn: I can sit. I can pay attention to my breath. We start to trust some of our own capacity for practice. And yet at some point, we even have to let go of that. We have to shift. There's an edge around practice where there's a shift from engaging with the practice, the doing, the picking up of practices to create states of concentration or to have experiences heading us in the direction of wisdom.

This is very familiar to us in a way—we engage with the teachings, we begin to see things in a certain way, certain clarity of mindfulness helps us see patterns clearly. We see how things are constructed, conditioned. We may start to recognize a very clear unfolding of experience. And we think that's what the practice is. That's what's trustable. And it is trustable, but it's not the only way. Sometimes we have to let go of what we know we trust in order to expand and open into new terrain, to open to the not-known, to what's unfamiliar.

So we start by beginning to explore what it means to trust just what is arising right now. Just this moment. Not needing to or trying to necessarily do the practice, but shifting more towards being. Just knowing what's here right now. We begin to trust the wisdom to know experience, rather than feeling like, "I have to do it." This is a kind of weakening of the sense of self around the practitioner, a trust that wisdom and mindfulness know their way.

This is not an easy edge of trust. It can be rather ragged at that edge, where we may at times be able to let go of the doing and simply witness, simply know any experience. It doesn't matter what's happening. It absolutely does not matter what the experience is. Mindfulness and wisdom can know it. Dhamma understanding, Dhamma wisdom can arise with any experience, any time. It's not just about sitting in silence on the cushion with our eyes closed. Dhamma wisdom can arise while cutting an apple, while flushing the toilet, while sitting anywhere.

This trust that Dhamma wisdom is available at any moment supports our engagement all the time. Greg the other day mentioned a poem from the Therīgāthā, one of the nuns' verses. It's a beautiful image. This nun is sitting on a hillside looking out over the fields. She's sitting near her kuti, watching farmers plowing, doing their work. And it raises a reflection in her mind. She says, "Just like the farmers work in their fields, I have been working for years on this practice. Why am I not free? What am I doing wrong? I've been following the Buddha's teachings and I'm not free." And then she remembers that it's not about thinking about it, but just about the experience in any moment.

She washes her feet. The water runs down the hill and she watches the water run down the hill. She gets up, aware of getting up, walks to her room, aware. Aware, she sits down on the bed. Aware, she takes a pin and pushes the wick and the lamp down. As the light goes out, her mind is freed.

Any moment, it's possible. We have no idea when that will happen. And yet, we have to be available, present for it to happen. So that's an edge of trust for us—beginning to let go of some level of control over the doing of the practice and opening to just what's here.

Another edge of trust: as our practice gets more continuous, as the mindfulness gets more continuous, sometimes it can start to show us actually more gaps in the mindfulness. Sometimes people describe, after being on retreat for a few weeks on these long retreats, "I'm way less mindful than I was when I got here." And it's probably more likely that what's happening is that you're more aware of when the mindfulness slips out.

This slipping out of mindfulness, as mindfulness gets more continuous, can be an edge for us. We can doubt. We doubt ourselves. We feel like we need to double down. That's our usual response when we see the mindfulness slip—I must not be trying hard enough. Double down, make sure I stay continuously mindful. And that can be helpful at times. I'm not saying that's never a good idea. It can be helpful at times.

And yet there are times when doubling down, that bringing up of effort in order to do the practice, actually gets in the way. I talked a couple of talks ago about the level of mindfulness and seeing certain experiences, how sometimes as mindfulness gets stronger, it's like mindfulness is searching out subtler experience, or new experience, or unfamiliar experience—and that's where mindfulness can slip out. If we double down at that point, that added energy or effort is a grosser experience. It gets in the way of seeing where the mindfulness is trying to go.

And so this is a place of trust. It's not about trying to stay mindful, but rather, instead of bringing the effort up, bringing the interest up. Where does the mind go as it slips out? Where does it go? If we can be interested there, instead of just trying to hang on to mindfulness with what we're used to being mindful of, then it's possible that we might be able to open into something new and unfamiliar that we've not seen before.

This takes some trust—the willingness to let the mind slip out and just keep trying. Oh, there it goes again. Can I be curious about that? And that may lead to being able to open into these perhaps new, unfamiliar experiences, maybe even things that we wouldn't even think were related to being mindful.

So often we have this idea about mindfulness looking a certain way—more and more clarity. That's what more and more mindfulness would look like, we think. More sharpness, more preciseness, just bits of seeing very clear pieces of experience. And in so many ways the deepening of the practice often happens through experiences we're completely unfamiliar with. They may be vague experiences, they may be diffuse experiences, and not this clear, precise kind of thing.

And so learning to trust—again, we begin to trust: Am I aware? And not judge or decide the quality of our awareness based on what is known, on what the experience is. Aware. Aware and have no idea what I'm aware of. You're aware. That's enough. Aware and not knowing.

This movement towards not knowing, I think, is a direction of the deepening of the practice and the deepening of trust. It's hard to trust letting go into not knowing, into unfamiliarity, into vagueness, into we don't know what. And so this is an edge of trust for us. We cling to anything that feels familiar. We cling because we can't fathom what it is we're letting go into.

And yet that is a direction this practice is asking of us. We have no idea the depth of letting go that has to happen. We don't know what's on the other side of that letting go. And yet we slowly learn to trust—at least in my own experience, slowly learn to trust this experience of release. Feeling the unconstricted heart that follows from release. We slowly begin to trust that.

So over time, we begin to trust this right mindfulness. We trust mindfulness and wisdom. We begin to recognize when they're present, when they're not present. We begin to recognize when the mind is actually trustworthy—when mindfulness and wisdom are present, the mind is trustworthy. There's nothing to fear from anything that arises. It's a great experience of safety, that place of having mindfulness and wisdom so established that there's just no fear. Anything can arise and it's known.

And yet, this seeing of when the mind is trustworthy, when mindfulness and wisdom are present, also comes with recognizing when mindfulness and wisdom are not present. So we begin to discern when it may be appropriate to step back to other levels of trust. To step back and acknowledge: this mind is not capable in this moment of just being with, just watching the arising of this habitual pattern. That habitual pattern is taking me down the rabbit hole. The capacity of mindfulness and wisdom in this moment is not able to just watch it and remain trustworthy.

We need to discern that. We need to discern when it's time to step aside, maybe turn our attention away from a particularly tangled pattern, or just bring in, draw on some of those borrowed wisdoms from ourselves. This is impermanent. This is not self. Can I just know this as best I can?

So again, it's not this continual, ever-deepening, one-direction movement toward trust. Mindfulness and wisdom have waves to them. We need to learn to ride those waves.

In the deepest letting go, we really just—it's such a stepping into not knowing. If we really start to look at our experience, we recognize we have no idea what's going to happen next. The next split second is unknown. And this is an edge of trust for us too. It can create a sense of fear when we recognize that. It feels like we are standing on the edge of an abyss, and we're asked to step into the abyss. It's that level of not knowing in the next moment.

This can be hard to trust, hard to live in that space. And yet what we see is that as we step into the abyss, trusting that step into the abyss, we land at the edge of the abyss, having to take the next step into the abyss.

CHAPTER 115

Qualities of Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · 55 min

> *In this foundational talk from a month-long retreat, Andrea Fella offers a detailed exploration of the opening passage of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), which she describes as the Buddha's definition of mindfulness practice. She unpacks the phrase "one abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world," examining each word to reveal the depth of the Buddha's instructions.*
>
> *Fella distinguishes between ordinary awareness—the simple human capacity to know that we know—and wise or right mindfulness (sammā sati). Using the example of a thief moving carefully through a house, she illustrates how awareness itself is neutral and can be directed by either wholesome or unwholesome intentions. The key difference lies in being curious about experience as experience in the present moment, rather than awareness aimed at achieving some goal rooted in craving.*
>
> *The talk illuminates how the qualities embedded in the sutta's definition work together: "abides" (viharati) evokes resting and receptivity; "observing" brings directedness and intimacy; "as a body" points to bare attention free from views and opinions; "ardent" contributes energy and commitment; and "fully aware" (sampajañña) involves recognizing what is skillful versus unskillful and perceiving the impermanent nature of experience. Fella emphasizes that this practice requires only a light touch of effort—"small moments, many times"—and that the freeing from desires and discontent is not a prerequisite but rather the natural result of sustained, curious attention.*

So as Philip said last night, we'll be exploring the Satipatthana Sutta with you for these first days of the retreat. In the beginning of that text, the sutta offers a pretty succinct definition of what mindfulness is. This definition, which I'll read to you in just a few moments, takes a few sentences to describe what the basics of the mindfulness practice are. I think of the rest of the sutta as being an exposition on these few sentences. It really sets up in a few words what the Buddha means by mindfulness practice—what we attend to and how we attend to it. So that's the piece I'm going to look at: what might be called the definition of mindfulness, where the Buddha begins this sutta.

But to start, I want to explore a little bit what we think of as mindfulness conventionally. We might use words like being present, being aware, being with, witnessing, awareness, observing. One that I sometimes use as a working definition is knowing what is happening while it's happening—just that simple kind of awareness of what's happening while it's happening.

This quality of mindfulness that the Buddha points to as being crucial for our understanding of our hearts and minds is based on a pretty ordinary quality in our minds. It's based on a human capacity that we have: just this simple capacity to know that we know, this self-reflective capacity of our minds. We can be aware of ourselves; we can know ourselves. But this simple capacity is not what the Buddha meant by wise mindfulness. It's the basis of this quality of wise mindfulness, but wise mindfulness uses that quality of knowing ourselves while aiming the interest of exploration in a particular way—being curious about experience happening in the present moment as experience happening in the present moment.

That may sound like nothing. What's the difference between that and just being aware of what's happening in the present moment? Here's an example to tease this apart. A thief walking through a house may be very aware of exactly what they are doing, aware of every step, every movement, especially if there's somebody in the house that they don't want to wake up. They may be very aware of what they're doing in the present moment. But the aim of that awareness is greed. The aim of that awareness is not, "Oh, what does it feel like to take a step?" It's not, "What is the experience of wanting this thing?"

So that's the difference I'm pointing to: the interest in experience in the present moment as experience in the present moment. What is the experience of taking a step? What is the experience of feeling an emotion? This is beginning to point at what the Buddha meant by wise mindfulness, by right mindfulness.

The suttas actually do point to, in a few places, the wrong Eightfold Path. It's not a widely used phrase, but the suttas mention that we don't want to be on the wrong Eightfold Path, motivated by wrong view, leading to wrong intention, leading to wrong speech, action, and livelihood, to wrong effort and wrong mindfulness and wrong concentration. So in the suttas, it's pretty clear that mindfulness is a kind of neutral quality that can be aimed one way or another depending on what's going on in our minds. The Buddha pointed to this quality as being crucial, but aimed in a particular way—aimed at this interest of exploring our human experience.

It's worth cultivating this awareness from a particular perspective. For example, with reactive emotions like anger or frustration or irritation, what it means to be mindful in this way is to be curious about what the experience of anger is in the present moment. What is it like?

Not "What do I do with this?" or "What do I need to change about this?" But just really connecting to what is this experience. What is the human experience of irritation, anger, frustration? Turning towards the experience and experiencing it from the inside—Philip used the phrase "felt sense." With our reactive emotions, we can explore what's the felt sense of this experience, curious about that.

That's a very different experience than having a reactive emotion and acting on it. Very different. And you all know this difference. You've felt this difference. And yet there are times that our emotions do point to—or a component of our emotions is—a kind of discernment that something needs to be changed in the world.

What I'd like to suggest is that this practice of being curious about what's happening in the present moment, turning inward to explore that reactivity—anger, for instance—exploring that experience, may be connected to witnessing injustice in the world. I don't believe the teachings simply say, "Oh yes, just notice that you're angry about this and just notice this is what's happening in the world." Because there are so many places where the teachings point to action following out of compassion.

As we explore and see what's happening in the world, our mindfulness begins to tease apart the discernment of what's happening from the reactivity about it. When the reactivity falls away and the discernment remains, there's room for other things to arise with that discernment—like compassion and wisdom and patience and kindness and generosity. Action out of wisdom instead of out of greed or aversion or confusion.

This exploration of being aware and curious about our experience as experience opens the doorway for more responsiveness to experience as opposed to reactivity. That's a piece of this perspective the Buddha is pointing to: this curiosity revealing, opening us to freedom, wisdom, compassion, and love. The emotions of the brahmavihāras and the wisdom of understanding suffering are really joined together. They're like two sides of a coin. The more clear the discernment, the more availability and room for the arising of these wholesome, responsive emotions.

So this phrase I'd like to explore with you begins to unpack what the Buddha means by wise mindfulness. All translations carry a kind of interpretation to them, and I have chosen a particular translation that I resonate with—the words have a flavor of what resonates for me in this teaching.

This phrase at the beginning of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta reads: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world."

That phrase is repeated four times, with "body as a body" replaced by "feelings as feelings," "mind states as mind states," and "dhammas as dhammas"—phenomena as phenomena. This fourth foundation of observing the dhammas is a little complex to explain, so I'll set that aside for now. In this exploration, I'll just use the first phrase: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world."

These words the Buddha puts together—each one adds a slight perspective on what he is encouraging us to observe and how he is encouraging us to observe it. The phrase points to both the "what" we are exploring and the "how."

The first word: abides. This word really resonates for me. What does it evoke? Abide. The word in Pali is *viharati*, which means to dwell, to live. "Abide" is a fitting translation. It evokes a sense of being at home, resting, contentment, perhaps a sense of intimacy, a familiarity of being with, connected. Abide.

Sometimes words can be very evocative for us. They carry many associations, and when we bring a word into our mind, we may find that just bringing in that word—abide—

Maybe there's a kind of collecting or settling or gathering.

Abide.

So this word brings in a quality of rest, of receptivity—that receptive quality to the practice.

The second word, *observes*. "Abides observing." This brings in a little bit more directedness, a kind of connection. The word *anupassati* is said to mean to look closely at, to observe repeatedly, to closely observe, to see closely. And so we're not just abiding—like, "Oh yeah, let's just chill." We abide connected, close, intimate with. There's a strong sense of meeting the experience.

So there's a relaxed, receptive connection. Those two together.

I like the phrase "being with myself." That phrase helps me to land with experience. Can I be with this? Can I be with this?

So we abide observing the body as a body. I want to linger with this phrase for a little while. The body *as* a body. Feelings *as* feelings. Mind states *as* mind states.

This is pointing to what I said earlier—that we are curious about our experience in the present moment *as* experience in the present moment. The body is what we explore; *as* a body is how we explore it. It's a body. It's a human body.

This phrase brings in an aspect of wisdom, bringing in some of the wise mindfulness, bringing in some of the wisdom to the way we observe. Exploring the body as a body. Exploring perhaps some of the impersonal nature of the body. There is a body, this is a body. Not *my* body—*a* body. Not as a person or an identity we might hold.

And also I think it points to noticing the body in and of itself. Not our ideas about it, our thoughts about it, our opinions about it, our agendas about it—but just the body as it is. Pointing to what we might call bare attention. Just the body as a body.

This particular exploration helps us to disentangle some very common ways that we get caught up. Views about our body. Opinions about our body. Sometimes, almost below the surface, we are relating to our experience through these views and opinions and ideas, rather than through just the connection of: well, what is this experience of the body?

So this kind of exploration begins to help us tease apart what is the physical side of experience from what are our views and opinions, our feelings, the mental aspect. We are really starting to explore the body as the physicality of the body—the actual experience, the felt experience. As Philip was mentioning, the felt sense in the moment. When he used the phrase "real-time awareness" of the body, of the breath—that connection with experience.

I think this phrase also encourages a non-interfering awareness. The interference in awareness often comes in through our views and ideas and opinions. Agendas of meditation. How we want the body to be, how we want to be paying attention to it. This is encouraging us to just notice—well, let's set those aside, or notice perhaps that they're there.

We're not trying to stop those things from happening so much, but just noticing: can I know that those opinions and views are there, those agendas, but see—can I actually connect with what's actually here? What are the sensations happening?

Philip talked about exploring pain in that way yesterday. The sense of the actual sensations of maybe hardness and sparking and burning and pulling and twisting, versus frustration and dislike and anger and all of the emotional responses to that. When we overlay the emotional responses onto the physical sensation, often it kind of solidifies, and we're not so much seeing the actual body as a body, the experience as experience.

And so this kind of exploration begins to help us be curious about a non-interfering awareness.

Just attuned to this experience as experience.

We might think of this non-interfering awareness as the wisdom side—a kind of equanimity, just observing things as they are. And yet that very activity, if we can open to this part of it, we could also use the word *allowing*. We are allowing the experience to be as it is. Just allowing it to be. Allowing all aspects of our experience to be present as human experience.

This brings in the perspective of kindness and care and love. In a way, we could say that the mindfulness we bring to that curiosity is a loving attention—a kind attention, friendly, caring awareness. This allowing quality is intimately connected with this loving attention.

I was speaking earlier about wisdom and the brahmaviharas—the love and compassion and sympathetic joy—being like two sides of a coin. As we explore experience in this way, allowing ourselves to be just as we are, this is the very definition of love. When we want or are looking for love from somebody else, isn't that what we want? For them to allow us to be exactly as we are? To be accepted for who we are? Allowed to be? That's what we're exploring doing for ourselves.

Last night we talked about belonging as community. This is an inner belonging. The Buddha didn't use these words, but the effect of this practice is that we more and more allow all the parts of ourselves to belong. And paradoxically, that allowing transforms things. Parts of ourselves that tend to be twisted up in knots, tight and contorted and constricted—those begin to loosen. Greed, aversion, delusion begins to weaken and just fall apart. Transform, really.

So this allowing aspect—the body is a body, just allowing the body to be a body and being curious about that—this allowing is about recognizing that what is happening is already happening.

I like the word *allowing* as opposed to *acceptance*, at least in my mind. You may not have the same perspective with the word accepting, but when I say accepting to myself, I feel like I have to agree with it. If I'm going to accept something, then I have to sign up for it. I can't disagree with it. But allowing is about acknowledging that what is here is here. You don't have to agree or disagree with it. It's just stating the truth: this is what's here. And so allowing is connected intimately with truth. This is what is here. We might as well allow it because it's already here.

That allowing then opens us to a more skillful response instead of a reactive response. And so we hold this possibility of allowing what is here to be here.

But I don't know about you—a lot of times I find the mind is in resistance to what's here. And so sometimes we have to take a step bigger. If there's a sense of "no, it's not okay for this to be here"—I see that it's here, but my mind is rebelling against this, this is not okay—then can we allow *that*? This is here and I don't like it. That's what's happening. It's like making the container a little bigger to include the resistance itself.

Can we allow the not allowing? Our minds can do this.

Creating a bigger container.

So we abide. Abide observing the body as a body, body in and of itself. Maybe the breath in and of itself. Maybe sensations in the body in and of themselves. Maybe the broader sense—there is a body. One abides observing the body as a body.

Ardent—the next word, *ardent*. This word brings in some energy, wholeheartedness, diligence, connection, alertness, heartfelt interest. Ardent maybe even has the quality of the word "heart" in a way—ardency, heartfelt connection to. To me, this brings in some of the sense of committing, standing here. The phrase of Satipatthana that Philip talked about: standing close to what mindfulness stands close to. This is that kind of commitment to, "Yes, I'm going to be with experience." It brings in a quality of energy, of commitment, of persistence, of effort. This word brings these in—continuity, ardency, staying connected with our experience.

So this brings in the importance of that staying connected moment after moment. We will emphasize continuity a lot during this time together. It is such an important part of our practice. And in a month-long like this, we really get the opportunity to cultivate mindfulness everywhere, even in our rooms. When we go in and close the door and it's like, "Nobody's looking, I don't have to practice anymore." You can get through maybe a five-day or ten-day retreat kind of on-off the cushion. A retreat of this length, it's so much easier, actually, when we just sign up. Just sign up. You'll forget—of course you'll forget. You'll close the door to your room and you'll forget. At some point, though,

you'll remember. And just reconnect at that moment. Like Winnie said, to have that moment be a celebration. I don't remember exactly the word she used, but it's positive reinforcement. Oh, I'm back. I'm back. Here again. Aware again. Awareness is back.

So that ardency isn't about trying to force ourselves to stay mindful all the time, but is more that intention to stay connected. And that intention to recognize when mindfulness returns.

In this definition, we have both *abiding* and *ardent*. So these two are kind of balancing each other in a way—both dwelling and ardent. Dwelling gives that sense of resting, stepping back, relaxing, receiving, receptive, at home. Ardency carries more a sense of engagement.

What does it mean to hold both of these? Relaxation and alertness are not opposites. They can come together in a moment, right now. How hard is it for you to be aware of the sensations of your hands, wherever they are, however they are? Just the naming of that. Do they kind of pop into your awareness? Often, if you're listening, if you heard me, often that moment—just for a moment—it's pretty easy. You just notice that sensation.

It's kind of the level of effort or energy we need. It's not hard to be mindful for a moment. What is hard, what's harder, where we tend to get tied up in knots, is in sustaining that mindfulness.

We tend to try to pick up a whole bunch of moments, thinking to ourselves, "Okay, I'm sitting down for 45 minutes. I'm going to be present for all 45 minutes." And it's almost like we pick up the whole sitting in that first two seconds and try to bring in the effort in that first two seconds to stay present for the entire sitting. Well, our minds don't quite work like that.

We can be present for a moment, a split second. Just enough effort to be present for a moment. And then do it again. Just enough for the next moment. Half a breath at a time. Just enough effort to be there for half a breath. That's all you need to do. Those thoughts about the other 700 breaths in this 45-minute sitting—let them go. Just this half breath, that's all you need. And then at the end of that half breath, do another half breath. It's almost like hand over hand, a little bit of pulling yourself along with the lightest touch of effort.

We can do this in the walking too. At certain points in my practice, I found that when the mind was kind of scattered, I didn't want to try to force myself to be mindful even for one walking path. I would pick a spot on the ground—that little spot there, that leaf

on the ground that's about two feet in front of me. "Can I make it to that spot? Can I make it to that leaf?" Lifting, moving. Yep, made it. "Okay, how about the next one? Can I make it to that spot?" Just enough effort.

"Small moments, many times," Joseph says a lot. Small moments, many times. That level of effort can be both relaxed and engaged—that way of practicing.

And the thought will come in: half a breath, an in-breath, "only 27 more days." And that thought will bring in some heaviness. That's what's happened. Notice that as idea. That's not what's actually in the direct experience of the body. That's a thought in the mind with a kind of resistance or a picking up of that. Although sometimes it can be, "Oh, 27 more days—yes!" But just notice that.

So this light touch of effort, moment after moment.

"One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware." The next phrase: *fully aware*. This phrase translates the Pali *sampajañña*, which is often translated as "clear comprehension." The place many of us first hear about this word, this teaching, is in the first foundation of mindfulness. There's a section on being fully aware in all activities, and I think Eugene is going to talk about this in a couple of days—though I don't want to promise that; talks can change. But this is the way we often think about it: fully aware while walking, while going and coming, while bending and stretching. So the term "full awareness" is used there.

In this particular context, I've done some research about the word, and there are a lot of different contexts in which this particular phrase—"clearly comprehending" or "full awareness"—is used. I'll just bring in two in particular that I think begin to point to what the Buddha is wanting us to explore here at this point in the instructions.

There are some places where the phrase "clearly comprehending" or "full awareness" is pointing to recognizing when what is arising is skillful and helpful, and when what is arising is unskillful and unhelpful.

There's a place in the suttas where it talks about when a hindrance is arising, one is fully aware the hindrance is arising. This is not about being lost in the hindrance, but it's also not about judging the fact that the hindrance is there. It's about recognizing: the hindrance is a hindrance. This is something that catches the mind, and we feel this in the way the hindrance expresses itself. The felt sense of a hindrance—those manifestations of greed, aversion, and delusion—tends to be constricted. Our system understands this is not helpful. This distinction is pointed to in certain places in the suttas around

clear comprehension: understanding the body as a body, clearly comprehending when the views, the ideas, the states arising in connection with what's happening in the body are helpful and when they're not.

Another definition of clearly comprehending points to recognizing the impermanent nature of experience. The phrase in one particular text says one exercises full awareness when experience is understood as it arises, as it persists, and as it passes away. This is pointed to specifically regarding thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, but I think we can also include physical sensations—noticing, knowing physical sensations as arising, persisting, passing away. Noticing the impermanent nature of every aspect of our experience.

This brings in some of the wisdom the Buddha is pointing to. The distinction between what's skillful and what's unskillful represents an almost ethical dimension of the teachings. What's unskillful takes us into suffering. What's helpful takes us away from suffering. Beginning to distinguish these two, having a clear awareness of when the mind is caught by unskillful states, creates the conditions for learning. As we witness these unskillful states, the system begins to understand them as constricted, as unhelpful.

We are fortunate in a way: when our human system gets information about what is not helpful, it actually wants to move in the direction of ease, of well-being. But we've been so fundamentally confused about what leads us in that direction—really fundamentally confused. Partly because we're caught by the views and ideas embedded in those unhelpful states. We're caught by the view embedded in aversion that says, "I need to get rid of this thing in order to be okay." Caught by that view, we buy into some possibility of being okay at some point in the future when we get rid of this thing. And we are not noticing that right now, in the present moment, the experience of aversion is already painful, already not well-being.

The reactive states are willing to give up well-being here and now for the possibility of well-being in the future—the idea of well-being in the future. But as our organism begins to get more accurate information about what is actually happening, recognizing that this aversion is happening in the present moment, and this is what aversion feels like as a human experience, our system begins to recognize: no, that's not well-being. And it's like our system begins to find its way, to navigate its way to letting that go.

On the other side, with the wholesome qualities, the helpful qualities, our system understands them right as they are seen, as they are witnessed. When we feel the experience of patience, of loving-kindness, of compassion, of wisdom, when our minds taste equanimity, our system understands in the moment: yes, this is well-being. We may

even be experiencing a reactive emotion with some balance of mind—a container of equanimity holding aversion, for instance. If we are really connected to that container of equanimity, we will feel the well-being of that, even as the reactivity is still there, still being unwound.

It's been quite a surprise for me in my practice. I've worked a lot around anger, self-hatred, aversion—those states were very strongly conditioned in my life. And when I began to be able to feel delighted, thinking, "Oh, I'm seeing anger again! Wow, that's so cool!"—that was a different relationship to anger. This is possible with this perspective of mindfulness the Buddha is encouraging us to cultivate.

"One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful." I talked about mindfulness earlier, so I won't go into that word again. The last section reads: "freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world." Often this phrase is translated as something like "free from desires and discontent for the world," and that, at least in my mind, set up a problem—as if desires and discontent meant I couldn't practice this mindfulness as the Buddha was instructing. I took some comfort from the fact that the list of hindrances is found in the fourth foundation of mindfulness, where it says when the hindrances are arising, one knows the hindrances are arising. In the foundation of mindfulness of mind states, it says one is aware: when aversion is arising, one knows aversion is arising; when non-aversion is arising, one knows non-aversion is arising.

And to me, that points to the fact that this statement, this part of the phrase, can't mean that we have completely freed ourselves from desire and discontent just to begin. Because there's this encouragement to notice desires and discontent with mindfulness.

Bhikkhu Anālayo offered what was an aha moment for me. He pointed out that the Pali verb being translated as "free from" has an active quality to it—what we call a gerund in English, with the "-ing" ending. It's an activity. It's happening.

So we could think about this part of the phrase as describing what happens as we do this practice. This exploration of abiding, observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful—it creates the conditions for the mind to become free from desires and discontent. It frees the mind from... it's the process of freeing the mind that is part of this practice.

And that speaks to what I was saying earlier about holding reactivity with equanimity. Right in there, we can sometimes even watch the freeing happen. Sometimes we just kind of watch something go on for a while, then we lose interest and go off to pay attention to something else, and later we realize, "Oh, that thing I was so caught up in before

—it's gone." So we see that it goes away. But sometimes we actually get to see it disappearing. We witness this freeing from, witness a kind of release from our greed, aversion, confusion.

One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world.

If any of those words particularly land for you, let yourself rest with them. *Abide.* Being with. *Observing.* Body as a body. Body in and of itself. *Engaged, ardent, wholehearted.* Fully aware. *Mindful.* Aware. Present.

This is our work, our practice. The results come in their own time. We practice for the sake of practicing, for the sake of observing the body as a body. And the learning, the understanding, comes along with that curiosity and interest. We don't get to decide, as Philip said yesterday—we don't get to decide when we have our insights.

We can stay connected with a light touch, moment after moment. This in-breath. This out-breath.

CHAPTER 116

Feeling Tone (Vedanā) - Retreat at Spirit Rock

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this retreat talk from the March Monthlong at Spirit Rock, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of vedanā—the second foundation of mindfulness from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). She explains how feeling tone serves as a bridge between body and mind, present in every moment of experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.*
>
> *Fella draws on the Buddha's teaching of the two arrows, illustrating how an untrained person experiences both the initial unpleasant feeling and the additional suffering of their reactive aversion—multiplying rather than simply adding to their pain. She shares personal insights about discovering her mind's habitual orientation toward the unpleasant, and recounts a powerful moment of seeing the split-second pleasantness at the very beginning of anger that keeps the mind returning to it.*
>
> *The talk includes practical guidance for recognizing feeling tone in bodily sensations, eating, daily activities, and mental states. Fella introduces the distinction between worldly and unworldly (sāmisa and nirāmisa) feelings—those connected with sense pleasures versus those arising from the path itself, such as the joy of concentration or the longing for freedom. She emphasizes that pleasant and unpleasant are not inherent in objects but are shaped by our views, expectations, and mental constructions, offering this understanding as a key to loosening the grip of habitual reactivity.*

I'm really appreciating hearing the frogs right now, watching these clouds, the sunset earlier. Just appreciating this land, the space that we're in together. It's truly such a gift to be here together—a rare gift, a rare opportunity. And it's been so wonderful meeting with you, hearing about your practice. Such an appreciation for your practice. Everyone is so engaged. It's really a privilege to sit in this seat and witness this unfolding. So thank you for your practice.

I'm going to continue with reflections on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta tonight. We've been exploring mindfulness of the body quite a lot, but also touching on some of the fourth foundation—the hindrances, the Four Noble Truths—and using those as practices, as experiences to notice. Today, we'll reflect on the second foundation of mindfulness: the mindfulness of feeling tone, vedanā.

This is the simple aspect of experience of whether there is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience arising with whatever is happening. As a second foundation of mindfulness, in some ways it feels a little like a bridge from the body to the mind. The first foundation of mindfulness is clearly mindfulness of body. The third foundation is mindfulness of mind states. And feeling actually lies somewhere in the middle, in that it's accessible through bodily experience.

Every physical experience—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—all of our bodily experience is associated with a feeling tone. Contact of touch may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Contact with the ear, the same. And so through our bodies we can begin touching into this aspect of experience, this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral aspect of experience.

But this aspect of experience is also associated with every mental experience that arises. Every thought, every mood, emotion, mind state also has a feeling tone. So this feeling tone is understood to be a universal aspect of experience. Every single moment of our experience, this feeling tone is present in one of these three flavors.

My understanding of vedanā is that it is actually defined as a mental experience, even when it's associated with physical sensation. Vedanā is, we could say, mind made. I'll get to that a little bit more in just a minute. I wanted to say that because it's a nice bridge in a way to help us begin to be curious about a mental quality, a mental factor in our mind, a mental process in our mind—this process of whether experience is being felt as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The Sutta instructions about this are, I think, the shortest section in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Mindfulness of mind states is just a little bit longer. It's a very brief section, and I'll read to you the first part of it. But first let me remind you of that definition section that we explored right at the beginning of the retreat with respect to this foundation:

"One abides observing feelings as feelings, ardent, fully alert, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desires and discontent for the world."

And how does one do that? That is the question the Buddha begins this section of the Satipaṭṭhāna with. "And how does one abide observing feelings as feelings? Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel an unpleasant feeling.' When feeling a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling.'"

It goes on to elaborate a little bit more, and if I have time, I'll go into that elaboration. Let's just start with that. It's a really simple instruction. Not a lot extra to it. When feeling a pleasant feeling, we understand, "I am feeling a pleasant feeling."

This is that pointing back to understanding experience as experience. Pleasant experience is arising in this moment. Unpleasant experience is arising in this moment. And it's understood as experience rather than as a problem, something to fix or change or hold on to.

So the Sutta describes for this mindfulness of feeling a very simple non-judgmental awareness. When feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel a pleasant feeling." When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel an unpleasant feeling." It doesn't say, "and try to fix it." It just says one understands that. That's a really simple non-judgmental awareness of this experience.

And yet, as with many of these very simple instructions, the Satipatthana Sutta as a whole is encouraging us to explore the entirety of our experience through what I'd call a few simple perspectives. This is one of those perspectives through which we can explore our experience. Every single moment of experience, this is arising. And so any moment we can be aware of this aspect of experience in this simple way—really simple way.

And yet the feeling tone itself is an aspect of experience that, until we come to retreats and hear dharma talks about it, we are very unlikely to be interested in experiencing as an experience in this way. Really unlikely to be recognizing, "Oh, this is an unpleasant experience. That's what it's like to feel an unpleasant experience." Most of the time we are going to be trying to fix it or change it or escape from it in some way, find something else to be with, flee from it into fantasy or whatever. We are not trained so much in becoming aware, in knowing this quality of mind.

It's actually a pretty subtle quality, although once we become attuned to it, it's mostly subtle because we haven't really thought to pay attention to it. But once it's pointed out to us that this is a really useful aspect of experience to pay attention to, it actually becomes pretty easy to recognize, at least in certain areas of our experience. Part of this exploration this evening is to attune you to this quality, to attune you to this experience.

Feeling arises as a result of contact with the world—contact with the sense bases contacting their sense objects. For our five physical senses, there are the physical sense objects of the world that make contact. The eye receives sight and there's contact with the eye. The ear receives sound and there's contact. I read a section of a sutta this morning that speaks to this: "Based on the eye and sight, along with eye consciousness, the

meeting of the three is contact." With the eye and sight, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. The next piece that the Buddha pointed to is: "With contact as condition, feeling arises." And so this is with every sense experience.

With our minds too, there's the mind door—the aspect of our minds that receives experience—and then there are mind objects: thoughts and emotions and mind states, moods, beliefs. These also contact the mind door, and there's a feeling tone at that point of contact. The feeling tone is a conditioned arising in dependence on that contact.

Often what happens with this contact and the feeling that arises is that there's a very habitual, almost nearly automatic response that is also deeply conditioned. And it's more deeply conditioned than something we learn from our parents. This seems to be—it's not hardwired into us as human beings, but, well, I was a computer person, so I'll call it firmware. Hardware is the actual hard components of a computer. Firmware is what you program into that hardware, the particular things that hardware can do. You burn it in. But you can burn something else in there too. It's more like that level: when we experience something as pleasant, we tend to like it and want it. It's human. This is a human response. It's not something we learn culturally. It's not something we learn from our families. It is a human response. It's actually more than human—it seems to be a living being response. When there is something pleasant, living beings tend to go towards that. When there's something unpleasant, living beings tend to move away from it.

In our human experience, this tendency to move toward the pleasant and away from the unpleasant tends to be accompanied by greed for the pleasant and aversion for the unpleasant, and it happens really quickly. Even before the greed or the aversion fully forms, there may be a subtler kind of response—when there's something pleasant, we like it. It's not quite full-on greed, but there's a preference. When something's unpleasant, we don't like it.

That's the real firmware level of our experience. But it's not hard-coded into our system to automatically like and want something just because it's pleasant. It is optional. There is this possibility of knowing pleasant experience as pleasant experience without having any inkling of leaning toward it. It's possible to experience unpleasant experience as unpleasant experience and just be completely balanced, with no tendency to pull away.

This is equanimity—this non-reactive mind, a mind that can remain balanced no matter what comes: pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

But this very human response the Buddha calls an underlying tendency. It's an underlying tendency for us as human beings to want to move toward the pleasant, to want to move away from the unpleasant, and to be disconnected from the neutral, unaware, ignorant of neutral experience.

And yet the Buddha points to something remarkable. In one particular sutta that many of you have probably heard about, he says that a person who is awakened, somebody who is completely free, somebody who has that non-reactivity, someone who is free of craving, will still experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling.

This is something to recognize. Freedom doesn't mean freedom from unpleasantness. The Buddha clearly says this in this sutta—that people who are fully awakened will still experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. And he says the ordinary person, the person untrained in this path, also experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience.

So what's the difference between these two?

He says that when an ordinary person is touched by a painful bodily feeling, they worry and grieve. They lament, beat their breast, weep, and become distraught. They thus experience two kinds of feelings: a bodily feeling and a mental feeling. It is as if someone were pierced by a dart, and following that first piercing is hit by a second dart. That person will experience feelings caused by two darts.

This tends to be what happens to the ordinary person with an unpleasant experience. They don't like it, feel put upon, feel like the world is against them. Why me? So the aversion is another experience that arises in conjunction with that unpleasant experience. Now you have not only the first unpleasant experience, but you also have the aversion, which is itself an unpleasant experience.

Have you been noticing that?

I like what Bhante said this morning about multiplying, because that's what this extra reaction does to the painful experience. It's not just adding one plus one to equal two darts. It's more like multiplication, many-fold. The mental reaction greatly exacerbates the feeling of unpleasantness, which is why we then feel aversion to the aversion. Because we see how unpleasant that is, and we want to get rid of it. But that adds another arrow—a third arrow.

This is our habitual way. This is how the Buddha says an untaught or ordinary person responds to feeling. With the unpleasant, we tend to become averse. With the pleasant, we tend to hold on. That also has pain to it—it's a little more subtle in some ways, although when we really start to turn toward the experience of that wanting, we feel the suffering of that too. We feel the unpleasantness of that.

The sutta continues: "But for a noble disciple, when touched by a painful feeling, the noble disciple does not worry nor grieve and lament, will not beat their breast and weep nor become distraught. Only one kind of feeling is experienced, a bodily one, not a mental feeling. It is as if someone were pierced by a dart but was not hit by that second dart."

So he points to this as possible for us. He's saying in this teaching that this nearly automatic leap from feeling to reacting is optional. It takes training for us to begin to see—first of all to recognize the pleasant feeling and see the greed, to recognize the unpleasant feeling and see the aversion, to see that the reaction to feeling is happening as a relationship to the feeling.

That's part of what we explore. As we start to see that there is unpleasantness, and that the unpleasantness and the aversion are different, that the pleasantness and the greed are different—this is really useful to recognize. For instance, if you're experiencing a physical pain in your body, very often you might notice the aversion to that.

When you are curious about what the aversion is actually relating to—what is the unpleasant thing that the aversion is in relationship to?—sometimes we see that multiplying factor of aversion and how much more unpleasant it makes the entire experience. We see that what we're actually reacting to is a small twinge, and it has proliferated into a huge idea: "I can't keep sitting here anymore because I'm not going to be able to walk at the end of this forty-five minute sitting, and I'm going to have to go have surgery on my knee." The mind has just gone out.

So seeing what the actual unpleasant experience is can be really useful. We begin to notice the difference between the unpleasantness of the first experience and the unpleasantness of the aversion—and notice that they're different. Notice that they're different things.

This practice of mindfulness of feeling begins to help us do that: to recognize the actual experience of pleasant and unpleasant and neutral. The first thing that's useful, I think, is to begin getting familiar with feeling tone, attuning yourself to this quality so that we can have this recognition of these things being different. Before I started medit-

ating, I don't think I knew there was a difference between hating pain and pain. They just seemed completely the same thing. And so we can start to explore these qualities of experience.

The easiest place to explore feeling tone is related to bodily experience. In our sitting postures, in our sitting, in our walking—just being curious about whether the experience is pleasant or unpleasant. You might feel some pleasant sensations associated with breathing. You might feel unpleasant sensations associated with an itch, tightness, or pain. Just being curious about that.

Right now in your experience, what's the most obvious experience in your physical body? Whatever's most obvious may have some kind of flavor of pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. With the most obvious experience in your physical sensation right now, see if you can tune in to pleasant or unpleasant. How about picking another one? Just the next most obvious. Is that one pleasant or unpleasant? Or neutral—maybe neutral, could be. How about another one? Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral.

So how many of you, in those three, felt that each of those three experiences was the same kind of feeling tone? A few of you. That was my experience too. And that actually points to another piece: some of us tend to have a particular habitual tendency of orienting toward a certain flavor. Sometimes it's talked about as almost being a personality type.

If you walk into a room you've never been in before, just do this mind experiment for yourself: What is the first kind of thing you're drawn to? When you first came into this room, what was the very first thing you noticed? For some people that might have been, "Gee, the front of the room looks pretty messy." For some it might have been, "Wow, look at this space! Look at that ceiling, it's so beautiful." For some it might have been, "What's going on here? Where do I sit? How do I get a cushion?"—kind of looking around, not quite so sure about what to do.

We tend to have certain flavors of patterns and habits in our mind. Some people are more balanced, equally spread between greed, aversion, and delusion. But many of us have a particular flavor that is more predominant. For my mind, aversion was definitely the predominant flavor. And with that predominant flavor, the Buddha offers a succinct version of conditionality in his teaching: whatever one frequently ponders, that becomes the inclination of the mind. And so this mind—boy, it was really pondering aversion a lot, and that became the tendency. What my mind tended to do when it walked into a new space was look for something to be averse to.

It would seek out the unpleasant. It's almost like my mind would orient to the unpleasant and think, "Okay, if I can fix all the unpleasant things, then I'll be okay." Somebody else might have more of the motivation of wanting, of greed, and that person might be drawn to what's beautiful in a room, looking for where the pleasant is. So we do have some tendencies there that are useful to recognize.

This exercise that I just did with you, one of my teachers did with me. I did it for a little bit longer than you did, and he was instructing me to just notice the next thing, don't choose, just whatever arises—make it choiceless. After that experience, he asked, "Well, what did you notice?" And I said, "I don't see how that could have been choiceless. I was trying to do it choicelessly, but everything was unpleasant. I know that the entirety of my experience is not unpleasant, but that was everything the mind landed on."

That was a huge learning for me—to see the orientation of my mind, its habitual tendency to orient to the unpleasant. So this can be a useful reflection and exploration for yourself. Do you have a tendency towards one of these? Almost a preference to fuel or fulfill the underlying tendency of greed or aversion or delusion?

So we explore in our physical experience this pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Another great place to do this is in between times—just beginning to pick a few times in the day. In mindfulness practice, we're not particularly trying to find experience, and yet with certain practices it can be useful to take some time to orient towards a quality or experience that we haven't had much familiarity with, in order to gain some familiarity. So it can be useful to spend some time during the day being curious about this particular aspect of experience, just to familiarize yourself with what it's like to touch into pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

A great place to do this is in eating practice. Just noticing the flavors, the tastes as you put food in your mouth—is the first sense of it neutral? Pleasant? Unpleasant? Just curiosity about it. How does it change? Doing your yogi jobs, there's probably a great stream of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral going on there. Just attuning to that, getting familiar with the experience. And it's really helpful to start noticing our habitual relationship to the feeling tone.

So as you're doing your yogi jobs, for instance—"Oh, this is unpleasant, this part's unpleasant"—and then the constriction, the tightening, the aversion, the pushing away, the wrinkling of the nose at extra food in the pots that you have to scrub. Just the experience of the unpleasantness and the relationship to it. Beginning to recognize the difference between those.

It's also useful to explore and get familiar with the feeling tone associated with our mental experience. Every experience has a feeling tone associated with it—thoughts, moods, emotions. Something like sadness might have an unpleasant or heavy quality to it. Joy, a pleasant quality. Grief, unpleasant. Fear can be unpleasant. Anger, perhaps unpleasant.

Although in doing this exploration for myself around anger, I was exploring on one particular retreat, watching the arising of anger. The mind got very attuned to the experience of anger. This was my anger retreat. I was really watching it every day, many times a day. I would see a thought in my mind and feel the anger in conjunction with that thought. Largely the experience was unpleasant—it was pretty clear that anger was unpleasant.

But then one time I got to see the very beginnings of anger, just the moment of "they done me wrong, I'm right." And that experience at the very beginning—that was pleasant. That was a real shock to me. It almost immediately shifted; it only lasted a split second that it was pleasant. This feeling of—it was like a feeling of power and engagement. A welling up of energy towards a kind of protecting of this being in some way.

There was a pleasant quality to that. It lasted about a split second before it became pressure and heat and unpleasantness. But the learning there—it was kind of the big aha. *Oh, that's part of the hook.* That's why my mind keeps going for this anger over and over again. It likes that little split second of feeling powerful.

This can be eye-opening as we explore how feeling tone changes. It's not static. It shifts from pleasant to unpleasant to neutral, to more pleasant, to less pleasant. It's very dynamic.

Emotions perhaps more obviously have a feeling tone associated with them. But thoughts, views, and beliefs also have feeling tone—and it may be neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Although thoughts and beliefs may seem like neutral things in the mind, they have a very powerful shaping effect on our experience of feeling. They're one of the key conditioners, one of the key aspects determining whether we experience something as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

There was a study done about the experience of pleasure and pain. Subjects were exposed to either a non-painful experience, a slightly painful one, or a moderately painful one. They were told beforehand—given a little flash indicating which they would experience first. When the moderately painful sensation came, they reported it as unpleasant, and their brains confirmed this through EEG monitoring.

Then came the second part of the experiment. Now the alternation was between moderate pain and much more severe pain. Again, subjects were warned what was coming. This time they reported the moderate sensation—which they had previously called painful—as pleasant. And the experimenters were surprised by this result. They expected subjects to report it as *less* painful than the severe one, but they did not expect it to be reported as pleasant.

Their hypothesis was that the warning created a kind of expectation, a moment of relief in the mind: "It's not going to be so bad this time." That view, that expectation, that anticipation—which is a mental experience—shaped their experience of the painful sensation as pleasant. And not only did they report it as pleasant, but their brains responded as if it was pleasant.

This is a very important thing for us to understand. Pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral are created and shaped in our minds by our expectations, by our views, by our thoughts, by our beliefs. The feeling tone is not in the object. It's not inherent in the object. The same experience at different times might be experienced as more pleasant or less pleasant, as pleasant sometimes and painful sometimes.

So this becomes a real exploration for us around what is happening in our minds when we're experiencing feeling tone.

Sometimes in this exploration—around hearing, for instance—there's an interesting teaching from the Abhidhamma. It's not a sutta teaching, and I offer it with some caution because I don't know that I completely believe it. But the Abhidhamma says that the bare experience in our non-tactile senses—sight, sound, smell, taste—is neutral. Any sense of it being pleasant or unpleasant, a sight being pleasant, a sound being pleasant, arises because of an idea in the mind.

Now, again, I don't know if this is really true. But hearing this teaching has prompted me, when I notice I'm taking a sound or a sight to be pleasant or unpleasant, to get curious. What is the actual physical experience? And what is the mind attributing as unpleasant?

For instance, you're sitting in a room and you hear a cough or a sneeze. The sound itself—it's just a sound. It's not physically painful. It's airwaves hitting the eardrum, a particular vibration understood as a sneeze or a cough. The mind, understanding it as a sneeze or a cough, has some views about that. Quite likely, if you experience the sneeze or cough as unpleasant, it's because of those views rather than the actual experience of hearing itself.

This has been a very interesting investigation in my own practice—a lot of learning, a lot of understanding about how our minds work through exploring this particular aspect of experience with a little bit of investigation.

I would say the vast majority of our reactivity, when we're reacting to something with aversion or greed—the vast majority of the time—it's not about something actually in the world.

It's relating or reacting to something in our own minds.

That was another big "aha" for me—watching the mind be averse to somebody doing walking meditation nearby. I decided to go through the senses and try to figure out where the unpleasantness was. This was an instruction that Carol Wilson had offered in a talk on aversion. She said, if there's aversion happening, there's something unpleasant in your experience. What is it?

So I'm doing walking meditation and this person's walking next to me. Okay, it's not sight—the person is not disturbing my eyes. They're not making noise, so it's not sound. They're not touching me, it's not that. I'm not smelling them. I'm not tasting them. Okay, it's got to be something in the mind.

I finally did get to that—it had to be something in the mind. But I didn't see what it was in the mind. I didn't understand. I couldn't see what was unpleasant. I was really curious. I was like, well, what is unpleasant here? So I just continued to do the walking, kind of curious about what's unpleasant.

And then suddenly this thought erupted: "They're weird." That's a thought. I still didn't quite get it. After another exploding thought of "They're in bare feet and it's freezing cold outside," I realized that this was my justification for thinking they were weird, and that the whole aversion was related to this subtle, almost unconscious relationship to that feeling of this person being weird that I hadn't even seen consciously. And then to see that the whole thing was based on bare feet—it was just so silly that the mind let the whole thing go. The aversion disappeared, and in the next pass I was just wishing the person well, just feeling that mettā for them.

So this is a useful tool. If you're experiencing some kind of ongoing reactivity, you can apply a kind of curiosity—go through the senses. Where's the unpleasantness? Most of the time you'll find, and this was the other big "aha," it's like, oh my gosh, I'm averse to a thought. That's what the aversion actually is. I'm averse to this idea. I'm averse to something my mind made up. This is completely optional. And that's what helped it to fall apart.

Doing this kind of exploration, most of the time if you look, you'll probably see that it's something constructed in our own minds where the actual leaping-off point is, what we're actually reacting to.

Just briefly in the last few minutes we have, I want to explore this last section of the sutta, because it points to a further distinction around feeling tone that's useful, particularly on long retreat, for us to at least be aware of. Again, I offer this not as something to dive into and do. My teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, when he gave teachings, he would often say, "This isn't something to do. This is information." It can go into the back of your minds, and having this information bubbling in there, like dharma rain filtering through your system, at some point the teachings or the reflection on this might arise in your practice. Perhaps that is the time to begin to explore it.

So there is a place and a time for some exploration of this, but mostly I offer this as information and inspiration—hopefully some inspiration about how helpful this can be to begin to see this leaping point, the springboard from feeling tone into reactivity. It's a key for understanding how our minds suffer. When we can see the feeling tone itself and just know it in this simple way—"oh, this is a pleasant feeling"—often that simple mindfulness almost short-circuits the leap. We experience the feeling tone in a different way.

This further refinement on feeling brings in a distinction between worldly feeling and unworldly feeling. It goes through the three feelings.

When feeling a worldly pleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel a worldly pleasant feeling." Likewise with worldly unpleasant and neither pleasant nor unpleasant. When feeling an unworldly pleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel an unworldly pleasant feeling."

The key here is to begin to understand what is meant by worldly and unworldly. There are a couple of different ways this is translated. In various translations, Bhikkhu Bodhi uses "worldly" and "unworldly," but another version he uses is "carnal" or "bodily"—of the body—and "spiritual"—of the flesh, not of the flesh. I believe that's the most literal translation for the Pali terms *sāmisa* and *nirāmisa*.

Bhikkhu Anālayo points out that this kind of feeling serves as a help for us to distinguish feelings that guide us on the path from feelings that tend to catch us in suffering. These spiritual feelings, these unworldly feelings, are feelings connected with the path of practice. This might include, for instance, pleasant feelings associated with generosity, the pleasantness associated with concentration, the bliss of blamelessness associ-

ated with engaging in ethical conduct, the delight and joy that come when we understand and see something clearly. These are all pleasant feelings associated with the path.

Now, just because they are associated with the path doesn't mean that we can't cling to them and make trouble for ourselves. We feel those pleasant experiences in concentration, have a sitting that we call a good sitting, and then we spend the rest of our day trying to get back to it because we think that's where it's at—that felt so good, I want that back. As Steve Armstrong says, there's nothing like a good sit to ruin your day. Because we cling to it.

The worldly feelings tend to be those associated with sense experiences—the feeling tones associated with sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, the food that we eat, and then in our mind, the thoughts about the things that we see, smell, hear, taste, touch, and consume. Those are the places where worldly feeling lands. And there's a lot of habitual clinging around that. Partly because we like the feeling of pleasant, we also tend to cling to these unworldly pleasant feelings. But they do point us in a direction. As we begin to understand or recognize the difference between this unworldly feeling and the worldly feeling, it helps us to understand we're on the path.

Fortunately, even clinging to these things—which we will; I don't know of anyone I've ever spoken to about their meditation practice who has not done this—is self-correcting. Because we feel the suffering of it. We get the dukkha. As soon as we try to start going for that state or that experience, we're all tied up in knots again and we feel the suffering of it. So we understand that clinging to these states is not helpful. It's not to say, "Gee, I shouldn't try to get concentrated because I cling to it." It's more like, "Oh, if I get concentrated and I cling to it, I get to feel the suffering of that." The mind does begin to wind its way out of that habit of clinging. Over time. It takes time.

What I'd also say is that there's an important aspect of this unworldly feeling, particularly around the unworldly pleasant feeling: it helps us to let go of the clinging to worldly pleasant. The pleasure of concentration, the pleasure of equanimity, the pleasure of insight is so superior to any satisfaction we get out of worldly pleasant. So this is almost like a stepping stone. It helps us to let go of our more habitual ways of clinging, our habitual ways of responding and relating to the world. And then at a certain point we get to notice the clinging to this.

There's a teaching: by relying on this, abandon that. By relying on the unworldly pleasant, we can abandon the worldly pleasant. But we'll cling to this, and then we have to begin relying on something else—equanimity, the recognition of insight and understanding—to help us let go of that clinging to the worldly pleasant, to the unworldly pleasant.

Many of the feelings on the path are pleasant. And it was an understanding of the Buddha the night he recognized the path, the direction—there was the understanding: "Why am I afraid of the pleasant states of concentration? Maybe those are on the path." I think they are on the path. But there are also some unpleasant, unworldly experiences.

One of the key experiences the suttas mention is the longing for freedom. Some of you have mentioned this in your meetings, expressing it as a kind of desire. And often there is a greed associated with that—"When am I going to be free?" or "How can I get to this freedom?"

But this teaching actually points to this longing as being a wholesome, on-the-path wish. We can cling to it. We can get greedy about it. But we must recognize that they're probably tangled up—that longing for freedom, together with the greed. We can't throw out the whole thing, because that longing for freedom is keeping us on the path.

So it's time to stop. Let's just sit for a moment. Maybe when I ring the bell, you can notice whether there's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling, and whether it's associated with any idea or view.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 117

Brahmavihāra Practice - Equanimity (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 40 min

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a nuanced exploration of upekkhā (equanimity) as the fourth brahmavihāra, distinguishing true equanimity—rooted in understanding and insight—from indifference or delusion-based detachment. She explains how equanimity is intimately connected to the understanding of kamma and conditionality: recognizing that what arises in this moment comes from past causes and conditions, while our present relationship to experience shapes the future. This understanding allows for agency without self, offering a middle way between determinism and helpless reactivity.*
>
> *Fella illuminates how equanimity serves as the quality that allows the heart to hold both joys and sorrows without being shattered or becoming indifferent. Rather than creating distance, equanimity enables a more intimate connection with experience. She shares a personal story about her journey from wisdom-oriented practice to discovering compassion, illustrating how these qualities are truly two sides of one coin—wisdom meeting suffering becomes compassion, while compassion that doesn't shy away from dukkha cultivates understanding.*
>
> *The talk includes a guided meditation exploring the interplay between compassion and equanimity, using phrases like "May all beings be free from suffering" alongside "Things are as they are right now—may I accept this as it is." This practice is offered in the context of collective difficulty, demonstrating how these brahmavihāras support practitioners in meeting challenging conditions with both an open heart and balanced mind. The session concludes with Ñāṇaponika Thera's teaching that equanimity's perfection comes not from emotional emptiness but from fullness of understanding.*

So I would like to offer a few reflections about equanimity.

Equanimity is a quality of balance of mind. Other words that may resonate: non-reactivity, impartiality, acceptance, ease, non-contentiousness. It's a balance of mind that is connected to understanding.

It is said that there's a kind of equanimity based in delusion. In one of the suttas it talks about equanimity based on the household life, which is basically where you're equanimous because you don't understand what's going on. That's not what we're pointing to here. This equanimity is fully aware of what's happening, and the mind is balanced.

And yet that balance of mind is not indifference. My niece would sometimes, when she was being corrected about something, say with a roll of the eyes, "Whatever." That sounds like it should be equanimity, but with the roll of the eyes, it's not equanimity. It's not indifference; it's not "whatever" in that way.

This equanimity is fully understanding the situation. Understanding that what is here is arising based on causes and conditions. The conditioned nature of experience—the classic teaching of equanimity is really tied to the teaching of karma, the understanding that our happiness and unhappiness is connected to our actions, our choices.

In this moment, in this actual moment, what's arising right now, what we are experiencing right now, is a consequence of choices and conditions, of causes and conditions from the past, but is also related to how we are relating to it right now. This is really where the possibility for non-determinism comes into this whole cause and effect chain. How we are in this moment radically affects what is shaped going forward.

The same thing could be arising based on past conditions, and our relationship to it now can be very different—one of greed, aversion, and delusion, or wisdom, compassion, and kindness. These shape very different futures.

The classic reflection on equanimity is connected to that understanding that things are unfolding in a lawful manner. It's not a mistake, and there is some possibility of choice in the moment—stepping into how we are in this moment, stepping into the future. There is some agency, not an agency of self, but agency of this being in this moment to make a choice based on skillful tendencies, based on wisdom.

So this equanimity is rooted in understanding, rooted in insight, rooted in this deep understanding of conditionality.

The mind of equanimity allows the heart—it kind of ties the other brahmavihāras together in a way. It allows the heart to hold, deeply hold, all the joys and all the sorrows without being shattered by them, sucked under by them, drawn in, but also not indifferent, not stepping back like, "Oh yeah, no problem."

There's a way that equanimity creates a more intimate connection with what is happening. Compassion isn't really complete without equanimity. Equanimity is what's needed for the heart to fully open to suffering without resistance. Equanimity is what's needed for the heart to fully open to all the joys that are happening. Sometimes it's hard to hold the joys and the sorrows together, but that's what equanimity helps us to do. We celebrate the joys and feel the sorrows more deeply with equanimity. So it's definitely not a "whatever" or an indifferent kind of quality of mind.

In classic equanimity practice, we do it very much the way that we've been guiding in the mettā and in the compassion. The classic instructions around the brahmavihāras say that you start where it's easiest. In mettā, we tend to start with either self or the easy being. With compassion, we start with someone who is suffering, because compassion depends on our meeting suffering, and so we pick someone dear to us perhaps, where it might have an easier inroad.

In equanimity, it's said that the neutral person is the easiest person to have equanimity about. We explore the possibility of having equanimity about the unfolding journey of that person, that being. Your actions are dependent upon your choices. All beings are the owners of their actions. Your happiness and unhappiness depend upon your choices. It's that kind of reflection.

And so when we come to all beings, reflecting on that, it's almost like we're looking at the collective karma of beings. We can think of it that way—kind of collective choices that have been made. And the practice of equanimity is a recognition that whether beings are happy or unhappy is not so much about what is happening, but again, the relationship, how you are, the choices you're making.

In reflecting on this situation right now, and for me again, maybe we can play with this a little bit in our meditation, but just reflecting on the conditions of where this arose, how it happened—it's conditioned. The transmission of the virus is conditioned. It's not personal. It's just causes and conditions unfolding. And how are we with these causes and conditions? Do we become distraught, add a second, third, fourth arrow? Or do we explore opening to it with some wisdom?

In opening to the situation with wisdom, when the heart is really open, when we're exploring this possibility of being open to the conditions, the unfolding of conditions, the response of the heart that is open in that way will respond with compassion when the situation is of suffering. And will respond with joy when the situation is connected to success or well-being or happiness.

And so I think we can explore this blending—at least today that's what I'd like to see, how it works—just explore this blending of particularly compassion and equanimity, because they're not really so separate. True compassion has got to have equanimity in it. And true equanimity will meet suffering with compassion.

When we come in, some hearts are more attuned perhaps to wisdom, or some hearts may be attuned more to the brahmaviharas. But they meet. Whichever doorway you come in, there's a bridge to the other quality.

For me in my own journey, wisdom has definitely been my doorway. And the brahmaviharas were pretty difficult for me in the early years of my practice. I didn't quite understand what the feeling of compassion was about. And yet, I just kept practicing and exploring, understanding the conditioned nature of experience. When I would sit down with people and talk to them about their practice or about their experience, I was meeting them from that place of just conditions unfolding. And so that was my experience—this sense of really being able to hold, not being afraid, not shrinking from whatever conditions were in front of me.

I was surprised when people said to me, "I so feel your compassion." This went on for a while and I kept thinking, "That's not my experience. I don't know what compassion feels like." When I talked to several of my colleagues and other teachers about it, several of them just said, "Oh, it's there, don't worry about it." That didn't work for me.

And then I had a conversation with Philip. He was so perceptive. He said, "Your mind is orienting towards wisdom and emptiness when you're meeting with people. Try orienting to the relationship, the connection."

It was stunning. The next time, and I had an opportunity ten minutes later to try it, it wasn't hard. I understood what he meant when he said I was orienting towards emptiness. And when I sat down in front of this other person, it was really simple. All I had to do was think, "I'm sitting in front of Julie. I'm sitting with Julie." The compassion was there.

That was a lesson for me around the connection of wisdom and compassion. It was there, but it was important to understand and feel that it was there.

I think the same thing can happen on the other side. If we cultivate compassion and really can hold with compassion what is happening, equanimity is being cultivated. Wisdom and understanding are being cultivated as we explore compassion, because compassion is meeting suffering. That meeting of suffering, the not shying away from suffering, the understanding of suffering—it's the first noble truth. It's intimately connected with wisdom. These two are just two sides of a coin.

So I'd like to explore—I've never done this before, tried a guided meditation like this—we'll see how it goes. Let's just settle into our postures and body, finding as comfortable a position as possible.

And letting your attention rest in the area of your heart, in your body, in this general region of your torso.

We'll begin with ourselves, holding ourselves—whatever sense of yourself is available, whether a physical sense or perhaps an image of yourself. Since we're going to start with compassion, the instruction is actually to connect to some aspect of your experience that is a little tender or challenging. Something that's not so easy. Bringing or calling dukkha into mind.

And exploring with that, calling that to mind, exploring the possibility of the wish—I'm going to change the language here instead of using "I"—may this being be free from suffering. Free from this suffering.

You can be more specific at times with the practice. It doesn't have to be "free from suffering." It can be "free from this struggle," or "may I have ease with this struggle." Holding yourself with that wish for freedom from dukkha, suffering, stress.

We'll do this in a radiating way now. Simply allowing your attention to radiate outward and take in that there are other beings near you. And knowing the kinds of things going on in your experience these days, we can extrapolate—there's some struggle going on in the beings around us. May we be free from stress.

Remembering it's the wish, not the result here. That's the piece of exploration. May we be at ease with this stress. If being free from seems impossible at this moment—we certainly cannot wave a magic wand and have the coronavirus disappear—and yet, if it were in your power, would that be your wish? That's the depth of the connection to that wish of compassion. It's the wish, not the expectation that the wish be fulfilled. It's the heart that's open to that wish. May we be free from suffering.

Allowing attention to take in all of us together in this room. Perhaps expanding to include the other retreatants who aren't here at this moment, and the managers and staff who are on the land. All of us human beings facing these concerns and uncertainties. May we be free from suffering.

And expanding further, allowing your heart to get as open as it can to take in all beings. Let's start with human beings—all human beings on this planet. Those all over the world struggling and suffering with this worldwide situation. We are joined together by this, intimately connected.

Recollecting the families who are losing people, or people in quarantine finding difficulty with food, or who are lonely and isolated. All different flavors of struggle around the planet. People in physical distress with difficulty breathing. People in fear, afraid they'll become ill. Can the heart open and hold that with this wish? May we be free from suffering.

Remembering it's the wish, not the result.

And while you're holding that—all beings, including yourself, with their struggles, stress, suffering—see what happens if you bring in an equanimity phrase: Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a lawful nature. Things are just as they are right now. May I accept this as it is. May all beings accept this as it is.

Noticing for yourself what happens with that wish. The heart may become more contracted, or it may relax a little, or maybe not much is happening.

And now bringing back the compassion phrase: May we all be free from this suffering. Notice how the heart feels with that wish.

Things are as they are right now. May I accept this as it is.

May all beings accept this as it is. May all beings be free from suffering. May we all accept conditions as they are. May all beings be free from suffering.

I'll fall quiet for a while and let you play with this alternation of the compassion phrase and some version or flavor of the equanimity phrase. Explore this alternation, being aware of how the phrase lands or affects your heart, your body, your mind. If one or the other is more resonant for you, you're welcome to linger with that one for a little while, and then maybe just sprinkle in the other every now and then. See what happens. Just be attuned to how these wishes land.

When I'm exploring practice for all beings, I often find it helpful to hold the idea of all beings while letting images of beings come to mind—imagining situations with beings around the planet, specific beings—which helps me connect more fully. You could play with that as well, not just keeping it at the abstract level of "all beings," but allowing the mind to circle the globe and land somewhere, considering what might be happening there. Let an image come in and express the wish with that representative of all beings.

I'll close with a quote from Nyanaponika Thera about equanimity:

"Equanimity is a perfect, unshakable balance of mind, rooted in insight. But in its perfection and unshakable nature, equanimity is not dull, heartless, and frigid. Its perfection is not due to an emotional emptiness, but to a fullness of understanding, to its being complete in itself. Its unshakable nature is not the immovability of a dead, cold stone, but the manifestation of the highest strength."

Thank you for exploring this today. May our practice be of service and support for the happiness, well-being, and freedom of all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 118

Four Noble Truths

Andrea Fella · 46 min

In this talk, Andrea Fella offers a fresh perspective on the Four Noble Truths (cattāri ariyas-accāni) by examining them not merely as doctrinal statements but as direct insights the Buddha experienced at his awakening. Drawing from Majjhima Nikāya 4, where the Buddha describes directly knowing "as it actually is" the nature of dukkha, its arising, cessation, and the path leading to its end, Andrea distinguishes between intellectual understanding and the transformative insight that leads to liberation.

A key teaching from this talk is that suffering arises now—in this present moment—rather than being stored from the past. Using a powerful personal example of working with anger, Andrea illustrates how the mind can witness the non-arising of suffering when wisdom is present, showing that the conditions for freedom are available in each moment. She explores the Pāli term samudaya, typically translated as "origin," noting that it more accurately means "arising," pointing to the co-arising of craving and suffering rather than a causal sequence.

Andrea also expands the traditional introspective focus of the Four Noble Truths to include understanding suffering in community and relationship, referencing the Buddha's teaching to his son Rāhula about reflecting on whether actions cause harm to self, others, or both. She emphasizes that the peace of the Third Noble Truth does not mean non-action but rather action arising from compassion and wisdom rather than craving—a freedom that naturally moves toward alleviating suffering in the world.

Thinking about this freedom, the possibility of freedom, it can be perhaps interesting or useful to look at what the Buddha described as the experience in the moment of his awakening. It's described in different ways, and I'm just going to pick one of those tonight to look at. We're going to basically be spending the week looking at a variety of different ways to explore this: What is this freedom? What is this awakening?

In one description the Buddha gave of his awakening, he described that he had four insights: "I directly knew as it actually is, this is suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the origin of suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the cessation of suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the practice leading to the cessation of suffering."

In this framing, insight is being described here—directly knew as it actually is. This is a little different than the framing of these statements which are typically understood to be the Four Noble Truths. When the Buddha had the insights, the way I kind of think of it in my own understanding, there was some insight that was born in him. And it's no surprise actually that the insights were framed in this way around suffering, because his whole path, the whole exploration, was around this question of what is suffering. This was a question that motivated him. What is suffering? Is it possible to be free of it? How does it come to be? How does it end? These were the kinds of questions that motivated his search.

And so the understanding that arose and the freedom that arose with that understanding, framed in terms of suffering—it kind of makes sense. But the way he expresses it is a direct understanding, a direct insight, a direct knowing. "This is suffering." It's different from "this is the truth of dukkha, birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, death is dukkha." That's a kind of teaching, perhaps. Maybe my understanding of this is that there was some insight that he had around dukkha in these four ways, and the rest of his teaching career was trying to help us understand that—help us understand how we could see that for ourselves. The framing of the Four Noble Truths was one of the ways that he spoke to help us begin to look at our experience from this perspective, from a different perspective.

So this question of whether it is possible to be free from suffering—I think this first insight, "this is suffering," in some ways speaks to a probably radical reframing of what even the idea of suffering is. The possibility to be free of suffering, ending suffering, doesn't mean that we somehow finally figure out how to arrange a life to our liking. That whole notion that we might—actually it's great news that freedom from suffering doesn't depend on that, because it doesn't seem to be possible to arrange a life to our satisfaction.

Pleasant things will happen, unpleasant things will happen. There'll just be this stream, this flow of pleasant and unpleasant experience happening. And fixing or changing that flow is not what is meant by the ending of suffering. The suffering the Buddha discovered—what suffering is that's possible to be free of—is a suffering that is in relationship to that flow. The flow of unpleasant, pleasant, neutral experience is going to continue.

The unpleasant experience in particular, from a kind of unenlightened or unaware perspective, unpleasant experience is dukkha, unpleasant experience is suffering. And the understanding that actually, no, unpleasant experience itself is not suffering, and

pleasant experience that disappears is not inherently suffering—this, I think, is a new understanding that the Buddha brought for us. This insight, "this is suffering," was a kind of radical reorientation of the mind around what suffering actually is.

This question of our relationship to pleasant and unpleasant, our wanting it to be pleasant, our wanting to get rid of the unpleasant—it's pointing to the second noble truth, the framing of the second noble truth: that the possibility for ease and peace with this flow of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral comes with the ending of wanting it to be some other way, that craving for it to be some other way, that constriction for it to be some other way.

The Buddha offered, over the course of his teaching, an understanding of the Four Noble Truths. In some ways I like to think about the Four Noble Truths as put firmly at the beginning of the Eightfold Path, right view—the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, right there in Right View. This is the intellectual understanding. The beginning of our path has to come with some kind of rethinking of what we think of as suffering, beginning to reframe our understanding of the possibility for freedom from suffering.

freedom to arrange the world the way I want it to be.

The framing of the Four Noble Truths in that first discourse the Buddha gave—I think of it as the perspective he wants us to explore, to bring to our practice. And this is what we've been looking at for the whole course of this program: How do we bring this perspective to our lives?

I want to explore the Four Noble Truths in a somewhat different way this evening—from the perspective of there being insights, and from the perspective of there being a framework through which we can directly meet experience.

This pattern that I described, the Buddha said he understood as it actually is: "I directly knew as it actually is, this is suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the arising of suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the cessation of suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the practice leading to the cessation of suffering."

In various places in the texts, it points to this pattern: "I directly knew" or "I directly understood" X. "I directly understood the origin of X. I directly understood the ending of X. And I directly understood the practice leading to the ending of X"—where X is replaced by many things in the teaching. This pattern of the insights around the Four Noble Truths was not just applied to the word dukkha.

It was applied to the five aggregates: "I directly understood form, the arising of form, the ending of form, the path leading to the ending of form."

It was applied to the sankhāras, the formations: "I directly understood mental formations. I directly understood the arising of mental formations. I directly understood the cessation of mental formations. I directly understood the path leading to the cessation of mental formations."

It was applied to the six sense bases. In short, it was applied to our experience—all of our experience.

And this, I think, is what the pointing is in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness. We're encouraged to look at the Four Noble Truths in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, and there it uses suffering. But I think we are encouraged to understand experience itself. The five aggregates, as we talked about in the last retreat, encompass all of our experience—it can be understood through the arising of the five aggregates in various configurations. All of our experience can be understood in terms of the arising of senses, of this meeting of experience at the six sense bases.

And so we can explore not just around suffering, but anything. Whatever's arising, we can be curious about: What is it? What is its origin? How does it arise?

This is another way to frame this language, because the word here in Pali—often translated as "the cause of suffering" or "the origin of suffering"—is samudaya. This is the word used for the second noble truth, the origin or the arising of suffering. At least as I understand from Gil Fronsdal's research, in other places in the suttas when the word samudaya is used, it means arising.

So what is the arising of suffering? The arising of suffering happens with the arising of craving. It's a subtly different framing of the second noble truth. Craving is not the cause of suffering, as if craving happens and then suffering happens. When craving arises, suffering arises with it. It's a co-arising.

As we learned in dependent co-arising: with the arising of craving is the arising of suffering. With the ending of craving is the ending of suffering.

So the exploration might be: What's the origin of something? Or we could simply explore: How does it arise? What's here? What's arising? What's ending?

This can be some of what we look at in our practice. And this is what I think the Fourth Foundation, this teaching in the Fourth Foundation, was pointing us to.

In another place, in Majjhima Nikāya 2, he describes this same pattern—looking at suffering, the arising of suffering, the ending of suffering, and the path or practice leading to the ending of suffering—not so much as insight already realized, but as an orientation or framework through which we look at our experience. This is a teaching on wise attention.

Here the Buddha says that in order to learn how to free oneself from suffering, one needs to attend wisely. How does one attend wisely? One attends wisely: "This is suffering." One attends wisely: "This is the arising of suffering." One attends wisely: "This is the ending of suffering." And one attends wisely: "This is the practice leading to the ending of suffering."

So we can look at our experience through this framework. In a way, what this points to—one way I understand this teaching, at least—is that whatever is happening in our experience can be seen through one of these four perspectives. It's either suffering that's already here, suffering that's coming into being, suffering that's ending, or we are cultivating tools and practices. We're cultivating the pāramīs. We're cultivating mindfulness. We're cultivating concentration. We're cultivating the path that heads us in the direction of freedom. Whatever is arising in our experience, whatever's happening, we could know it from this perspective.

And this is important to recognize: it's not about "this is unpleasant experience." The suffering is about the contraction, the constriction, the craving that comes along with it—the wish that it were some other way. Either the wish that unpleasant experience were not here, or the wish that pleasant experience would not be disappearing, or the wish for something more exciting than neutral experience. Or the suffering that comes with unawareness, with just spacing out around experience. So it's not the unpleasant experience itself; it is that relationship, that wishing it were some other way, the craving. I think you're all familiar with what this means, to understand suffering when it arises. And I think you also understand the distinction between unpleasant experience just as unpleasant experience and feeling into the ease and peace that's possible even in the face of unpleasant experience.

Another thing I appreciate about this particular teaching, this framing of wise attention—"this is suffering," "this is the cause of suffering"—*this* is the operative word. What's happening now, in this present moment. In this teaching the Buddha is encouraging us to look at the now. Not what happened five minutes ago or two years ago or eight years ago, but what's happening now. Suffering happens now.

This was a really important recognition for me when I began exploring this perspective. On one retreat, this got highlighted for me. I was experiencing a lot of suffering—embarrassment was the experience—that came up as I remembered an incident from several years before. This memory kept popping up; it was a particularly embarrassing memory of being on stage and forgetting a line. There I was, standing looking out at the audience, not having a clue what to say. That moment arose in my memory over and over again.

What I got to see was that while the suffering was arising in dependence on that memory coming up, the suffering was being recreated in this moment. It wasn't that somehow the old embarrassment from years before was being dredged up, or that it was sitting in some little storeroom and I'd opened a trap door to find the embarrassment waiting there. The memory arose, and in that moment—I got to see this so clearly on retreat—the memory arose and the reaction to that memory was embarrassment. The suffering, the embarrassment, was created in that moment.

Suffering arises now. If you are experiencing suffering in this moment, the information you need to understand it is arising now.

Whatever you can know about this moment will help you to understand what will lead to freedom from that suffering.

Likewise, the cause of suffering arises now. In that example, the reaction to the memory was some kind of wanting that not to have happened—some kind of craving for that not to have happened. Again, arising in the mind, in the moment. This craving for that not to have happened.

So again, suffering happens now. The craving that leads to that suffering happens now. This is hugely freeing when we can start to watch it. And this pointing to seeing the suffering happening now, seeing the arising of suffering happening now, leads us to the place where we can see the suffering ending now also.

We learn about our experience through this framework of looking at experience. This is suffering. We begin to see how suffering arises now. It arises in dependence on things that have happened, yes. It arises in dependence on memories and things that we've done in our past and conditions from the past. But those conditions are like all pulled together here again in this moment. And the suffering arises now.

As I began to witness this over the course of watching the mind, I began to see thoughts that would arise that had habitually triggered particular reactivity—those thoughts could simply arise. That was a bit of a shock to me. I had kind of thought that

certain memories inherently came with their baggage. Memories are pretty habitually connected to the baggage. It's like our baggage is floating around with us. It doesn't weigh anything, though, unless we pick it up.

So the thoughts can arise, memories can arise, moods can arise, and the subsequent habitual response does not have to arise. This is experiencing the freedom from suffering—watching, seeing that in the moment.

Sometimes this third noble truth is experienced as watching something release, seeing a clinging and feeling it let go. That feeling of seeing the clinging let go has a particular quality of release. We recognize that contraction releasing. That's one way that we sometimes experience this third noble truth, this ending of suffering.

But sometimes we experience it in a different way. We sometimes might experience it as suffering that doesn't arise—the non-arising of suffering.

The best example I have of this is one that I've given a lot, so some of you may have heard this story. One very particularly clear example from my practice: I had spent quite a bit of time watching anger in my life in my early days in practice. It was my very first mindfulness practice—watching anger in my daily life. And I got really familiar with the dukkha of anger. Really familiar with that.

As I look back on this story, I see how the mind was applying the Four Noble Truths to experience without consciously knowing what it was doing. I had learned enough about the teachings to be curious about what is anger. Okay, well, this is what anger feels like. That right there is the curiosity of "this is dukkha." Okay, here's anger. This is dukkha. What is the human experience of anger? That's dukkha.

In this exploration of watching anger for a couple of months, I really got it that anger is dukkha. Really got it. Completely.

And so one day I was just in my kitchen doing some things, cutting an apple, and as I cut that apple a memory arose. I was not trying to practice here. This was just the fruit, really, of being available for anger and being available to watch and be curious about experience. In that moment, I saw the arising of a thought of being with the person that I was angry with. We were together at a fruit stand.

So in that moment I could see there was a connection between what I was doing—cutting the apple—and the memory that came up. And I could see the memory coming up. With this particular person, I had a lot of associations. Pretty much just about anything I would do would find a pathway to some memory with this person. So this one, cutting an apple, brought up a memory with this person.

And in that moment, the mind saw that memory and saw this kind of urge—this urge to jump on that thought and think more thoughts and get angry at him. Think thoughts to make myself angry. There was a strong urge in that direction. It takes a while to describe this, but this all happened in about a second, or a split second.

In that moment of seeing that urge, that heading in that direction, the mind wanting to get angry, I could see that I wasn't yet angry. Anger had not arisen. And in that moment the mind thought, *Don't pick up that thought. Don't go there.* And again, this wasn't something I did. It was the mind. Actually, my understanding came in retrospect. And so much understanding, I think, happens in retrospect, as Temple was saying earlier. We see how we've become free as we reflect back on things.

In retrospect, I understood that the months of looking at anger and realizing it was suffering—the mind recognized in that moment that wanting to get angry was headed right towards suffering. And because it understood that it was headed towards suffering, the mind said, *We don't want to go there.* So the mind did not go there.

This was not something I could have tried to do. In fact, I stood there waiting to get angry because it seemed impossible in my mind for this person to arise in my mind and anger not arise in my mind. And yet it didn't. I stood there waiting for myself to get angry and I didn't get angry. At that point I kind of sank down to my knees. It was like, *Wow. This is possible.*

That moment was a real moment of seeing. That was the seeing of the non-arising of suffering. It wasn't seeing the ending of suffering; it was seeing it's not happening, it's not arising. That was a very powerful moment in my practice. I really credit that moment with having me commit to this practice for the rest of my life.

So this third noble truth we can see through this releasing—the sense of feeling the clenching and the craving and watching it. Sometimes we can see it let go. And sometimes we can simply see it's not arising. That non-arising of suffering might be experienced in different ways. I'm not going to go into those; I'm hoping you'll explore some of those in a few minutes when we have an exploration of this.

Whatever is happening in our experience is a possibility to understand it from this perspective. Each noble truth in the first discourse of the Buddha—which I think we assigned to you recently—each noble truth in that discourse is associated with a task, an action that essentially turns those understandings of the Four Noble Truths into practices. Suffering is meant to be understood. Craving should be abandoned, released. The ending of suffering should be realized. And the path leading to the ending of suffering should be cultivated.

In that discourse, there are three ways each of those insights is explored. Around suffering, the first insight is simply to recognize, *This is suffering*—that same recognition, that same insight that we just talked about. What actually is suffering? This is an insight when we recognize, *Oh yes, anger is suffering.*

This is an insight. Maybe it doesn't feel good, but this is an insight. So this is suffering.

The second insight is that suffering should be understood. It's useful, it's valuable to turn towards suffering and begin to get curious about it. This is the second insight. Again, we can see ourselves in this teaching, I think, because we spend a lot of time when practicing being curious, turning towards. Anytime we recognize, "Oh right, frustration is happening," and ask, "What's the experience of frustration?"—that's an expression of this second insight around the First Noble Truth. Suffering should be understood.

The third insight: suffering has been understood. This is the realization, the recognition of what it actually means to understand suffering. Suffering has been understood. To me, these three right here are a kind of description of the whole path. In some ways, I think each of these three insights around any one of these truths is a whole path of practice.

So suffering is arising. It should be understood. We turn our attention towards it and begin to be curious about it. When suffering has been understood, we are already beginning to understand the Second Noble Truth. When suffering has been understood, we understand something about why it arises. We understand something about the craving that has conditioned it. When suffering has been understood, there is a release from that craving. And so in some ways we can look at these actions associated with each noble truth as leading onward to the next.

Understanding suffering leads us to recognize that craving is the cause of suffering, and that it should be released and can be released. Probably not by saying, "Oh, I'm going to let go of you, I'm going to do the letting go," but more along the lines of curiosity, exploration, creating the conditions for the letting go to happen.

That letting go happening—that's the Third Noble Truth. As we allow craving to be released, the abandoning occurs. Craving is abandoned with the abandoning of craving. And again, these three framings: This is craving. Craving should be abandoned. Craving has been abandoned. When craving has been abandoned, what's the experience? This

is the ending of suffering. This ending of suffering needs to be realized, and has been realized. So each of these noble truths leads onward to the next, just as we do this simple path of turning towards our experience, recognizing our experience.

Another piece I want to bring in around "suffering should be understood" concerns the First Noble Truth and the Third Noble Truth. The teaching around this, often in the way we talk about it, is very much internal. We are looking at suffering as it's arising here, exploring what the human experience of suffering is. And this is a piece of what the Buddha encouraged us to explore. But he also encouraged us, with respect to suffering, to look at suffering in community, in relationship.

In a teaching he gave to his son—and we've talked about this teaching, but I want to point to it here again—he encouraged us to look at suffering in community. He said to his son, before you do an action of body, speech, or mind, reflect: Is this going to cause suffering for yourself, for someone else, or for both? So right there he brings community in. Exploring and understanding suffering is not just about suffering that happens here, but also understanding when suffering is happening based on our actions, based on other people's actions in our communities.

And so this is an avenue for the exploration of the questions we've been looking at around suffering in our systems, in our cultures—around race and homophobia and ageism and sexism, the suffering that comes around war, around jealousy, around hoarding, around using resources. Looking at how actions impact self, other, both. This is part of the exploration of suffering too. And I think we are really, as a community of practitioners, bringing that piece into our practice. I think it's been left out of our practice, but we're bringing it in. What is suffering, not just in here, but in our communities as well?

And then the Third Noble Truth: peace is possible. Peace is possible.

The ending of craving leads to peace. Again, a peace that's really useful to recognize—and just to say over and over again—that peace around letting go of craving does not mean that we let go of action.

We may recognize there are situations and conditions in the world, and we've lost our sense of constriction around the wanting for that to not be there. So the constriction's not there; the heart's not clenched. And yet that very heart not being clenched—it feels the suffering way more strongly.

We think perhaps peace means non-action because what does it mean to act when we don't want? If we're not wanting, why would we act? That's our question. If I didn't crave something to be another way, why would I act?

Well, the heart wants to act to alleviate suffering. The heart wants to act in resonance with suffering, with joy. And so the heart at peace, to me, is the heart of non-constriction, but it's not the heart of non-action. The action comes from compassion, from joy, from kindness, from wisdom—instead of from craving.

The third noble truth, peace is possible, doesn't mean that we end up floating on some cloud somewhere. I think this brings us into engagement. It brings many of us into engagement.

I was pointing earlier to the way that the expression of a free mind and heart can take so many different forms. I've met monks who seem very free who are sitting in caves, kind of removed from the world. And other people who seem very free who are deeply engaged in the world. The expression of freedom will have your flavor. Look for that. What is your flavor of freedom?

CHAPTER 119

Non-clinging Part 1: Exploring the Aṭṭhakavagga

Andrea Fella · 1h15

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella introduces the Aṭṭhakavagga ("Chapter of the Eights"), a collection of 16 poems from the Sutta Nipāta that scholars consider among the earliest Buddhist teachings. Unlike later systematized teachings, this text notably lacks references to the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, or detailed dependent origination, instead offering direct pointing to non-clinging as the essential path to liberation.

Fella explains that the text can be understood through three perspectives: the ordinary person caught by clinging, the liberated person free from clinging, and the training that bridges these two states. The teaching particularly emphasizes two forms of clinging—to sense pleasures and to views—exploring how both lead to suffering and conflict. Drawing on translations by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu and the doctoral thesis of Grace Burford, Fella highlights how this text presents liberation not as a metaphysical achievement but as a practical way of living free from anger, fear, and attachment.

The talk addresses challenging questions about how to engage with views skillfully—particularly relevant in times of social conflict—without falling into either rigid attachment or spiritual bypass. Fella explores the apparent paradox of the Buddha speaking truth while teaching non-attachment to views, and examines the Simile of the Raft to illuminate how clinging to the Dhamma itself must eventually be released. This teaching offers practitioners a direct, non-metaphysical approach to freedom that emphasizes recognizing and releasing clinging in everyday experience.

This morning I wanted to structure the teachings around one particular text. It's a relatively lesser-known text in some ways, found in the Sutta Nipata, which is one of the smaller books in the smaller collections of the suttas. Until recently, there hadn't been very many translations into English. In fact, Bhikkhu Bodhi is coming out with a translation of the Sutta Nipata—I think that will come out next year. So this text hasn't been too accessible in English translation.

I first got interested in it maybe six or seven years ago, when Gil, my colleague at IMC, said, "This is a really important text, and I think we need to give a daylong on it, but I don't have time to do it. Would you do it?" I said, "I don't even know what that text is. I've never even read it. What is it?" He told me a few things about it, and I said, "Well, that sounds interesting, but I'm not ready to give a daylong on something I've not even

looked at." He said, "Well, let's put it on the calendar." So I said, "Okay, let's put it on the calendar in six months." I spent those six months studying this text, and it was a really powerful time for me.

I mention this because in talking about orientations to practice, some of you have mentioned wanting to pick up a theme for a while and explore it. Sometimes we can enter into a study and just see where it goes. Don't give yourself a limitation on it. In my case I did have a deadline—I had to have something to say in six months—but really giving yourself time to explore a teaching can be valuable. I found this particular text to be very, very rich.

There are a couple of interesting things about the Aṭṭhakavagga. One is that scholars generally understand this particular text to be an early teaching of the Buddha. A couple of things indicate this. One is that it's one of the few texts referred to in other places in the suttas. There's commentary about it, with people saying, "Have you memorized the Aṭṭhakavagga? Can you repeat that?" So it is mentioned and held up as a revered teaching in the suttas themselves.

Another indication is that the Pali in which this particular text is recorded is a more archaic form of the language. The text is written in poetry, however, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu points out that poetry in the texts—when the Buddha breaks into verse or people use poetry in the suttas—tends to be in this more archaic form of Pali. So he says it's not necessarily a good argument for it being an early text simply because it uses this earlier form of the language.

But there's another quality about this text that strikes me—this is more my sense rather than something from scholars. The picture it gives of the Buddha is that of a solitary monk. It's the Buddha wandering around without a big retinue of people. He's not sitting there talking to five hundred monks. He's wandering around the countryside, running into people and having conversations with them. That's the flavor of this text. As I read it and let myself settle into it, I got a very visceral sense of what some of the early teaching years of the Buddha might have looked like.

The other thing I find interesting about this text is that it doesn't refer to most of what we think of as the Buddhist teachings. The Four Noble Truths are not mentioned. The Eightfold Path is not mentioned. Transcendent dependent origination is not mentioned, although there is a place where a kind of conditioned chain appears that is very much like transcendent dependent origination.

The theme of this particular teaching is suffering resulting from clinging. How clinging leads to suffering is a key theme. Non-clinging as the path to freedom is a key theme. So really, this text points to perhaps some of the early teachings of the Buddha directly pointing to non-clinging—simply, don't cling.

Temple mentioned Joseph's quote the other day: "Nothing should be clung to as I, me, or mine." That particular quote is not in this text, but the orientation is the same—don't cling. Don't cling to anything. Keep looking at where you're clinging and release that, release that, release that. Freedom is the result of non-clinging. That's the direction this teaching points.

The text itself is relatively short—sixteen poems, about two hundred and ten verses. The title, the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, means something like "the chapter of the eights" or "the chapter of the octads." It's a little mysterious why it's called that, because the first couple of poems have eight verses or eight sections to them, but after that there's no connection to eights as far as I can tell. So we don't know why it's called this, but that's the name it's been given.

Because it's relatively short—though long enough and deep enough—all we're really going to be able to do in this session is get a sense of how this teaching teaches, what it points to, and I hope to give you some interest in exploring it. To me, it has the flavor of direct pointing—direct pointing to liberation, direct pointing to freedom. It uses almost koan-like teachings at some points to shake the mind up, particularly around views, around clinging to views.

We're not going to be able to go through the entire teaching in detail. What I'd like to do is give you a flavor of it and hope that some of you find this teaching of interest and pick it up for study. It is complex in some ways—because of this koan-like nature, it deserves time. You read something and you go, "What?" You read it and go, "I'll just sit with that for a while." Not trying to figure it out intellectually, but just letting yourself sit with it. So I hope this inspires some of you to look at this text.

Now, the way this set of poems teaches—I spent six months studying it, and I used a couple of key sources. I used one PhD thesis on the topic by Grace Burford, if any of you are interested in going into an academic study of it. I think it's called *Desire and...* I'll get the reference for you. So she wrote a PhD thesis on the topic. And then I also used Thanissaro Bhikkhu's comments, his notes on this text. He's translated it, and that translation is on Access to Insight.

I found as many translations as I could while doing this study, and that's another thing I'd point you to if you want to study a particular text—it's useful to find as many translations as you can. I searched the internet and found several others. One of the key ones I found that I use a lot here is a version by Bhikkhu Varado. So Thanissaro Bhikkhu has a translation. Saddhatissa has a translation. Norman has a translation. There are some out there. Gil Fronsdal is coming out with a translation later this year with commentaries, so that may be a great source if you're interested in studying it.

Primarily I used this PhD thesis and Thanissaro Bhikkhu's notes on the text. One of the key points he made that really helped me in the study of this teaching is that there are three key perspectives this teaching looks at. You can look at any of the verses and basically see it's coming from one of these three perspectives. As you read this text, he said, see which of the three perspectives this teaching is coming from.

Those three perspectives are: first, the perspective of an ordinary person, someone who's caught by clinging—that perspective. Second, the perspective of someone who's free—what does it look like when somebody is not clinging? And third, how do we get from one to the other? What's the training?

So the structure is very simple. If you see this overarching structure, it's really simple: What's it like to be caught?

What's it like to be free? And how do we become free?

I'd like to explore some of these verses with you. I have made selections, and I took the liberty in putting this handout together to edit these translations for gender neutrality. It began to feel a little heavy to me, hearing "he, he, he, he" everywhere, so I changed them. These are not the direct translations, but I have modified them for gender neutrality.

This first one, Sutta 1, the Kāma Sutta on sensual pleasures, is a description of somebody who's caught by clinging—clinging to sense pleasure. There are key ways that we cling, and in later teachings, the Buddha codified the four kinds of clinging. I think another interesting thing about this teaching is its absence of lists. It doesn't say, "Here are the four kinds of clinging." It simply talks about clinging. But in later teachings, the Buddha spoke about clinging to sense pleasure, clinging to rites and rituals, clinging to identity view, and clinging to views separate from identity view. These are the main four kinds of clinging. This particular text focuses on sense pleasure and views as the real exploration of clinging.

So this first one looks at what it looks like when we're clinging to sense pleasure. How does that appear?

If one longing for sensual pleasure achieves it, yes, they're enraptured at heart. The mortal gets what they want. But if for that person, longing, desiring, the pleasure diminishes, they're shattered as if shot by an arrow. One who is greedy is overpowered by weakness, is trampled by trouble, for pain invades them as water a cracked boat.

This points to the drawbacks of sense pleasure. We all know that this is something which takes some practice to really begin to understand. When we achieve what we desire, yes, we get that moment of "this is good." And yet, because of the law of impermanence—the truth, the reality of impermanence—the getting of that is not lasting. So there's this cycle: "Oh, that didn't last. Where else can I get something? Let me find it." And when we lose the things we've gained, the Buddha talks about that pain invading us like water leaking into a cracked boat.

Another discourse on this, the second one I've included, is the Discourse on the Cave:

Longing for what's over or for what's to come. Yearning for pleasures in the present and pleasures of the past. Those who are greedy for pleasure, hunting for it, deranged, selfish, have entered the wrong road.

Again, this points to the sense that there may be some pleasure or gratification we get from obtaining what we want, but that ultimately this is not the road to a deeper happiness, a truer happiness, a more free kind of happiness—one that's not dependent on the conditions of the world.

And then verse 777 says:

Look at them floundering amidst their cherished possessions like fish in a dwindling stream.

That image came to me in my meditation. I think the Buddha's analogies are very evocative. I was sitting in meditation at one point during a long retreat, just watching my mind flipping around—where can I get happiness, where? And it felt like this flopping, this fish flopping around. The mind is flopping around looking for something to make it happy. This image came to me of the fish in a dwindling stream, and I laughed. That's what he's talking about. That's the sense of the mind just grasping for someplace to find pleasure. The dwindling stream.

So those are some of the drawbacks, what happens as we cling to sense pleasure. We have to have the understanding that there's a drawback to clinging to sense pleasure, or we're never going to look at what else might be possible.

Now the next piece I want to look at: we've examined clinging to sense pleasure, and now comes the second piece—what happens when somebody clings to views? Because this is the other key element of this teaching on clinging.

These verses describe the drawbacks to clinging to views:

Abiding by fixed opinions and pleased with themselves, they say, "My opponent's a fool, they're no expert."

Upon whatever basis they regard their opponent a fool is the same upon which they regard themselves an expert. To the extent to which they rate themselves expert, they despise anyone else who makes the same claim. And one of my favorite lines of this whole text: "Those attached to perception and views roam the world offending people."

We see this. We see this daily right now in our political primary season.

"Those who maintain a view and dispute, saying this alone is true—is criticism all they experience?" This question comes from someone in conversation with the Buddha. It's one of those suttas that describes the Buddha just talking to somebody. He's having a conversation with this person about views, and he's said, "Clinging to views isn't helpful." And this person responds, "But when they maintain a view and dispute, saying this alone is true, is criticism all they experience? Don't they also get something useful? Don't they also receive praise?"

The Buddha responds: "What they receive is trifling—not enough to bring any peace of mind."

Again, here we're pointing to what is possible. The whole notion of clinging to views bringing some kind of praise, the value that people put on praise—thinking that's what I want to go for—the Buddha says that's trifling. That's like this tiny benefit. It does not bring them any peace of mind. "I say there are only two consequences of dispute: praise and criticism. Seeing this, you should not dispute. Regard instead non-dispute the grounds for peace."

Now, this can challenge us—this particular kind of statement, in some ways. When we have people holding up a particular perspective that is oppressive, a certain political candidate holding up the perspective of "let's build a wall"... To just let that sit in the world, it kind of feels to us like if I don't dispute that, aren't I letting that go forward? Aren't I letting that take over?

And I think to some extent, when we look at what's happening in this text, there are times—I don't have an example in the handout, I don't think—but there are times when the Buddha is saying something quite different. I can remember one where somebody says, "Aren't there many kinds of truths? Doesn't everybody have their own truth?" And the Buddha said, "No, there is one truth." So it's not that the Buddha doesn't come forward and say this is what's right, this is what's true, this is what's valuable, this is the direction we should go.

But I think non-dispute is around the clinging. The clinging that I'm right, you're wrong—the clinging is where we get caught. Not through the recognition of "this wholesome direction needs to be put into the world."

The Buddha didn't just sit there when people said things he felt were inappropriate. He didn't just sit there. He said, "No, that's not the way it is." And so this is a little bit of a paradox. The Buddha said non-dispute is the grounds for peace, and yet when we read this text, it sounds like he's disputing. So what is that? What does that mean? How can we understand non-dispute within what seems to be dispute?

That's what I'd like to encourage us to explore in our own lives. I want to get out there and say building a wall is not the way. Kicking out all the Muslims is not the way. This is not what's helpful, this is not what's wholesome. I want to get out there and say that—but what does it mean to do that without hating, without constriction?

That's the exploration here. Non-dispute is the grounds for peace. It doesn't mean not saying what's in the direction of the wholesome. But how can we do that without the constriction? And if we do it with the constriction, know that. This is our practice. We feel, "Oh, I hate you for saying that." That doesn't feel good, but that's where I am. Okay, can I know that? Can I know the suffering of that hatred? I'm not at the point of being able to let that go, but I can know it and know that it's suffering.

That begins—and I think so many times as we explore suffering, this speaks to some of that spiritual bypass.

If we were just to say, "Oh, I shouldn't hate," well, that's not what's happening right now. If I were to step aside from that feeling of not liking what's being put out into the world, that doesn't feel good. I constrict around it. I get angry about it. Can I open to that?

Through that opening, my sense and understanding of how the practice works is that as I open to that constriction, wisdom begins to tease apart the piece of that which is wisdom from the piece of that which is aversion, greed, confusion. And so if I were to

just step aside from it entirely, I would miss the wisdom that needs to be revealed in that exploration. So open to those places of constriction, confusion. Don't be afraid of them. They open us to wisdom and compassion and understanding how to hold on.

You know, this is a koan for me—that non-disputing dispute. But can I hold that? Can I hold that possibility and explore where it feels like it's not happening?

So, clinging to views. The next way this teaching teaches is by showing us what it looks like to be someone who is liberated. Liberation in this text is interesting. Let's read some verses from the Aṭṭhakavagga describing someone who is free.

The questioner, again a solitary person the Buddha is having a conversation with, asks: *Having what vision, being of what character is one called peaceful? Gautama, tell me about the supreme person.*

The Buddha responds: *A person who is not angered, not frightened, not boastful, not fretful, who gives wise advice, who is calm, restrained in speech, who is indeed a sage. A person who is not attached to the future, who does not sorrow over the past, who finds solitude amidst sense contact and is not guided by fixed views. A person who is retiring, not deceitful, not covetous, not greedy, not impudent, not arousing contempt, who does not engage in malicious speech. A person who does not relish pleasure, who is not arrogant, who is mild and of ready wit, who is not credulous, who by nothing is repelled. A person who does not take on the training in hopes of material gain, who is unperturbed if they get nothing, who is not hampered by wishes and not greedy for flavors. A person who is even-tempered, ever-attentive, who does not suppose that in the world they are equal, superior, or inferior, who is free of conceit. A person for whom there are no tethers, who in knowing the truth is not tethered in any way, and in whom no wishes are found for existence or non-existence. This is someone I call peaceful. They are indifferent to sense pleasure. In them bonds are not found. They have overcome attachment. The sage, free of greed and selfishness, does not speak of oneself as among those who are superior, equal, or inferior.*

A couple of pieces about this. Mostly what it describes is not "someone who is peaceful has attained this refined state of nibbāna." It describes them living in the world and what that person looks like living in the world. Primarily, it reads as a description of what they are *not*—not angry, not frightened, not boastful, no blind faith. There are a few areas where it points to qualities of mind that are present: wise, calm, even-tempered, attentive. This may also be challenging for us to some extent.

But I think the fact that it points to what we are not—what is a free person? It doesn't say what that person *is*; it says what they're *not*—this speaks to a really radical direction of the Buddhist pointing. He wasn't talking about freedom as something we get, as something to have. He was speaking about what needs to be released for freedom to happen.

This to me speaks to something important. The Buddha didn't say, "When somebody is free, this is what they do, this is what they look like." He said, "This is what's not happening." Someone who's not angry, not boastful, not frightened, not clinging to blind faith—how that person is in the world, what they do, can look many different ways. There's not one result of freedom. So to me, while it's a little unfamiliar to hear about what somebody is *not*, it leaves space for a lot of different expressions of freedom.

One thing that is kind of absent in this teaching, and I need to hold this a little bit—I'm not sure how to live with this or be with this.

It's a question I hold, a kind of koan in my heart. This text does not speak of the brahmavihāras as much. It doesn't say this person has love, is compassionate. It speaks of the absence of suffering, the absence of fear, the absence of hate.

We often speak about how, as those things fall away, the natural result of the heart—and we have been speaking about the brahmavihāras in this practice—is the natural expression of the heart that's free. This is how I hold this in the text. The Buddha isn't saying you have to go out there and find love. Rather, with freedom from all of these constricting qualities, what results? What happens? Maybe certain beings have an expression of it that looks like just equanimity, just wisdom. Maybe other beings are more active in the world, expressing compassion and love. So again, this is something to hold in our hearts.

Elsewhere in this text, aside from what I've read, liberation is described in terms of qualities of someone who's free. And again, it brings in wisdom, silence, calmness. They're mindful. They see, they know. They're equanimous. So the liberated person is described in terms of what's released and certain qualities that are present. To me this is actually inspiring, because the picture of freedom in this text is one that I can envision living in the world. It's one that I can envision walking around and acting and speaking and being in the world.

This text emphasizes freedom in this life. There are a few places where the Theravada tradition has said, "Oh, here's where it's talking about freedom in the next life," or "Here's where it's talking about the transcendent quality of liberation." But as I read those verses, I think, I don't know—it sounds like it's just describing not clinging to

future existence. It doesn't say whether future existence exists or not. So the transcendental quality of liberation, of freeing ourselves from the cycle of rebirth, is not particularly found in this teaching.

This teaching, in some ways, contrasts pretty strongly with the standard Theravada description of one who's liberated—that being who has freed themselves from the cycle of rebirth, the transcendent quality of Nibbāna that breaks the bounds of rebirth. Here the teaching is: don't cling to either rebirth or non-rebirth. Just don't cling. Clinging is the issue. Let go of clinging.

To me, this is a direct pointing teaching. Clinging is the exploration. When there's clinging, can I know that? Can I not do a spiritual bypass and say, "Oh, I shouldn't cling here," but can I open to that? Can I know that? As clinging releases, certain wisdom is understood. There are deeper and deeper levels of clinging that get revealed. As the grosser kinds of clinging to sense pleasure are released, we see how we're clinging in other ways. And then those we explore and release.

My inspiration here is that I don't know what Nibbāna is. I don't know what full liberation is. I don't know. I know the freedom that comes from the non-clinging I've experienced. That direction—it's like, yes, I'm heading that way. I trust that way lies more and more peace. What it looks like with full non-clinging, I have no idea. But I'm willing to go there. I trust that is a good direction to go.

So the overwhelming majority of teaching in this text, the Aṭṭhakavagga, points to freedom in this very life, primarily as an unselfish, non-clinging, non-desirous way of living in the world. That's a description of someone who's free.

Grace Burford, the scholar who wrote the doctoral thesis, said: "The Atthakavagga is exceptional even within the earliest Buddhist literature in its non-metaphysical presentation of the highest good achievable by humans. It is significant as an example of how the Buddhist ideal goal can be presented without all the usual problematic cosmological and metaphysical accessories that accompany it in its traditional Theravada doctrine." This teaching presents a coherent understanding of liberation without resorting to multiple lives.

Another scholar, Gomez, says: "The Atthakavagga sets out to find a practical solution to human sorrow—not merely the abstract sorrow of rebirth, but the everyday sorrow of strife and aggression."

Then there's the path to freedom. Let's read a few of the verses that describe the relationship to views from the perspective of liberation:

"One who is pure has no preconceived view about anything in the world. Having abandoned delusion and pride, they remain without attachment. Therefore, by what view would they go? One who is attached argues over religious teaching. But how and about what can you argue with one who is without attachment? There is nothing that they either take up or throw off. They are indeed free of every view in the world. Abandoning what they have taken up, free from any basis of attachment, they do not rely even upon knowledge. Amongst those in dispute, they do not take sides. They do not revert to any grasping of opinions whatsoever."

Again, some challenging words about views, which I hope you can hold as a koan, as a question.

So now the next piece is the training. The other set of teachings in the Atthakavagga describes the path of practice—what does it actually look like? Clinging is the place where suffering is born, so how does one move from clinging to non-clinging? Here are some descriptions of that:

The questioner says, "Now venerable sir, speak about the path of practice." The Buddha responds: "A person should not have covetous eyes. One should close one's ears to ordinary chatter. Should not be greedy for flavors. One should not cherish anything in the world. One should be meditative, not footloose. One should desist from worry. Should not be indolent. Should not live in lodgings where there is little noise."

Skipping down a little: "One should not be drawn into telling lies, nor be deliberately treacherous. One should not dispute others for their lowly way of life or wisdom or precepts or practices. If ascetics or ordinary people irritate one with their talkativeness, one should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate. Knowing the Buddha's teaching, an ever-attentive person who investigates it should train in it. Knowing the cooling of desire as peace, one should not be negligent in applying Gautama's teaching. With regards to the Blessed One's teaching, one who is diligent should constantly venerate it by following his example."

What's interesting to me about this is that as you read it, some of it may resonate with the description of someone who is free. In the basic path of practice here, instead of describing how one who is free naturally has no greed for flavors, has no worry, is not indolent—instead, this says one *should* practice this. The path, especially in terms of our engagement in the world, is described as modeling the behavior of those who are free. What does that look like? It's a kind of practice I sometimes explore.

Now this is important. In my exploration of this—for instance, around patience—I did a practice for a while on patience because impatience was huge in my life. A big, big pattern. And what I discovered around this modeling piece is: what does it look like when I'm feeling impatience to act *as though* I were patient? The key to this practice is not to sidestep the impatience. You have to be completely, deeply honest with yourself about where you are in doing this modeling practice.

In cultivating or practicing patience, at one point I was in a drugstore walking through the store, and I was really impatient. I noticed the impatience, and I noticed that this impatience expressed itself by picking up things off the shelf and throwing them in my basket. There was a physical manifestation of the impatience expressing itself through the body.

So I began to look at this teaching of modeling patience. And that exploration of fully acknowledging—yes, impatience inside—it's not about trying to create the mind of patience. But what I did is I began to smooth out my behavior. I felt fully that urge to throw things in the basket. I felt it completely, and yet I just moved, and I gently placed things in the basket, feeling into that impatience all the while. It's almost like this practice of fully knowing the impatience inwardly and seeing if it cannot leak out through any pore. What does that mean?

As I explored that, it was actually shocking—and this is a small example. I encourage you to try this in the small, because in the large ones, if you're in the midst of a very charged situation, trying to model that is probably going to create the spiritual bypass. I don't think that's useful. But in the small places, it can be useful to explore this—the little places like impatience in the drugstore.

So that practice of exploring: here's the feeling, and here's how I might act if I were patient. Within about a minute, the impatience had released, and I was patient. That very modeling had a rebound effect on the mind. By not repressing—I think if we're repressing, it's not going to have that same impact. This is a delicate practice. I found it interesting and inspiring to play with, but it's very easy for this to be interpreted as spiritual bypass. So I really want to be careful in how we pick up this teaching of how the Buddha encourages us to model. But to me, this speaks to the sense that the path of practice and the goal of practice are not so different. We cultivate the path of practice by modeling, heading ourselves towards where we end up—the non-clinging.

I want to talk about views, because this too is a major aspect of the teaching in the Aṭṭhakavagga. There's a lot of teaching on clinging to views here, and in this place it gets a little more nuanced in terms of how the path of practice works around views—at least that's my understanding.

What kinds of views are there? There's the view "I am"—the identity view, the sense of identification. There's views around metaphysical reality that are clung to. A lot of the various debates that happened in the time of the Buddha were debating: Is the world infinite? Is the world finite? Only this is true, everything else is wrong. The world is transcendent. All of these different views about the world—speculative views about the nature of reality, essentially. And then all other views, opinions, and beliefs, views that we have in our cultures and our societies around everything.

The Buddha pointed to views and clinging to views as one of the key ways suffering happens in our world. This is expressed through the results: clinging to views leads to dispute, to conflict, to war, to contention. And we see this. The view of race—this is clearly a concept, an idea, and how much suffering, conflict, sense of better, less than, equal to comes out of this perspective. The Buddha pointed to any clinging to views as leading to strife and suffering.

We may not be able to know what views we're clinging to. Often views are in the realm of delusion, below the surface. Views are created in dependence on our culture, on our society. The paper that Larry offered really points to that—how our sense of self, our sense of identity is conditioned by our culture. The views that we pick up, the beliefs that we pick up are so deeply embedded.

Views from family, views from culture, views from who we spend our time with as a child. Views that are created as we move into ourselves as an adult. The whole mind we're swimming in is often views that are not consciously articulated. And so views are often in this realm of not seeing. We're swimming in our views—it's like the fish in the water not knowing the water. We're swimming in our views and we don't know them.

And so in our relationships with each other, rather than having the notion or the idea of "I'm right, you're wrong," it's more like, "Oh, different views are happening." Let's see—what view does this expose when there's conflict? We can be curious about that. When there's conflict, what views are being held to? This is an exploration.

Beginning to look at this, anytime there's suffering, my understanding is that some view is being clung to. Some view is operating. We may or may not be able to recognize the view immediately, but this can be a question we explore. So there's suffering happening here. We can feel into the suffering of that, feel into the constriction, the pain, and use this wisdom or this question—not necessarily to find the answer, but simply to ask: there's suffering here, what's being believed? Just to begin to burst those bubbles of delusion, to recognize what's being believed, as opposed to the sense of that suffering coming from the conviction that this is true. We begin to recognize our beliefs as beliefs. This is really powerful, this exploration, as we begin to recognize, "Oh, this is a be-

lief." Maybe we can't immediately let go of it, and I would not encourage a spiritual bypass of saying, "Well, I shouldn't believe that." Instead, acknowledge it: "Ah, this is what is being believed." Let's explore that, look at that, get to know what's happening there around that belief.

In the Aṭṭhakavagga, it's interesting that the attachment to beliefs is really singled out as the issue. There's a statement at the top of page five: "A person who associates themselves with certain views, considering them as best and making them supreme in the world—they say, because of that, all other views are inferior. Therefore, they are not free from contention with others. In what is seen, heard, cognized, and in ritual observances performed, they see a profit for themselves. Just by laying hold of that view, they regard every other view as worthless."

This statement apparently applies to views whether they are true or not—that we should not cling even to views that are true. The Buddha actually said in one place in the text that yes, there is truth, there is a single truth. It's hard for us, from our perspective of our usual way of relating to views, not to see that as clinging to views. That's a koan, another koan in this teaching to me. What does it mean for the Buddha to say, "Yes, there is a single truth," and not be clinging to that? I don't know what that means. But I do know that when I see myself clinging to views, I feel the suffering of that, and so that can be explored. What did it mean for the Buddha to say there is a truth and not be clinging to it? I don't know, but I'm willing to explore it. Willing to explore not by sidestepping it, but by recognizing, "Okay, this is belief. Belief is happening."

I'm going to skip over some of what I was going to talk about here and move on to the question: given that this teaching says we should not cling to any views, what about right view? Where does right view come in? Again, another koan in this teaching to me. There are questions, actually, whether this particular teaching holds the perspective that using any kind of view is not the path. Essentially, the question is: does this teaching point to a non-path path?

Some argue that yes, this text teaches the training where the path itself includes not holding any view at all. This might be in the flavor of: not holding any view is the path as well as the result of the path. Not holding to any view whatsoever is the path as well as the result of the path. To some extent, this is the flavor I get when I read some of the Zen teachings. There's no path. Freedom is just there. It's like, well, how do you do this? I don't know.

My sense is that when I look at the passages in this text that refer to one who does not hold any views at all—and this came from the encouragement by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu to look at it from these three perspectives—we need to ask: who is this verse describing? Is it describing someone in the training?

Not holding any view—or is it describing someone who's free, not holding any view? And my read of these teachings is that whenever it's describing someone not holding any view at all, that person is liberated. And so the Aṭṭhakavagga, to me, does not point to "don't hold any view at all." How would we get there? The whole teaching is a direction, a pointing for us.

So perhaps some people might say, "Well, we're not supposed to cling to the teachings." Well, good luck. Here's another text—the very first mentioning of views in the Aṭṭhakavagga. And I think this is a teaching that points to two sides of the question. You can take this teaching from two angles:

How would one, led on by desire, entrenched in their likes, forming their own conclusions, overcome their own views? They dispute in line with the way that they know.

This points to when we are entrenched in our views—we hold to those and we don't let other things in, or we dispute in line with that. But this speaks to all of our predicament in the world. We can't usually simply say, "I'm not going to cling to the Dharma." That would be spiritual bypassing again. It's like, "Well, yeah, I am going to cling to the Dharma."

And in fact, there is a teaching that I think speaks to this. I have some teachers that don't like my talking about clinging to the Dharma. But at the same time, there's this teaching—the simile of the raft. Many of you, I know, are familiar with the simile of the raft. That description talks about the path of practice moving from being caught on this side of the stream, to crossing the stream—the stream representing the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion—and landing on the far shore, free from clinging.

The analogy talks about building the raft on this shore. And I like the fact that it's a raft—something we build out of sticks and mud and stuff that we find around us. The analogy says that the raft is basically the Eightfold Path. The Buddha points to the raft being the Eightfold Path. But it's put together out of our sense experience. It's put together with what's around us—sight, sound, smells, taste, touch. Our orientation towards that through the Eightfold Path. We build the raft and we cross over the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The raft, you know, I'm envisioning this raft—it's pretty rickety. It barely keeps me above the water. This is a piece I love about this analogy. The flood is said to be the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion. We're on this raft. We're going to get wet. So the path of practice is about being in contact with greed, aversion, and delusion with this support of the path of practice.

I don't think the Buddha would teach, "Let go of the raft in the middle of the river." We have to hold on to the raft. We have to make the effort with our hands and our feet to cross the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion. And so the analogy goes on. When we get to the other side of the flood, the Buddha asks his monks, "Is it useful at that point to say, 'Oh, this raft has been really useful to me. I think I'll carry it around on my head'?" At that point, no, that's not useful. You've crossed the flood. You can set it down.

And at that point, in that analogy, the Buddha says the Dharma is not to be clung to. Wholesome states are not to be clung to—and how much more so unwholesome states not to be clung to. And yet, that analogy points to letting go of clinging after we've crossed the river. Letting go of the clinging to the Dharma after we've crossed over.

And so there's probably some transformation over that time. We start out gripping onto the practice.

I remember sitting there, thinking, "Oh, I really have to work to do this. I have to try to be present for this difficulty." Just clinging to the Dharma, creating an identity around being the meditator. And it served. It served.

At some point, I began to experience the suffering of that clinging. And then that's the time to begin to look at it. When the suffering becomes obvious, we begin to see the clinging that's there and let it go.

I understand the path of practice as being an uncovering of subtler and subtler forms of clinging. And as we reach them, that's when we work to let go of that clinging. If we're clinging to sense pleasure, that's not the time to let go of the identity of the meditator. So it's a staged kind of release that can happen.

There's also another perspective on views. This is one of my favorite suttas too, for several reasons. It points to what kind of views are helpful, views that allow us to move in the direction of transcending views. One of the reasons I love this teaching is that it's given by Anāthapiṇḍika, a householder. So this teaching is given by a householder to monks from other wandering sects.

The monks see Anāthapiṇḍika and they say, "Oh, let's talk to Anāthapiṇḍika. He's a follower of that Gautama, so let's see what he has to say." They come up to him and say, "Tell us, householder, what views the contemplative Gautama has."

Anāthapiṇḍika, being very honest, says, "You know, I can't tell you what views the Blessed One has." The monks think this is a little strange—if you can't tell us what views he has, then you obviously don't know his teachings. So they say, "Well, if you don't know what views the contemplative Gautama has, then tell us what views the monks have."

He says, "Well, I can't tell you that either."

"But I can tell you what views I have."

They say, "Okay, tell us what views you have."

And he says, "Okay, I'll tell you what views I have, but first tell me what views you have."

They start spouting off their views—those speculative views I mentioned before. Things like, "The cosmos is eternal, only this is true, anything else is worthless." "The cosmos is not eternal, only this is true, anything else is worthless." You can see these different opinions: the cosmos is finite, the cosmos is infinite, each holding this perspective that only this is true, anything else is worthless.

When they were done, Anāthapiṇḍika said—and he goes through this for every view they've stated—"As for the one who says the cosmos is eternal, only this is true, anything else is worthless, this is the sort of view I have: that view arises from their own inappropriate attention, or in dependence on the words of another."

This is how views are formed. Views are formed from our own meeting the world with our experience. We contact the leg of an elephant and think, "That's an elephant." We contact the trunk of an elephant and think, "That's an elephant." Perhaps not seeing the entirety—I'm referring to the teaching story about the blind people and the elephant. Creating views out of our own direct experience, but perhaps not the entire picture. When views are created out of our direct experience, we tend to cling to them very tightly. Or we create views based on the opinions and views of others. Somebody has said, "This is what's true." Oh, then that must be what's true.

And again, a koan here, because the Buddha says the Eightfold Path is what we need to follow. It's like, "Okay, I'm going to pick that one up." This view has arisen in dependence on his words.

So here's what Anāthapiṇḍika goes on to say: "The views arise from their own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. This view has been brought into being, is fabricated, is willed, dependently originated. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated—that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. The venerable one holding this view adheres to that very stress, submits himself to that very stress."

Here Anāthapiṇḍika is pointing to the holding to that view.

The holding to something that is inconstant, something fabricated, creates stress. So again, it's the holding. It's the "this is true, everything else is wrong." It's the holding to the view that Anandapindika is pointing to as creating the stress. The view itself is there—it's fabricated, it's inconstant. Clinging to something that's inconstant is stressful and will create suffering.

After Anandapindika has responded to all of the views of the other monks, they say, "Okay, now tell us what view you have." And Anandapindika says: "Whatever has been brought into being is fabricated, willed, dependently originated. That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not myself. This is the sort of view I have."

They try to pull the same argument on him: "Well, you submit yourself to that same stress. You're just holding to that view." And Anandapindika responds that when he sees the stress of holding to the view, he understands it is fabricated. He understands that it is inconstant and that it creates stress to hold to it. And there is release in that understanding.

When this was said, the wanderers fell silent, abashed, sitting with their shoulders drooping, heads down, brooding, at a loss for words. Then Anandapindika went to the Blessed One and reported this exchange. And the Blessed One said, "Well done, householder. This is how you should periodically refute the wanderers of other sects."

This teaching points to the using of view in a particular way. In a sense, the view that Anandapindika pointed to is a view that leads us in the direction of understanding that clinging to views is not helpful. So we can keep recognizing that. And I think this is some of the paradox of the teachings—we have to keep deepening, keep deepening. Oh, clinging to that. Oh, and there's suffering there. And clinging to that, and clinging to that. Clinging even to the teaching of non-clinging. Okay, let go of that too.

CHAPTER 120

Awareness of Hindrances: It Is Possible

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella reframes the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa)—sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt—not as obstacles to eliminate but as opportunities for deepening practice. Drawing from the fourth foundation of mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), she explains that when we shift from being caught in these difficult states to being with them, they become gateways to understanding rather than barriers to concentration.*
>
> *Fella offers practical guidance for each hindrance: stepping back from the object of desire to feel the wanting itself; recognizing that aversion is an experience of separation that can be witnessed rather than believed; exploring sleepiness and dullness as vague but knowable states rather than failures of meditation; giving restlessness space by expanding awareness; and recognizing doubt's characteristic wavering and the emotional undercurrents beneath it. She introduces James Baraz's playful metaphor of being an alien reporting on human experience as a way to cultivate curious investigation.*
>
> *Sharing her own transformative experience with self-hatred during a three-month retreat, Fella illustrates how sustained investigation of a hindrance can lead to profound insight into impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā). The talk emphasizes that meeting hindrances with mindfulness is not "second-class practice" but the very path itself—developing skills that serve both formal meditation and daily life.*

It really is a privilege to sit up here and see you all, feel you all—really more than see. Just connecting to the energy of your practice. It is so inspiring to have the privilege to spend so much of my year with people who really want to look at their hearts, their minds, to explore what it means to understand what's happening and to purify, to move in the direction of love and compassion and equanimity and joy, and to begin to release the tendency to move towards greed, aversion, and delusion. It's a rare thing in this world, what you're doing.

Tonight I'd like to talk about some of the mind states, the difficult energies that tend to get in our way, that we tend to get caught in and struggle with as we practice. The Buddha highlighted five particularly challenging mental energies that tend to unsettle our minds, to get in the way of concentration. These are the five hindrances: sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt. Anybody experiencing those?

They manifest in so many different forms. They can be very obvious, screamingly obvious—"Get me out of here!"—ranging from a really strong energy to a very subtle form. Each of these hindrances has a range of strength. Along the line of aversion, it might go from the strength of screaming rage or anger or fear all the way down to the subtlest kind of "not that," or a kind of "I can put up with that"—not in a balanced way, but just a slightly resistant way.

Wherever you are in the course of your retreat, whether you're at the beginning or halfway through a three-month course, these energies will be arising. They are worth being familiar with in both their subtle and obvious forms, because they tend to represent the edges of our practice. When they are arising, there's something asking to be seen, something asking to be known.

The word "hindrance" gives us a particular sense. The Pali word *nivarana* literally means something like "covering," but it's often translated as hindrance, and the Buddha does speak of these qualities of mind as getting in the way of concentration in certain forms. That word tends to make us think, "All right, how do I get rid of these? How do I figure out how not to have these come up?" After all, if they're hindrances, we should want to not have them. That's the way we relate to that word.

And yet, in the fourth foundation of mindfulness, in the Buddha's meditation instructions, the list of these energies is right in there as a way we can cultivate mindfulness and wisdom. When we shift our perspective on these states of mind, when we explore what it means to be curious about them and understand them rather than be lost in them or believe them, instead of hindering our path, they actually become the way our practice can deepen.

You may not believe me. I certainly didn't believe the teachers when they said, "Yes, you can be mindful of aversion, and it really doesn't matter what you're mindful of. If you're mindful with this curiosity, with a wise attitude, then it doesn't matter whether aversion is arising or sound is arising." I thought they were just saying that to be nice or something. I went through a large part of my practice believing that if the hindrances were arising, I was doing something wrong and needed to figure out how to get rid of them.

But it really wasn't until I began to open to them as teachers that things shifted. They really are teachers for us. They point out places where we have something to learn. Often these hindrances are experienced as suffering, as dukkha. They're unpleasant. And the Buddha's instructions for us around suffering, in the First Noble Truth, say: there is suffering, and when suffering is arising, we understand that suffering is arising. Our

task around this arising is to understand it—not in an intellectual way, but in an experiential way. This is our work, our practice around these difficult states: to explore what it means to open to them, to understand them experientially.

I think the other morning I spoke about having the stance of a naturalist in our receptive awareness. As we explore meeting our experience, receiving our experience, rather than going out and trying to figure out what's going on, we can have this stance of a naturalist who sits quietly and watches what's happening, or feels into what's happening. A naturalist in the world tries not to get in the way of the natural unfolding but simply to witness it. That can be our exploration in observing all of our experience, including the hindrances.

One language I like to explore in this receptive stance, particularly around the hindrances, is the language of being with experience.

What does it mean to be with anger or frustration or desire or sleepiness or restlessness or doubt? To me, that language of "being with" is supportive in my own experience. It may or may not be for you, so check it out. See if it's supportive for you to think about what it means to be with experience.

There's a difference between being with aversion and being averse. We know this difference. We understand and recognize a kind of shift that can happen when we explore moving from being averse to being with aversion. When we are being averse, we're caught in the midst of that difficult state. But we might be able to shift into, "Oh, aversion is happening." That's a kind of being with—aversion is happening.

That shift represents a vast difference between being averse and being with aversion, between being averse and understanding that aversion is happening. There is a kind of space that opens around the experience when we understand that shift. In that place where we can be with experience, that's where we can begin to be curious about what it means to know the human experience of this difficult state.

This exploration of human experience is another way I like to think about exploring the hindrances in general. The hindrances are human experiences. You are not alone when you experience them. The causes and conditions that arise in your mind leading to hindrances—very similar patterns are going on in everyone's mind. It's not just you. And so what might it mean to look at it as a human experience rather than my anger, my aversion, my sleepiness?

James Baraz has a fun way to explore this perspective of being with and being a naturalist about our experience, especially around difficulty. He says there were times in his practice where he decided he would pretend he was an alien that took up residence

in this human body. His job as that alien was to report back to the mothership what it was like to be in a human being. This is what it's like when they feel anger. This is what it's like when they feel happiness. This is what it's like when they feel sleepiness. It's a humorous way, perhaps a light-hearted way, to put us into that stance of curiosity about the human experience of these states of mind.

As we meet hindrances from this stance, as we meet experience from this stance, hindrances are no longer hindrances. They just become another experience that can be known, that can be understood, and around which wisdom and understanding can arise.

So I'd like to take some time with each of the five hindrances, to offer some thoughts and suggestions about working with each of them. Actually, more what I'd like to explore is ways that I have found helpful for meeting these experiences—opening to them, exploring them with mindfulness—so that they aren't something I'm battling with, trying to somehow get rid of them, but rather something I'm curious about. What is the experience of sense desire? How does it work in a human being?

Sense desire is a desire to have sense pleasure. Very natural, as Greg mentioned the other day. It's a natural movement. We all move in that direction, towards surrounding ourselves with things that feel comfortable, things that feel pleasant. Having comfortable things around us, having pleasant experiences, is not in itself particularly an issue. But what happens is that our mind begins to orient towards having to have things in a certain way, trying to construct our lives such that they're a string of pleasant moments, like we're stringing beads—pleasant moment after pleasant moment after pleasant moment. And if we miss and don't get a pleasant moment in there, we feel like we've done something wrong. We are driven by this desire, this urge to satisfy that wish for pleasant experience.

As Greg said the other day, this kind of pleasantness, this kind of having pleasant experience, it's a form of happiness, and the Buddha spoke about that. He said that kind of happiness isn't particularly a problem. But he did point to it as a lesser kind of happiness. The happiness of concentration, the happiness of understanding, the happiness of release, the happiness of equanimity, of being okay with things as they are—these are much deeper forms of happiness. And we do have to explore what it means to let go of this lesser happiness in order to move ourselves in the direction of this greater happiness.

So we are driven by this desire, this wish, this wanting to surround ourselves with pleasant experience. Again, it's not the pleasant experience that's inherently a problem, but this wish, the wanting to have it be a certain way. This is what we need to look at. The energy of desire kind of keeps us out of the present moment when we're not aware of it. When we're not present for desire as it's arising, we're believing it, buying into it.

We believe we have to fulfill desire. The story of desire is, "I need this thing, this experience, this state of mind, in order to be happy." That's the belief that stands behind desire. And when we're caught by a desire, when we're in that belief, it's like we do not see any other possibility than satisfying that desire.

So the first exploration around desire is to see if we can recognize that desire is happening, instead of buying into the belief of desire. That takes a little bit of a step back. One of the first explorations when we recognize that desire is happening is to see if we can perhaps take a step back from the thing we're desiring. When desire is running rampant, our attention is on the thing that we want—that cookie, that state of mind, that fantasy, that state of life. Our minds are kind of pulled out, thinking about how great it's going to be when that happens or when we get that thing. So our minds are projecting forward, not in the present moment, not aware of what's happening in the present moment, and not particularly aware of the experience of desire itself. Because the story of desire is putting us into the future where we would have that pleasant thing.

And so sometimes we think that desire feels good, because it's connected to the wanting of something pleasant. But if we take a step back, let go of putting the attention on the thing that we want, and feel into the experience of desire itself, we quickly see that desire itself actually doesn't feel good. It's an unpleasant state. As soon as desire springs up, there's a feeling of lack in our system. As soon as there's desire, there's a feeling that something's off, that it has to be fixed, it has to be changed, I need that thing. It really is this pattern around desire that has us believing that getting that thing is what's necessary. That's the story of desire.

Some of the process by which desire unfolds, some of the reason why this is such a potent force for us, is that when we get the thing that we want, when we act on that desire and we get the thing that we want, there's some measure of happiness that comes from having that thing, that state, that experience. Some measure of happiness comes from the having of the pleasant. And at the same time, there's a measure of happiness that comes from the relief of that unpleasant wanting. So we have both the release of an unpleasant and the getting of a pleasant—a very potent force in our minds.

Desire believes that it has to get the thing that it wants in order to have that release. Desire is not going to tell you that if you just let go of wanting that thing, if you just explore the experience of desire and see desire disappear, that release will bring a deeper kind of happiness than the having of that thing. That's what's quite amazing as we step back, as we see if we can let go of having our attention on the thing that we are wanting and step into the feeling of desire.

We feel into maybe the pull. Sometimes it feels like—if any of you are Star Trek fans—a tractor beam, you know, kind of the pull to something. That's sometimes the feeling of desire. It's like, "Ooh, need to have that thing." A cookie. It's like the feeling of the cookie is pulling. That feeling is kind of a feeling of being off. There can be a physical sense. We can come into the body and feel into the physicality of what it feels like to want something. There's a mind that feels constricted and tight around that particular thing that we need. And so we can explore that state itself. What does it feel like? What is that experience?

I have spent a lot of time on retreat watching this experience. Sometimes as I watch it, I commit myself to not follow through—not always, but sometimes I would pick something and say, "Okay, I'm not going to follow through on that. I'm just going to watch it." At one point I spent quite a bit of time watching the wanting to look at people, especially in walking meditation. People walk by, I really want to see who's walking by, but I just decided I was going to explore the wanting instead. That feeling of that pull to look at somebody, just watching that, not looking but feeling that pull. And then watching as that person walked up the stairs of the front door here and disappeared into the building—the wanting vanishes.

Seeing that wanting vanish in that moment was like being released from a vice grip, really giving me the understanding of just how potent and how actually painful wanting is. And that that wanting didn't need the satisfaction of knowing who that was in order to be released.

And so being curious about exploring wanting itself. Letting go of the thing that we want, stepping back, exploring the experience of wanting itself. Seeing if you can let go of thoughts around wanting that particular thing. Let go perhaps just means not putting so much attention in them. You may not be able to stop them, but see if you can connect with the experience, the understanding the Buddha was talking about—the experience of wanting.

In this exploration of meeting wanting, we need to have some discernment about when perhaps the wanting is stronger than our capacity to meet it with mindfulness. And then we need to learn some skillful means. This is true with all the hindrances.

There are times in exploring them where the power of the hindrance is stronger than our capacity for mindfulness. It's almost like the hindrance is this swamping wave and our mindfulness is this trickle of a stream. We need to recognize that.

Sometimes we might see that in trying to be with a particular desire, we just get pulled into it over and over again. Maybe that's not the time to try to be present with that. Maybe that's the time to step back, to use another strategy—such as coming to your anchor, perhaps consciously putting your attention on something else, learning some skillful means. And also recognizing if the allowing is turning into indulging.

If we are looking at a fantasy arising and thinking, "I'm just going to explore being with this fantasy and watching the desire," it's possible. We can do that. But we can also just get into the fantasy. So we need some honesty in this exploration. Are we really exploring being with it, or are we indulging it?

The hindrance of ill will has many similarities to how desire functions. Ill will has a range—many states of mind are in this terrain, from irritation, resistance, anger, frustration, annoyance, hatred, rage, resentment, to dislike. A real range of states in this hindrance. It's basically an aversion, a dislike of what's happening.

In this case, the story of aversion is that happiness depends on getting rid of this thing—either through some kind of lashing out, a movement of annihilation to get rid of something, or in the terrain of fear, getting myself out of the situation. Happiness will come if I get out of here. There are different flavors of this quality of ill will in our experience. Sometimes it has a quality of lashing out, sometimes a quality of withdrawing.

This pulls us away from the present moment when we're not aware of it, by being oriented around trying to fix, change, figure out how to get rid of things, figure out how to control something, figure out how to get myself out of a situation.

Very similarly to desire, as soon as ill will springs up, there's this feeling of necessity around following through on its energy. I need to control this thing, I need to fix it to change it in order to be happy. Whatever it is that we have that feeling of aversion about—maybe a pain in the body, maybe what somebody else is doing, maybe a sound, maybe a mind state, maybe just what's happening that feels like it's not right at this moment, that it should be something else—see if you can take the attention out of what you don't want or don't like, and put it into that energy of aversion itself. How does that feel? What is that experience? Again, perhaps feel it in the body. Does it feel like pushing away?

In my experience, the nature of aversion is to separate—whether that separation comes through getting rid of something, kind of annihilating it, or whether it comes through moving myself out of it. What is that state? What is this experience of wanting to separate?

Sometimes it feels like a contraction in the body, in the heart, around the heart—a closing down of the heart, a pressure. Sometimes it feels like heat and pressure pushing away, lashing out. Various flavors of what this experience feels like.

Often many thoughts come along with ill will—what somebody should have done, shouldn't have done, what I should have done, how I should have responded. See again if you can take your mind out of the thoughts and into the experience. What is the actual experience of aversion? The thoughts are often a kind of fuel.

And so if we're thinking about the thing we don't like, it's like our foot is on the gas pedal and we are revving up the emotion associated with those thoughts. We don't like something, and thinking about it—"I really hate that thing, that's just such an awful thing"—is going to increase the aversion and the ill will, the experience of ill will. And so, again, taking the attention out of the thoughts, away from the thing that we're averse to, and coming into the experience of aversion itself.

Now, aversion is an unpleasant experience, and sometimes we end up with aversion to aversion. Sometimes we may simply be able to recognize, "Oh yes, there's aversion, and I don't like it." That's what's happening. Sometimes it can be that simple. And sometimes it has a kind of snowball effect. We have aversion to something, and then we're angry at that aversion, and then we get afraid of our anger, and then we're frustrated by our fear—it's just this incredible piling of reactivity, a multiple hindrance attack around aversion. Hindrance of hindrance of hindrance of hindrance.

If it feels like, when you explore what it means to take up residence as the alien—what does it feel like to be a human being experiencing aversion?—and it feels like the aversion just runs out of control, sometimes I use this analogy of going down the rabbit hole. If that happens when you try to explore being present for aversion, that may not be the time to try to explore that. So again, there are strategies we can use to take our attention away from that and put it on something else.

One of my favorite approaches is this: when strong aversion arises and I recognize that right now is not the time to explore it—aversion is my favorite hindrance, one that I have spent a lot of time with—I would recognize it and bow to it. I'd say, "I see you, anger. And right now, you can stay in the room with me. You can walk next to me," because I was often walking. "I see you, and I'm not going to try to stop you, but right now

I'm going to put my attention in my feet." And I would just pay attention to that. It was a kind of turning to something neutral, without aversion, without resistance to that state, but also without repression. A kind of meeting it, bowing to it. Not now. And I'm going to put my attention on something else—in a very friendly way. "I see you, and you can hang out with me, but I'm going to put my attention someplace else." Just redirecting the attention to something neutral.

If it's a strong aversion attack, the breath may not be the best neutral experience, because often with strong aversion the breath is involved. Have you noticed, when there's a lot of difficult emotion, how the breath can be ragged, how the breath can be caught up in that emotion? And so picking something outside of this core area of the body as a place to ground—hands, hearing, feet on the ground—something neutral and something simple can be really helpful as a strategy.

Sometimes I also find it helpful to consciously broaden the container. If something is magnetizing the attention, especially something unpleasant like a pain in the body, where the mindfulness feels magnetized to it, then that experience becomes your whole world. You're embedded in that place, and that's all there is. So we use some reminder that we know that isn't all there is. While the attention is magnetized to that right now, there are also thousands of other things happening in the present moment. We consciously broaden the container. Maybe we open our eyes if we're in the hall and just recognize, "Yes, there's that difficult state, the aversion, there's the pain—and seeing is happening, and hearing is happening." Going through the sense doors: seeing is happening, hearing is happening, body senses. "Oh, there's the aversion again. Okay, that's happening. And seeing is happening." Just keeping stretching the container to help the mind recognize that it doesn't have to be stuck to that. This can be an action that begins to balance the mind if it's not possible to just meet and be with the aversion as it is.

This does take some honesty to recognize when we are overwhelmed, and to use that wisdom to shift to a skillful means, a skillful strategy to balance the mind.

The third of the hindrances is sloth and torpor. This is in the terrain of sleepiness, dullness, low energy, thick mind. Often the mind is not clear because of the low energy, because of dullness. And often the mind gets agitated around this state—something like believing or thinking, "I can't meditate if I'm dull or sleepy."

I have to fix this. I have to change this.

So what I'd like to explore here with you—how many of you have had the thought, "I'm too sleepy to meditate"? When you have that thought, if you're thinking it and you know you're thinking it, what I'd like to propose is this: if you can recognize that you're thinking that thought, you actually have enough energy to know the experience of sleepiness itself, or dullness itself—maybe just for a few moments. But you've already recognized sleepiness. You've already been aware of it. There's been a moment of noticing it, to have that thought. So this is a possibility I'd like to encourage.

Often sleepiness and dullness feel unpleasant in meditation, partly because we're resisting them. Sleepiness is usually this way—if we're resisting it, it feels really unpleasant. But if you decide to explore what the actual experience is, what's the human experience of sleepiness, that reporting back to the mothership, you'll find it's actually very pleasant.

There was one sitting where I finally realized there was just so much sleepiness that this was all I could do—just be mindful of the sleepiness. So I would feel into it. I was sitting up straight, and I encourage this when you're sleepy: find a posture in which if you fall asleep, it will wake you up. If you're sitting in a chair slumped back, it may not wake you up. So I was sitting up straight, and I would feel into it, and not resisting it, the body got very heavy, lots of pleasant sensations. And then the mind went into this lovely vibrating, pulsing, and then... that woke me up. So I sat up and did it all over again. It looked like this—nodding, dropping, waking. But the mindfulness was there for all but those dropping moments. It actually was a very present sitting.

And by the end of that sitting, I had recognized, I had seen it enough, I had watched that process of dropping enough, that I knew in the mind the moment before I was going to fall asleep. And instead of dropping, I just sat up a little straighter, which gave a little bit of energy. Then I'd relax and do it all over again. So then it ended up looking something like this—a gentle rising and settling. And again, quite a bit of mindfulness.

One thing that happens with dullness and sleepiness is that we often have some idea about what we want to be paying attention to. We want to be with our breath. We want to be noticing sound. We want that clarity where everything is sharp and delightful and we know every single moment of experience. Having fogginess or dullness in the mind is kind of like having a mirror coated by steam. The job of a mirror is to reflect experience, much as mindfulness reflects whatever is happening. The job of a mirror is to reflect what's in the room. And if we're standing in front of that mirror and there's fog on it, maybe we can kind of see our shape, our outline. We may feel like the mirror's not doing its job. But the mirror is doing its job perfectly. It's reflecting every drop of water on that mirror. It's just not doing the job we want it to do.

Very similarly with sleepiness and dullness. Often our resistance to these states is because when the mind is thick, when it's low energy, it's hard to direct the attention and pay attention to the breath. It's hard to notice other experience. But can you come in closer? Can you notice just the low energy, reflecting those drops of water on the mirror? That's what the mind is most naturally doing in that moment. And that's what I'd like to propose is possible for us when we think, "Oh, I'm too sleepy to be mindful, too sleepy to meditate." See if you can know the experience of sleepiness or dullness or thickness of mind, low energy.

These states of fogginess, of dullness, of sleepiness—they're kind of vague. There was a question this morning about vague experience, and exploring things like sleepiness and dullness begins to give us a sense of what it means to meet vague experience. Another way to explore this: if it's really foggy outside—there was some fog here the other day—and you're looking out at the fog, you're not going to be able to see the trees clearly, or maybe even at all if it's a really thick fog. But the fog is there. You can know the fog; we can know that. It's not precise. We can't point at it and say, "That's the fog."

It's more vague, more diffuse. This might be similar to the experience of hearing a kind of static noise in the background—you can't just point at it and say, "Oh, that's that noise." It's more of a diffuse sound. And then sometimes there are specific sounds like a cough or a sneeze. But that vague, diffuse sound, even the sound of the amplifier—it's a broader kind of sound. And so sleepiness and dullness are a more vague kind of experience. We know them, but we can't point at them and say, "That's what it is."

This exploration of recognizing vague states is a very helpful direction in our practice. There's a lot of experience that happens as our practice deepens and unfolds that's not very precise and not very specific. And if we are constantly wanting things to be precise and specific, we are going to miss huge areas of our experience. In my own practice, this exploration around low energy and dull mind has been a great learning ground for being with these broad or vague states of mind.

Restlessness is also a vague or broader state of body or mind. There can be both physical restlessness, which can be experienced as jumpiness in the body, almost like there are jumping beans under the skin—a state of agitation. And there's a mental side of it too, the experience of a mind that just feels like it's swirling or spinning, not particularly wanting to land anywhere, or just landing on one thing and then another and then another.

So again, we can open to what the experience of restlessness itself is. One exploration, much like with sleepiness, is broadening to the vaguer side of it rather than trying to pin it down and say, "What are all these sensations in the body?" Just let the aware-

ness get broad. Don't try to be so precise about knowing the restlessness. Don't try to know every little thing the mind is landing on. Just have a sense of the spinning energy or the experience of restlessness in the body. Just stepping back.

I sometimes have the feeling with restlessness of almost allowing the awareness to expand rather than feeling like I'm holding it in here. It feels like a pressure cooker with restlessness if we're trying to just observe inside the body. But if we allow the awareness to get as big as the room, or to expand into space, into the vastness—let the restlessness get as big as that. It can be a little scary to think about. But when the restlessness has more room, it's kind of like the analogy some people use of giving a wild horse a bigger pasture to run in rather than this tiny little pasture where it's running up against the fence every two steps. Give it a larger pasture. A sense of giving the mind space when there's restlessness.

It can also be helpful, if it's not so easy to be with the restlessness, to use some antidotes. Find some ways to work with it—sometimes a faster walk can be helpful, or opening the eyes, or getting into nature, feeling the breeze, just putting yourself in a different situation. Being outside can often support the mind when it's restless.

And then there's doubt, the fifth of the hindrances. Two nights ago, Greg talked about faith quite a bit, and doubt is kind of the flip side of faith. We have doubts in ourselves and our ability to do the practice. We have doubts in the teachings, doubts in the practice itself, doubts about the teachers.

The description of doubt in the suttas is one of wavering. The Buddha says doubt is kind of like being lost in a desert. You take a couple of steps this way and think, "That can't be right," and go back, take a couple of steps that way, "Oh, that can't be right." It's got that quality of wavering—a feeling of wavering. The mind can't decide what to do. It spins often in logical arguments about what we should do, or think about what would be the best thing to do. Sometimes doubt can sound very wise. "Oh, I should do this. Oh, this isn't a good thing to do right now."

In terms of familiarity with doubt—doubt often comes about, or we recognize it, because of the kinds of thoughts happening in our minds. It can manifest as thoughts about the practice: "I can't do this. What good is this? I should do another practice. What do these teachers know?"

"How does what the Buddha said 2,600 years ago have anything to do with my life now?" Those kinds of thoughts—if you find yourself thinking about the practice in ways that take you away from the practice, that may well be doubt. Sometimes practice thoughts arise and actually bring us into the present moment. But if thoughts about the

practice are things like "I can't do this" or "What good is this practice?" or perhaps "Maybe I should try this practice... no, not that one... maybe this one... no, maybe that one would be better"—if we find ourselves caught in that kind of thinking, it might be doubt.

Recognizing doubt is the most powerful tool we have with this hindrance, because doubt basically takes us pretty far from presence of mind. Often with the other hindrances, there's some measure of awareness involved. We know we're averse. We know that we want something. There's some measure of awareness possible even in sleepiness—"I know I'm too sleepy to meditate." But with doubt, we are often removed from even the possibility of awareness because we are so caught in the story. And so the recognition that doubt is happening is the biggest support for us.

When we can notice, "Oh yes, these are doubting thoughts," that's a first step. What I've found helpful next is not just to recognize that doubt is happening—which can be very helpful in itself. Sometimes when doubt is seen, it simply goes away. Sometimes that's all that's needed: turning the light of awareness and mindfulness onto doubt, and it withers in that clarity.

But sometimes doubt is related to deeper questions, deeper feelings of worthiness. I've had doubt related to feelings of vulnerability, feelings of inadequacy, feelings of failure, fear of failure, fear of the unknown—different emotional tones underneath thoughts like "I can't do this" or "I'm a failure" or "What do the teachers know?" So when I recognize those thoughts, it's like, "Okay, doubt is happening. What does doubt feel like?" Sometimes doubt feels like grief. Sometimes doubt feels like fear. And when we can be present for that, we're back. We're mindful again. We can explore what it means to be present with grief, what it means to be present with fear.

Mostly I hope this exploration of the hindrances has given you some interest and curiosity about investigating these states of mind. When the hindrances are arising, they are our path. Meeting them, being with them, opening to what's there—wisdom can grow, can arise.

I used to believe that being mindful of the hindrances was second-class practice, that the real practice would begin when I was completely free of hindrances. At one point, on one long retreat, I was looking at self-hatred quite a bit. I call it my self-hatred retreat. It was a three-month course, and I spent a lot of time with self-hatred. At first there was this feeling of it being a lesser practice. But at some point I thought, "Okay, well, I guess this is my self-hatred retreat." There was a little bit of surrendering to it—still some judgment, but at least I started to be more interested in investigating it, more curious about it, willing to witness it.

I learned so much during that retreat about the conditions that put it together, the beliefs that were operating in the mind. And then at one moment, during a late-night sitting, just watching very rapid little flits of self-hatred coming up in the mind, simply noticing them—

Oh, there it is. And I was using a practice that Joseph had suggested. As soon as I noticed it, I would recognize it and know: contact, unpleasant. Contact, unpleasant. I was just recognizing the very moment of the arising of self-hatred.

Watching that, in one moment the mind saw the arising and recognized in that moment very clearly—not as a reflection but seeing in the moment—this is just a thought. It has no basis in anything. It's constructed in the mind. It is a construct.

And in that moment, seeing that self-hatred was a construct, the mind flipped from self-hatred to bliss. For a split second, the mind went to, "Oh, I'll never feel self-hatred again." And then there was a recognition: no, actually that moment of understanding was that moment's understanding. And so the mind moved into more of a balance, into equanimity after that.

That moment of understanding didn't get rid of the self-hatred forever. But it was a deep understanding into the nature of self-hatred as a belief in the mind. And that belief was undermined very deeply in that moment. Not only seeing something about how self-hatred works, but how belief works, how the mind congeals a sense of self around it—right in the midst of watching self-hatred, there was very deep understanding of anicca, impermanence; dukkha, suffering; and anatta, not-self.

That moment was important for me because I realized: it doesn't have to be that the self-hatred is gone for the practice to really have deepening, for there to be deep understanding.

And so these hindrances are the path when they're arising. It's not lesser practice. So much of our minds are caught by these kinds of states in our lives. And learning skills to be curious about them will serve you not only here, but in your life.

So let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 121

Crossing The Flood

Andrea Fella · 1h02

In this richly layered dharma talk, Andrea Fella unpacks two of the Buddha's most evocative water analogies: the simile of the raft and the crossing of the flood. Drawing from the Alagaddūpama Sutta (MN 22) and the Ogha-taraṇa Sutta (SN 1.1), she explores how these images illuminate our spiritual journey from the dangerous near shore of identification to the far shore of Nibbāna—defined simply as the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion.

Fella examines each element of the raft analogy with care: the near shore represents our clinging to identities and strategies we believe keep us safe; the flood symbolizes the four āsavas (sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance) that keep us submerged in dukkha; and the raft itself is constructed from our present-moment experience bound together by the Noble Eightfold Path. She emphasizes that crossing the flood means getting wet—we don't transcend suffering but rather meet it directly, allowing wisdom to grow through contact with dukkha.

The talk offers profound practical guidance on effort in meditation, using the image of a kick scooter to illustrate how we build momentum through light, frequent touches of attention rather than exhausting bursts of willpower. Fella also explores the paradox from the Ogha-taraṇa Sutta: the Buddha crossed by "neither tarrying nor hurrying"—meeting each moment fully without grasping or rushing past. This teaching invites practitioners to honor every moment of experience while recognizing its passing nature, trusting that even when progress seems invisible, each moment of mindful attention contributes to eventual liberation.

The Buddha is said to have been an extremely skillful teacher. The other day, I mentioned how he was tracking someone during their meditation and could give them just the right instruction at just the right moment—a kind of example of that understanding of the Buddha as such a skilled teacher.

One of the ways I think this manifests for us at least—since we don't have the luxury of being able to stumble into the Buddha in a potter's shed—is in exploring the teachings he offered. He often used analogies for deepening someone's understanding of the teachings. Analogies are useful because they can provide something familiar from our lives that, as it's connected with the teachings, that sense of experience becomes something we can recollect, and the teachings come alive for us through that example.

The Buddha was really a master of analogies. As I reflect on his teachings and explore the analogies in some depth, I find more and more layers that can help us unpack some of his wisdom. Tonight I'd like to take a couple of analogies and explore them with you—to unpack them and look at all the different pieces and how the teachings relate to those pieces, and what we can learn as we reflect.

The two analogies I'd like to explore cover similar terrain. The Buddha actually often used analogies about water in his teachings. In this particular case, he used the analogy of a flood or a large expanse of water, and the idea of crossing that flood as being what our journey is—crossing a flood of greed, aversion, and delusion.

In one of these flood analogies, the Buddha equates this large expanse of water with what he calls the four floods: the flood of sensuality, the flood of existence or becoming, the flood of views, and the flood of ignorance. My understanding of why they're called floods is because they keep us submerged in dukkha. They keep pulling us back to our habitual ways of orienting in the world, making it challenging for us to cross to freedom. This understanding that we have to cross this terrain is what these analogies point to.

The Buddha pointed to these four aspects as being the floods, but in a simpler way—and for me it's meaningful to think of this expanse of water we're trying to cross as really the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion. These are very familiar forces of mind that make it really hard for us to navigate our lives with ease. We keep getting caught by them, stuck by them, pulled into eddies, pulled into whirlpools, swept downstream by these states of mind. There can even be that sense of being swept away as one of these sticky states captures us, being pulled by a current. This imagery of the flood has some connection to what happens in our minds, being swept away by greed, aversion, and delusion.

The first of these two similes is a very famous one—many of you have probably heard of the simile of the raft. I'd like to look at each piece of this simile because as I began exploring it again, it really began speaking to me in different ways.

"Suppose someone in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water whose near shore was dangerous and fearful, and whose further shore was safe and free from fear. But there was no ferry boat or bridge for going to the far shore."

This sets the stage for our analogy. Looking at these various pieces, there's the near shore, which is dangerous and fearful. In another sutta that uses very similar imagery, the Buddha says the near shore is how we identify. It's these identities that we connect to, that we hook to, that we get stuck to.

Identities are often strategies for us, familiar ways of navigating our lives, navigating what's challenging. We have familiar habitual strategies that have been conditioned for us, that at times—in many ways as we grew up—helped us to navigate challenging situations. Yet even though they may have been helpful during our lives, they have an inherent suffering to them. There's an inherent kind of what the Buddha calls danger on this near shore of identity, of identification. We try to make ourselves feel stable and secure through identities. "I'm the kind of person who..."—that landing in an identity is often a way of finding safety or security. We think it feels safe and secure, but actually it's anything but.

As we cling to identities—and we can cling to different kinds—I've certainly seen myself cling to identities such as self-hatred. In seeing it and seeing how I'm clinging to it, I think, why on earth do I cling to this? But that kind of identity, which we do cling to—those kinds of identities of "you're no good, you're a failure"—they're inherently suffering. We know the suffering of those immediately when they come. As to why we cling to them, the mind thinks it's getting something out of it. That's a whole talk in and of itself, but look in your own mind. There are often beliefs in there. For me, in a way, that self-hatred was a way to make myself do the right thing—like if I hated myself enough, I would behave properly. So sad to see that in our own minds. And then there are other kinds of identities we hold to, identities of being someone who knows what they're doing, someone who...

does certain things in a certain way. Often with those kinds of identities, we are invested in making sure that other people see us that way too—that others hold that same identity of us. We spend time trying to convince people: "No, that's who I am, that's me, that's who I am." It's an endless project, trying to make sure others see us through that identity. And we suffer when they don't.

So this is the near shore the Buddha points to—this sense of self, the identities, the congealings of ourselves.

And then there's the expanse of water. In this analogy we have the near shore which is dangerous, and the expanse of water where there's no bridge, no ferry boat to cross it. But the far shore, we know, is safe and free from fear. We'd like to try to get across this expanse of water.

In this analogy, the expanse of water is the flood—the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion. As I reflected this evening about this analogy of the near shore being identity, and the flood being what's difficult to cross, what keeps us from reaching the place of safety, I contemplated these four floods: of sensuality, of existence or becoming, of views, and of ignorance. These are the activities of mind, the patterns of mind, the

habits of mind we could say, that make it difficult to let go of these strategies of identities. They keep sweeping us back. The views that we have, the beliefs, the ignorance—they keep sweeping us back, thinking, "Oh, these identities are how I feel safe."

The strategies of identities are hard to let go of because of views, because of ignorance, because we're drawn to sense pleasure. These make it hard for us to realize the possibility of release from the perspective of identification.

The far shore in this analogy the Buddha equates with freedom, with Nibbāna. The most succinct definition of Nibbāna that I have heard through the teachings of the Buddha is the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. It's a letting go of greed, aversion, and delusion that is the ultimate safety.

In this analogy, the far shore seems like a place or something. But the definition of freedom in the Buddha's teachings is freedom *from*. Freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, freedom from delusion. It's not having anything.

I like this for a couple of reasons. One is that greed, aversion, and delusion are things we have a handle on. We know what they're like. Through our meditation, we begin to really touch into these qualities. The fact that the Buddha defines freedom as the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion makes it seem like something that might be possible in this very life.

Every now and then I've had a taste, perhaps, of a mind that lets go of greed, and that's a pointing to this possibility. When I first started practicing and heard this idea of enlightenment—or even before I started practicing, when I was in my twenties—I heard about enlightenment and had some idea of it being some transcendent thing that you have to get to or attain or have. But this teaching about Nibbāna being the release of greed, aversion, and delusion makes it seem like something possible in this very life. And in fact, that is what the Buddha says: Nibbāna can be touched, freedom in this very life.

I can imagine, perhaps, what it might be to walk around in my daily life—I can kind of imagine, I can't really imagine—but it doesn't seem too far-fetched to me that I could walk around in my daily life and interact with my family and friends in that place of freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion. Whereas whatever this idea of mind-blowing enlightenment was, that wasn't anything related to being connected with my friends and family. At least that was the case for me. This really brings the teaching of freedom into the realm of possibility. It's inspiring for me. It brings it into the possibility of living freely.

So the next part of the analogy. This person, seeing this expanse of water—the near shore dangerous, the far shore safe—thought: "There is this great expanse of water whose near shore is dangerous and fearful and whose further shore is safe and free from fear. But there's no ferry boat or bridge for going to that far shore. Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore."

And so the person collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with hands and feet, they got safely across to the far shore.

This is the raft, the piece of the analogy that's the raft. This whole talk was really inspired by a reflection from Ajahn Sumedho about this raft. In one of his essays he wrote: "The Buddha referred to his teaching as a raft, which you can make out of the things around you—the grass, the twigs, the leaves. You don't have to have a special motorboat or submarine or luxury liner. A raft is something you make from the things around just to get to the other shore. We're not trying to make a super-duper vehicle. We're just able to use what's around us for enlightenment."

I like this reflection. What's around us? On the near shore it's twigs and leaves and grass, but here, what's around us? Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, things happening in the mind. That's part of what we build the raft out of—our present moment experience. That's what's available. That is our raft: our present moment experience, our sense experience. We also build the raft out of the teachings.

The Buddha, in his own exploration of this analogy, said that the raft is the Noble Eightfold Path. I think of that as being the binding that holds the grass, the leaves, the twigs together—maybe the twine or the mud that cakes it all together to make it into something that can float across the river.

And then we think about being on that raft, in the swirls and eddies of this vast expanse of water. It's a raft. It might be falling apart as we're going across. We are definitely getting wet. We are in contact with the flood. We are touching the flood. We are touching all of that greed, aversion, and delusion, with the Eightfold Path keeping us afloat. But we are getting wet.

It's not a mistake. It's not a mistake when in our practice we turn to our experience—our sights, our sounds, our smells, our tastes, our touches, the things going on in our minds—and we notice this hurts, this is unpleasant, this is painful. The mind of aversion, the mind of greed—it's not a mistake. It's meeting the flood. We're right on that raft.

We don't cross the flood by magically transcending it, as if we've built a hovercraft to float across, fly across above the flood. We are in touch with the flood. And so we meet dukkha.

The other day, Alexis in his talk said that it's not a mistake that we meet the dukkha. In fact, the purpose of meeting the dukkha is that wisdom grows; understanding happens as we contact the dukkha. He mentioned Joseph's famous quote: we'd like to have insight into dukkha without experiencing dukkha. But it doesn't happen that way. The contact with the dukkha is where the wisdom grows, as we're contacting it with the Eightfold Path as our support.

With the path, with the support of wise view, of wise intention, of understanding the perspective we bring to practice—which we've been talking about, particularly with the hindrances—we understand that if we are bringing mindfulness to a hindrance, if anger is arising and we are knowing anger in the present moment with mindfulness, it's not functioning as a hindrance. It's functioning as our path. When we're lost in anger, the Eightfold Path isn't supporting us. But when we bring wise understanding, wise intention, ethical conduct, wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration to whatever's arising—maybe it's as simple as sights and sounds, but maybe it's a hindrance attack—when we're bringing that perspective, we are crossing the flood. And yet we're getting wet.

Then the sutta mentions making effort with hands and feet: "Supported by the raft and making an effort with the hands and feet, they got safely across to the far shore." This speaks to the reality that we don't just get on a raft and hope for the best. We know basically the direction of the far shore, though in the midst of that vast expanse of water we may not quite know where it is. We have to have other guides. We may use the feeling of the moisture in the air as a guide, or we may use the stars to help guide us toward the far shore.

In our practice, we use wise view and wise intention—this perspective of recognizing what's wholesome and what's unwholesome. Essentially, we explore cultivating the wholesome and letting go of the unwholesome, or being aware of the unwholesome. When something unwholesome is arising and we bring awareness to it, it's like it turns us back toward the far shore, back in the direction of crossing the flood. Because that

unwholesome state of mind is no longer driving the mind or running the show. Instead, wise mindfulness, wise effort, and wise concentration allow us to meet it and learn something about that challenge, that difficulty—heading us toward freedom through the growth and development of wisdom and understanding.

Thinking again about this analogy, about making effort with hands and feet, about the way a vast expanse of water or a flood works: sometimes in crossing a river or going across a body of water, the conditions may be the wind in your face or the current going against you, and you have to work. You have to really paddle. You have to work hard with your hands and feet to keep the raft going in the right direction. Sometimes it feels like—as the Red Queen says in Alice Through the Looking Glass—"it takes all the running you can do to stay in one place here." Sometimes it feels like that, like we are working really hard and not making a lot of headway.

And yet, no amount of effort, when it's connected with this perspective of wise view, is wasted.

There's an analogy that my colleague Gil Fronsdal uses around this sense that you're not getting anywhere sometimes. He uses the analogy of chopping a big piece of wood. You have this big piece of wood and you take a hatchet and you come down on the piece of wood with that hatchet—pretty unlikely that piece of wood is going to split the first time. So you keep trying, keep making that hatchet movement. And at some point, as you do that, you bring the hatchet down and the log splits.

I know that when I did this—I really loved splitting logs when I was a teenager. Whenever we went camping, I would ask to do that. I just loved that feeling of hitting the log and feeling it split. And I always thought it was just that I hit it right that time. But Gil points out that each time you hit that log, it's weakening the fibers inside. You don't see it from the outside. You don't see that weakening happening. And then at some point you hit it and there's been enough weakening and the log splits. Every single moment before, when you hit that log and nothing seemed to happen, contributed to the possibility that it split the last time.

It can be like that with our practice. We look for progress. We look for how we know that we're doing okay. We look for those log-splitting moments. But so much of our practice has this gradual nature—this gentle wearing away, gentle weakening of greed, aversion, and delusion. And then sometimes there's a moment where we see aversion just drop away, or we see, as I mentioned the other day, the arising of the thought of self-hatred and knowing: this is just a thought. This is the mind thinking this thought and believing it. It has no reality other than what the mind is constructing. Seeing that in that moment was like that log falling apart. But I'd spent weeks watching self-hatred,

feeling the pain of it, feeling the struggle of it, understanding little bits and pieces of it. All of those moments contributed to that moment of really understanding how self-hatred is simply a construct in the mind—a thought being believed.

This is a lot of our work. We really just have to keep a steady kind of effort even in the face of it seeming like we're making no progress. In that way, this touches into faith and trust. If we are meeting our experience with mindfulness and wise effort and concentration, if we're able to stay with our experience, whatever is unfolding is heading us in the right direction. So it does take some trust at times—the confidence to not keep checking. Not thinking, "I've been mindful for three minutes, have I understood something yet?" Rather, just patience. A lot of patience with that process of wisdom developing.

Sometimes I've seen wisdom kind of developing and presenting itself after the fact—like recognizing that a pattern, a very strong pattern of anger, had disappeared. I had been watching this pattern of anger over the course of weeks, maybe even months, maybe even years. That was a long time. And just seeing this anger come, recognizing how hard it was to be with that anger. "I need to just be with my feet right now." Setting it aside over and over again, setting aside the anger. And then beginning to recognize over the course of those months that the anger started happening less often. It was getting weaker. It was clear to me because it wasn't happening so much.

And then one day I noticed it hadn't happened for a really long time. In thinking about it, I thought, "Wow, I haven't experienced that anger for a long time." In that moment of realizing this, of course the person—it was a particular person I was angry with—that person came to my mind. But I could not even call up the anger. I couldn't find it anywhere. I didn't believe it. I thought, "It's got to be there somewhere. It's got to be there somewhere." It had disappeared without my knowing when it disappeared. I understood in retrospect that it had released.

So sometimes we don't even get to see the release. We just get to experience the benefits of it sometime later.

So there are very different ways that wisdom grows as we meet the flood. We make the effort to just stay present. Sometimes when we're crossing a stream, or we've got the wind at our back, it's kind of smooth sailing. It may be that there's just a little bit of directing we need to do—making sure we're not getting caught on that rock or that branch—but only a little steering is necessary. So sometimes in our practice, the effort can be lighter.

There's an analogy I sometimes like to explore around making effort in our practice. We have a habit, I think, of making effort in our practice in the way that we tend to make effort in our lives. If we have to do something really hard, we gather all our strength and apply it right at the beginning. Sometimes we may have that sense of sitting down in our meditation, thinking, "I'm going to sit here for 45 minutes, and I'm going to stay present for the whole 45 minutes." It's like we pick up the entire 45 minutes in that first second and try to gather the effort we need to stay present for the whole time. But it doesn't work that way. We can be present for a moment, and then we can do it again, and again, and again.

The analogy I like to explore for this is that of riding on one of those little kick scooters that kids ride on—Razor scooters, I think they're called. You have one foot on the scooter bed and the other foot you use to tap the ground to get the momentum going. You could, at the beginning, make one really gigantic push, but it's probably going to be pretty wobbly if you do that. It's not going to lead to stability. So it's much more skillful to just do these little taps—tap, tap, tap, tap—let the scooter gain some momentum. Then, after there's some momentum, you can just ride the scooter. You get the feeling of that scooter riding, and you get familiar with when it starts to feel a little wobbly. Then you put your foot down and tap again.

Applying effort in the practice is more like that. At the beginning, we connect frequently. If you're practicing with the breath, every half breath: Can I be with this half breath? Just enough effort to be with half a breath. And then another half a breath. Just enough effort—that much. Right now, be with an in-breath. How hard is that? And now an out-breath. Just enough. That's all you need. And we just keep that tap, tap, tap going.

As we make enough effort to stay with an in-breath—or if you're doing another kind of practice, open awareness practice, it may be just enough effort to be with this experience, asking, "Am I aware of what? And now, am I aware of what?"—just connecting moment after moment. Light touch, just enough to be with this moment of experience. As we explore that light touch of being present, a momentum of mindfulness starts to build. We can get familiar with that experience of what it feels like to ride that wave of mindfulness.

At that point, we don't have to keep tapping. We don't have to keep reminding ourselves every single breath. Perhaps we can just sit here and be with four or five breaths without really much effort at all. We get familiar with when it feels like the mindfulness is getting a little soft or mushy, and then we bring in another connection, really connect—just like tapping the scooter.

So this is how we can explore this light touch of effort. It's a light touch, but there's a commitment to it. It's not commitment like bearing-down commitment. It's commitment to keep going. In the walking meditation, we can do this too. There have been times when my mind is really scattered in the walking meditation, and I'll pick a spot like two feet out on my walking path.

Find a little stone or a little leaf there, and I'll think, okay, can I make it to that? It's like two feet—a step, two steps. Can I be mindful for two steps? Yeah, I could do that. Okay, now pick another spot. That spot on the sidewalk—can I be mindful until I get there? It's like hand over hand, gently, gently pulling yourself along in the mindfulness. Just enough effort to be present, ride that wave of mindfulness, and then do it again and again.

And then sometimes we have the wind at our back on this stream, on this raft, and the current is heading us right in the right direction. All we need to do is just let go and let the current carry us. Sometimes in our practice, mindfulness and wisdom are strong enough that it doesn't require a personal effort. We don't need to remind ourselves to be mindful—it's just happening. And if that's happening, then making that effort is actually getting in the way of the unfolding of wisdom and mindfulness.

There are so many different ways of making effort, and the conditions require us to make different kinds of effort at different times. As we're crossing a flood, we're not always going to have the wind at our back, and we're not always going to be able to just flow with ease. Sometimes there may be moments where we can flow with ease, and then conditions shift—there's an eddy, a whirlpool—and we have to work to get through that.

I think there can be a sense sometimes with effort in the practice that it functions something like effort in our normal lives—that when we've learned how to do something, like ride a bicycle, we don't forget, and we can just do it. We don't run into the same problems we did when we first learned. But with practice, the conditions are so varied. We may have stretches of time where the flow seems very natural and easy, and it's like, "This seems so easy—how can I not just do this all the time? It's so obvious! It's so obvious that something arising is just something arising. And anger's not a problem; it's just a fleeting thing and it vanishes as soon as it's seen. How can I not see this all the time? Of course I understand this now." We think we've figured it out.

And then conditions change, and we discover that actually maybe it's not so obvious. Conditions change and we're caught again. So the level of effort that we make doesn't progress from making a lot of effort, to making a little less effort, to just riding the wave of mindfulness and wisdom. It doesn't tend to just head in that direction. Sometimes it's

very simple, and sometimes we really have to apply ourselves—to not get pulled under, not get pulled into the whirlpools, to not go down the rabbit hole, to not get sucked under the waves. Sometimes we really have to make effort. Recognizing the conditions—we've talked about this over the course of these weeks—we've talked about skillful means for meeting challenge, when there's an overwhelming state of mind or something where we really have to take some care to be with it.

The second analogy I'll read as well. This is a different crossing-the-flood analogy. This one for me just had a real resonance as I touched into the language.

The Buddha was meditating in a grove, and a deva, a heavenly being, came to him and asked, "How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?" The Buddha responded, "By not halting, friend, and by not straining, I crossed the flood." "But how is it, dear sir, that by not halting and by not straining, you crossed the flood?" The Buddha responded, "When I came to a standstill, friend, then I sank. But when I struggled, then I got swept away. It is in this way, friend, that by not halting and by not straining, I crossed the flood."

The commentaries point out that this image of neither tarrying nor hurrying—that's the translation I particularly resonated with, the one that kept coming back to me in my mind. Here Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as "by not halting and not straining." For me, "not tarrying and not hurrying"—by not tarrying and not hurrying I crossed the flood.

The commentaries say that this is meant to be a little bit paradoxical, because typically if you're crossing a stream with rocks in it, you find a foothold, you pause there, you get your balance, and you search for the next foothold. You go to the next one, so you kind of halt and then you move, halt and then search and then move. The commentaries say this is supposed to jar the mind a little bit—oh, it's not the way I would think about crossing a flood or crossing a stream. It's different. It's got a different quality to it, by neither tarrying nor hurrying.

One of the pieces that I'm inspired by in this particular analogy is that the Buddha says—

When I came to a standstill, I sank. And when I struggled, I got swept away. So basically, the Buddha struggled. He sank. He got swept away. He had to experiment. He learned through his own practice how to cross the flood. He made mistakes—he tarried and he sank, he hurried and he got swept away. The Buddha had to experiment. He tried different things, noticed what was helpful, noticed what was not helpful. We need to do this in our own practice: understand what's helpful and what's not helpful.

For me, this image of neither tarrying nor hurrying is one of meeting every moment of experience. That's the visceral feeling it gives. Neither tarrying with the moment—think about this flood as just the stream of moments. Neither tarry with the moment, holding on to it, trying to keep it or understand it or fix it or change it, nor do we hurry past it trying to get to the next moment. Each and every moment receives its full due, its full honoring, whatever it is. And then we realize that that moment is passing, and we meet the next moment. Moment after moment, really meeting every moment.

Sometimes I would use that language in my mind when I found myself in a struggle, or during a period of time where I felt I needed some inspiration. I would use this language: neither tarrying nor hurrying, neither tarrying nor hurrying, meet each moment. It helped me to just settle and connect. Connect with this. Not connect and hold and try to keep it. Sometimes I find with certain kinds of experiences it's like we hold on to them in order to look at them, rather than recognizing they're already changing as we're looking at them.

It's like a handful of sand. We can hold on to a handful of sand and try to understand a handful of sand in that way, and there's some things we can learn about it that way. And we can also relax our hands and just feel the sand slipping through our fingers and learn something different about the sand in that way. Neither tarrying nor hurrying, meeting each moment.

At the end of the simile of the raft, the Buddha says: "When this person got across and arrived at the far shore, they might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me since, supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder and then go wherever I want.'" The Buddha asks, "Now, do you think that person is doing what should be done with the raft?" And his disciples said no.

The Buddha went on: "When that person got to the far shore, if they thought thus: 'This raft has been helpful to me since, supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to haul it onto dry land or set it adrift in the water and then go wherever I want'—it is by doing that that the person would be doing what should be done with the raft. So I have shown you how the Dharma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping. When you know the Dharma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings—how much more so things contrary to the teachings."

This is an interesting piece: abandon the teachings. The Buddha is pointing out in this part of the analogy that the raft is abandoned when one has reached the far shore. We can't let go of the teachings, we can't let go of the practices too soon. If you try to let go of the raft in the middle of the expanse of water, you'll be drowned. We need to use the raft, we need to use the teachings to navigate the flood.

And sometimes we do have this sense of realizing that we're kind of holding on to mindfulness, or holding on to being a meditator, having that identity of being a meditator. In my very first ten-day meditation retreat, it was pretty clear to me that I was constructing an identity as a meditator. I was like, "Yeah, I'm going to be a meditator and I'm going to be good at this. I'm going to try to really do this." There was a construction of identity, and I did recognize that this was something new. And I did hear the teachings that said clinging to identities is suffering.

And yet, somewhat to my credit, I decided and realized that this seemed like a useful identity. I don't think I'll let go of this one just yet.

And indeed, this is partly how our practice can unfold. In some ways, we hold to the teachings. We may even cling to them, holding on for dear life to mindfulness and wise effort. If we're holding on for dear life to mindfulness and wise effort while being battered by greed, aversion, and delusion, that holding to the wholesome qualities of mindfulness and effort—yes, there's some suffering there, but it is helping us let go of a much greater suffering.

This is how much of our practice unfolds. It happens in stages over time. We meet great challenges, the grosser and more obvious forms of greed, aversion, and delusion, by perhaps clinging to mindfulness. Maybe craving being a meditator. Maybe that happens. Helping us to let go of a more unskillful state, we construct another identity.

At some point, however, as those more obvious forms of suffering begin to fall away, our mind begins to get attuned to subtler forms of suffering—including the suffering of clinging to mindfulness. In my example of having that identity of being a meditator, I wasn't in that first retreat, or even the first few years of retreat, suffering over that identity. I was suffering with anger and suffering with self-hatred. That connection to the identity of being a meditator was helping those to weaken. And then, as those patterns began to weaken, yes, I had to look at the suffering of that identity. Oh yes, I want to be the best meditator in the room. Oh, it's so painful to be comparing myself to everybody—comparing myself to my best friend who's on retreat looking so concentrated. Her mind is so concentrated, and look at mine, all over the place. I'm never going to be as concentrated as she is. All of that identity of being a meditator being felt at that point.

When we feel the suffering—I sometimes say, let suffering be your guide. When you feel the suffering of a clinging, when we feel the suffering of holding to mindfulness, feel the suffering of wanting to understand something, that's when we begin to explore the suffering of it. Not to let go and say, "Oh, I should stop being mindful now," but to explore the tightness, explore the suffering of that. That's our path. We meet the suffering; that's the flood at that point. We don't let go of the raft before we're across the flood.

And yet the Buddha says that we let go of the teachings. My understanding of that, based on my readings and study and a little bit of my own experience, is that the more greed, aversion, and delusion fall away, the more the mind naturally gravitates towards living with wise view and wise understanding, with ethical conduct, with wise mindfulness. The effort becomes less necessary to exert. There's even one sutta that describes someone who is fully awakened as being someone who just lives the Eightfold Path. It's not necessary to hold it. It's not necessary to think about it. It is the natural manifestation of someone for whom greed, aversion, and delusion have fallen away. And so there's no need to hold to the teachings. They're being lived.

CHAPTER 122

Compassion Practice

Andrea Fella · 44 min

> *In this guided meditation session, Andrea Fella introduces the brahmavihāra of compassion (karuṇā), describing it as a flavor of mettā that naturally arises when the open heart encounters suffering. She explains that compassion has an active quality—a momentum toward alleviating suffering—while remaining free from aversion, fear, or confusion. The traditional Pāli phrase "dukkha muccantu" (may you be free from suffering) serves as the foundation for the practice.*
>
> *Andrea skillfully addresses the near and far enemies of compassion: pity, which maintains a subtle separation from those who suffer, and cruelty, which wishes harm upon those perceived as causing suffering. She emphasizes that our mindfulness practice itself cultivates compassion, as we continuously meet our own suffering—the hindrances, fears, and aversions—with an open, non-resisting heart. This reveals how wisdom and compassion are deeply interwoven.*
>
> *The guided practice begins with self-compassion, inviting practitioners to receive compassion from loved ones before expanding outward. Andrea offers an alternative phrase—"may you be at ease with these conditions"—which brings wisdom into the practice by acknowledging the conditioned nature of suffering. The meditation gradually expands from self to near ones, to all beings in the room, and ultimately to all beings everywhere, while remembering that the practitioner remains at the center of this field of compassion.*

This evening during this period we will explore the brahmavihara of compassion.

The quality of metta, that open-hearted connection with other beings as well as with ourselves, has the feeling of connection and non-constriction—at least to me, those are some of the qualities of metta. When that open heart, that unconstricted heart, meets suffering, the natural response is compassion. And so we can say that compassion is a flavor of metta—the flavor of that open heart when suffering is present, whether our own suffering or the suffering of others.

Some describe the feeling of compassion as the quivering of the heart in response to suffering. And that quivering, to me, points to one of the qualities of compassion: it is very active. It wants to do something. It has this momentum or direction of the heart to alleviate suffering. So it is not a passive state of heart and mind; it is quite active. That

wish, that movement of the heart to alleviate suffering, is not tied up with aversion or fear or confusion or desire. It is the simple heart that wishes for beings to not suffer and to participate in supporting that direction.

The proximate cause, one of the conditions that supports the arising of compassion, is seeing the helpless state of someone in distress. Perhaps you can evoke this quality for yourself. Just imagine a child that you know, one perhaps closer to you or perhaps not, but one for whom you feel some affection. Envision yourself going into their room one evening and seeing them sobbing. You ask them why they are sobbing, and they respond that the spider in Charlotte's Web has just died in the book. From the perspective of wisdom, from a perspective of age and experience, you can understand both the conditioned nature of that distress and also feel the heartbreak of it—without aversion, without pity, and without a feeling of lashing out. That is the kind of quality of this heart of compassion.

It connects to suffering. It does not resist connecting to suffering. Our work in compassion practice is to explore that connection with suffering and to recognize that the practice of compassion involves watching the heart that has some struggle in that connection—the heart that says no, that insists it is not okay for that to be happening. We also watch the heart that disconnects a little bit, that feels a kind of pity instead of really connecting. Pity is one of the near enemies of compassion. It is in the neighborhood of compassion, but it has a separation to it. It is kind of an "oh, poor you" with a little bit of "doesn't involve me" in the background. So there is a separation there.

The other side, the far enemy of compassion, is cruelty—the wish to lash out, to harm. Perhaps in the context of seeing someone suffering, it is the wish to lash out and harm the person or situation we see as responsible for that suffering.

In the exploration of compassion we will feel both of these energies. This is how our practice unfolds. We do not expect to find our way to the perfect balance of wisdom and love immediately. We head in that direction by seeing where we get caught, opening to that, opening to the feeling of pity with some measure of compassion for ourselves, opening to the feeling of cruelty with some measure of compassion for ourselves.

Actually, I think of our mindfulness practice—at least a significant chunk of it—as, in a way, a cultivation of compassion through the avenue of wisdom and mindfulness. Because so much of what we meet in our mindfulness practice is our own suffering. We are exploring what it means to meet those hindrances, those fears and confusions and desires and aversions. What does it mean to meet those with a heart that is not pushing them away and not holding on? In this way we can see that wisdom and compassion are interwoven. The heart of wisdom, as it meets suffering, naturally responds with

compassion. And so the practice of mindfulness strengthens this openness of heart, and the practice of compassion can strengthen this quality of wisdom—the capacity to explore meeting suffering without constriction.

We explore compassion from many directions on this retreat. Tonight we will explore a little bit of the formal compassion practice. It has a form similar to the metta practice, where we call up or imagine a being or beings, including ourselves at times, and offer the wish of compassion, much as we offer the wishes of metta.

The compassion practice typically uses a very simple wish. The traditional phrase, or the translation of the traditional phrase, is "May you be free from suffering"—*dukkha muchantu* in the Pali. May you be free from suffering. This is the phrase we express in our hearts as the intention, the wish, as we call to mind beings and consciously orient to the ways in which those beings may be struggling.

Since compassion is a response to meeting suffering, part of this practice is actively calling up ways in which we are suffering, ways in which our families and friends are suffering, and exploring meeting that suffering with an open heart, expressing the wish: May you be free from this suffering.

Sometimes, depending on the situation and circumstances, that wish can feel impossible, or there's a little bit of a rub in the mind about expressing it. If, for instance, you have a loved one who is at the end of a terminal illness, expressing the wish "May you be free from this suffering" somehow feels not quite congruent with where you are, or feels like you're wishing for something impossible.

Two reflections on this. One: the wish of compassion is the wish for freedom from suffering. It's the wish that we're connecting to, not the demand that the wish be fulfilled. Sometimes I find myself in a situation like that, and I wish, you know, may war spontaneously cease—not that I think it's going to happen, but if that were possible, that is my wish. Can we connect to the wish itself? That's one way to explore the wish of compassion.

Another avenue, one that in some ways brings in the wisdom side of the situation, is to change the phrase, perhaps to: May you be at ease with these conditions. Because that brings in the understanding, the wisdom, that suffering is a response to conditions, and that perhaps an ease with conditions is in the realm of possibility for all of us.

Classically, with compassion practice, as with metta practice, we begin where it seems easiest. The easiest is said to be someone you know but perhaps not that well, who you are aware is suffering. That would be where classically we might begin the compassion practice.

But this evening I'd like to explore it a little differently and see what it might mean for us to wish compassion for ourselves—to be at ease with the conditions of our life, connecting to and recognizing how we may be struggling or suffering. Remember, with compassion we consciously connect to how we are suffering.

The way I'm going to suggest we do this is as follows. As you sit here, allow your body to be as at ease as is possible in this moment. Relax the physical body and let the attention rest in the area of the heart. Just see how it is right now for you. How are you in this moment? However it is, is fine. Perhaps have a sense of breathing through the heart center.

Allow yourself to be surrounded, in your imagination, with beings that you know love you, care for you. As you recognize for yourself a way in which you may be struggling, allow yourself to receive from your family, friends, and loved ones their wish for you to be free from suffering—their wish for you to be at ease with the conditions of your life.

Receiving that wish: May you be free from suffering. May you have ease with these conditions.

And if for you, in your situation, whatever it may be, it feels like your family and friends share this situation, you might explore expressing it as a collective: May we be free from this suffering. May we have ease with these conditions. Recognizing that this wish of the open heart, the wish of compassion, actually doesn't have any boundaries, and so expressing it for one, another can also receive it. May we be at ease with these conditions.

Take some time to explore that. If the heart gets constricted, see if there can be an allowing of the constriction also—that's a condition too. May I be at ease with this condition. May there be ease with this.

For myself, I find it helpful to keep the attention in the area of the heart, perhaps having the sense that each phrase is a wind through the heart.

And explore: how is the heart, having made that wish? Or having received the wishes of your friends and family?

The heart can stretch to all the conditions of the world. If sometimes it feels like the experience is overwhelming, connecting with the suffering, sometimes it can be helpful to, rather than trying to stay with the compassion phrases, explore mindfulness of the feelings. Use your skills, your tools for working with the arising of challenging emo-

tions. Or if it feels simpler for you, reconnecting with the practice of metta—remembering a dear friend, a benefactor, and connecting with the wish for well-being for your friend or benefactor.

And as it feels appropriate to you, staying connected or reconnecting with the compassion practice for yourself, for your friends and family. As though at this point you're sitting in the middle of a sphere of that wish for compassion. Envisioning that sphere of wishing freedom from suffering to expand to those sitting near you.

Recognizing that as human beings, we all share even just the simple struggles of being human. We all have loss. We all know separation from that which is loved. We all know aging, illness. We are all subject to death. This human body experiences dukkha. This human mind experiences dukkha. And so connecting with the humanity of those near you, allowing your wish for freedom from suffering or ease with the conditions to spread.

You can allow it to spread as far as it wants. You don't have to try to push it.

And then perhaps envisioning that all of those spheres join together. They may make one big sphere of compassion, all of us together. This room filled with the wish for freedom from suffering. And allowing that wish to spread outwards from this room to other beings nearby—your wish for compassion joined with others.

As we explore the possibility of expanding outwards to other beings beyond this room, it's fine to let yourself visualize or imagine specific beings that you may know. See if you can connect to their humanity and wish them freedom from suffering.

And remembering too that you are in the center of this field. As if we are wishing: may all of us be free from suffering. May we all be free from suffering.

And perhaps even envisioning the planet cloaked with this wish. And any beings beyond this planet—may all beings be free from suffering. May all beings know ease with their conditions. And remembering that you are one of all beings in that wish.

And now bringing the compassion practice back to yourself. May I be free from suffering. May I know ease with these conditions. And recognizing that is not a selfish wish, because this heart of compassion is a gift to the world.

May the benefits of our compassion practice be shared with all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 123

Core Truths and Core Wishes

Andrea Fella · 53 min

In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella examines the Buddha's central teaching that dukkha is not something that happens to us from the outside, but rather arises from our reactive relationship to experience through greed, aversion, and delusion. She explores how wisdom transforms our response to suffering, allowing the brahmavihārās—love, compassion, joy, and equanimity—to naturally arise as the emotional terrain of an awakened heart.

Fella introduces a powerful framework for understanding our struggles: the collision between "core truths" (impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable) and "core wishes" (happiness, safety, well-being). She suggests that our wish for well-being is deeply connected to mettā, and that suffering often contains threads of both love and truth that become obscured by reactivity. Through a moving personal account of experiencing fear during the aftermath of September 11th, she illustrates how fear and the wish for safety are flip sides of the same coin, and how mettā practice can reveal this connection.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with difficulty through patient, allowing awareness rather than trying to surgically remove suffering. Fella shares her experience of watching depression transform into vast mettā when met with non-demanding curiosity, illustrating how our struggles, like ice melting into water, can reveal the love and wisdom already present within them. This teaching encourages practitioners to honor their suffering as a doorway to understanding, belonging to themselves fully through loving awareness.

So much of our practice is around exploring this experience of dukkha, of suffering. We found the right practice because that was the Buddha's own journey from the beginning of his spiritual quest. Is it possible to find a way to be free from suffering? As he explored this question and found an understanding of suffering, he decided to teach, and he famously said, "What I teach is only suffering and its end." All of his teachings are oriented around this question: how to more fully understand suffering—not so that we can fix it, but so that understanding will free us, will liberate the mind from the ways it suffers.

This exploration, the Buddha's definition and recognition around suffering, is radically different from our usual perspective. I think a lot of us—at least I know for myself before I came to this practice—thought of suffering as something that happened to us.

Kind of like I was just a leaf in the wind, buffeted around by the conditions of the world, with very little say over when I was happy and when I was unhappy. From an ordinary perspective, or maybe from a pre-Dharma perspective, we think of suffering as something that happens to us. Stuff out there makes us suffer.

And yet what the Buddha teaches us is that while there are things that happen in the world that are unpleasant, things that create unpleasant experience, things that are unjust, there's nothing inherently in what happens in the world that can make us suffer in this particular way—having the mind become constricted, frozen, unable to respond skillfully. The Buddha's teaching is that dukkha itself is not so much the unpleasant experience but rather our reaction to it: our fears, our aversions, our desires, our confusions. The wisdom that grows around understanding suffering allows us to be responsive to the world. As Rebecca said last night, we can be responsive rather than reactive. Our reactivity is based in greed, aversion, and delusion. Wisdom joins with compassion and love to support a completely different response to suffering in the world, to injustice, to unpleasant experience—a response of love, compassion, wisdom, and generosity.

We could call these the emotions of wisdom. The emotional terrain, the emotional map of the heart that has opened to wisdom is really the map of the Brahmaviharas: love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. These emotions are not passive. Love acts in this world. Compassion acts in this world.

I think we misunderstand the motivation. Sometimes we feel that if we just settle back and accept things as they are, why would we do anything? Why would we act? That perspective comes from this familiar frame of reference—we tend to be motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion. We tend to act out of those states, and from their perspective, we cannot fathom any other way to act. We envision that if we were free of greed, aversion, and delusion, we would just sit there. But that's not what happens. The heart opens, connects, and breaks with that connection to suffering. It wants to respond, wants to act.

This dukkha that the Buddha asked us to explore is not about getting rid of injustice in the world, but about beginning to free our hearts from greed, aversion, and delusion, and beginning to act in the world from these beautiful emotions of love and wisdom. The Buddha's teaching around dukkha is that greed, aversion, and delusion in our own minds creates what we call dukkha—that there's a possibility of a different way to relate to experience.

As we begin to touch into that, we begin to really understand what dukkha is. We understand its nature. In small ways perhaps, we might see how reactivity, an aversion to physical pain for example, creates a whole complex of experience around that physical pain. And when the mind lets go of that aversion, it doesn't even feel like pain anymore. It's not what we would call pain. It's an unpleasant experience, but vastly different from when we are fighting it.

This teaching of the Buddha—that suffering results from craving and craving happens in our minds—is good news. If it were the case that we were at the whims of the world, that our suffering was just a response, like somebody pushing a button on us, we would be helpless. It sometimes feels like we have buttons and that other people have the power to push them. But we actually offer our buttons to be pushed, in some ways. With this teaching about dukkha, we begin to recognize that transformation is possible.

a whole host of what we call suffering. And not all of what we call suffering at the outset will we be free of, because at the outset we think unpleasant experience is suffering. But the mental pain and grief—that is what the Buddha said it is possible to be free of.

And so the suffering lies in our reactivity to experience, and it's possible to change our minds. This is the good news of this whole mechanism at work in our minds. We're not trapped by the conditions of the world. There's a way in which our response to those conditions can be cultivated to move in a different direction.

That different direction is not a change that makes us think injustice is okay. It's not a change that makes us think it's acceptable for unethical things to happen in the world. Quite the contrary. It is a change that allows us to fully acknowledge this is what is happening, and with a heart of compassion, to respond. Compassion naturally responds to suffering.

So this teaching of the Buddha—that dukkha is created in our minds, that it's a reaction to experience—when we feel into this, we begin to understand how aversion and wanting actually constrict the heart. We notice how it feels to be in a state of aversion, and we see the mind let go of it at times, recognizing how much more ease there is as the mind releases aversion and can actually come into alignment with what's going on, which may be a painful experience, or an uncontrollable experience, an unreliable experience.

And so we see this. We see how as the mind lets go of that aversion or that wanting, how much more ease and peace there is in the mind. And so the question comes up: why on earth does the mind keep doing this? I've seen it. I've seen it's not useful. But it keeps doing it.

I wanted to explore that question. Why do our minds keep doing this? What can we learn about this?

I think our human organism naturally wants to move in the direction of well-being, much as any creature of life wants to be in environments that support it and nourish it, and not be in environments that lead to its harm. A single-celled creature will move towards nourishment and away from a noxious environment. This is a very natural function of life—to move in this direction towards some degree of well-being.

In our human experience, we're vastly more complicated than a single-celled creature. And while we still do this same thing—we move towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant—there's an awful lot going on in between something pleasant and the decision to act, the decision to move towards pleasant.

What we tend to do as human beings, before we start to investigate this question of what is happiness and what leads to true happiness, is that our organism tends to take the quickest route to well-being. The most immediate thing that will make us feel a little bit better in this next moment—we tend to go in that direction. Towards the pleasant, away from the unpleasant, very like the single-celled organism.

I like to think that this movement towards well-being, at a deep level, is connected to metta. It's connected to the wish that when we express metta, we say: may I have ease of well-being, may I be happy, may I be healthy, may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe. This is expressing that wish for well-being, which is a very natural movement of the human being.

And so this movement towards well-being and this movement of metta, I think, have a link deep in our system.

And yet, as I said, there are all of these processes at work in the mind around trying to find well-being, and our tendency, through habit, through having seen in our lives that when I get something I want I get a moment of well-being—that happens over and over again. We get a moment of well-being, a feeling of release perhaps from the wanting that was associated with that desire. We've talked about recognizing how the wanting itself is suffering. And so we get a little bit of release there, and we begin to believe, through repeated application of that principle, that that's the only way to happiness—that's the best way.

We see that those moments of getting what we want don't last very long, but some part of us thinks, well, what I really need to do in order to have happiness in this life is just string a whole bunch of those moments together. That's what happiness would be. If I can figure out a way to navigate this life so that I can string together more and more moments of pleasant and less and less moments of unpleasant, that's as good as it's going to get. That's kind of what we think about happiness.

And so there are all kinds of ideas in our minds, and those participate in this process of moving in the direction of getting what we want. For instance, we want perhaps somebody to think well of us. And our mind creates plans or ideas about how it's going to go about having somebody think well of us, and envisions what might happen when somebody does think well of us. All of these thoughts, all of these ideas in our mind—these plans, the idea of "I'm going to be able to have this person think well of me in the future"—all of these ideas, beliefs, opinions, in this particular case, tend to be pleasant.

We're kind of living in that world of pleasant thoughts of how great it's going to be in the future. And in this moment, as we're having those thoughts, we're experiencing pleasant right now because we've constructed a pleasant fantasy, basically.

Craving can enter in here—does enter in here. When we're not mindful, when we're not aware of this process going on, we get caught up in that fantasy and we're deceived in a way, believing that this is the direction toward happiness. We're confused, believing that this is the path.

And yet, perhaps if we could entirely live in our minds with pleasant fantasy construction, only experiencing the pleasant creations of our minds without reality actually impinging on us, that might be a good strategy. But reality does impinge on us. We don't have control over whether that person thinks well of us. We don't have control over whether what we like will continue or end.

When we meet this impermanent, unreliable, out-of-control nature of experience, we don't like it. We resist it. And we suffer. We somehow think that we've made a mistake or done something wrong because we haven't been able to make the world match our fantasy. But it's not a mistake. It's the nature of experience—to be impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. So much of our suffering comes from this meeting and resistance to just the nature of experience.

We've been saying this a lot in the last few days: the impermanent, unreliable, out-of-control nature of experience and our resistance to that is so much of why we suffer. Resistance being that craving, that clinging, that desire to make things different—the desire to get rid of unpleasant, the desire to hold on to pleasant.

At the same time, our suffering also seems deeply connected to this inner wish for well-being. We wish to be happy and safe and at ease. And given the nature of impermanent, unreliable, out of control, those wishes seem out of reach sometimes.

When we're suffering—and I'm not ready to say always, but often, at least in my own experience—there are two threads that we can open to. When we are suffering around something, when we're angry about something, often it's because there's a deep wish for well-being underneath that has been thwarted somehow. When we're afraid, there's a deep wish for safety connected to that fear. As we open to our suffering, we start to see this connection to the wish for well-being—the natural wish, the human wish, a core wish for well-being, happiness, ease, and safety that we share as human beings.

And those wishes meet reality. The wishes of well-being and safety meet the truth of unreliable, impermanent, out of control—and they collide.

So these two threads: the truth, which I'll call the core truths of life—impermanent, unreliable, out of control—and the core wishes for happiness, safety, health, well-being. It seems like it's not possible to have both. And the mind reacts to that. In almost equal part, it's reacting against the truth and holding on, trying to hold on to that wish.

This is, I think—you know, last night Rebecca said that her first movement with something was "No!" That's that movement. This truth, it cannot be true—because we so wish for the well-being. That movement from deep within us: we so wish for the well-being.

I've had some experiences that have really helped point me to this connection between my suffering, my reactivity, and this deep wish for well-being. Some startling recognitions.

At one point, it was September 2001. I was visiting my family during the September 11th attacks. They live in Tennessee; I live in California. I had flown to Tennessee, and then the planes were grounded. When I finally left, it was the day after the planes started flying again. They had been grounded for a couple of weeks, I think, and so there was some trepidation in getting on an airplane that day.

There was bad weather in Tennessee, and my plane was delayed. I had a connection to make in Houston, but I landed late, and the last flight to California had already left. So I needed to get a hotel. I checked into one at George Bush International Airport.

Sometime that evening, I was talking to a friend on the phone, making arrangements for my travel the next day, when the power went out. It was out for a while, and I finally decided to get up and look out the window. It was really dark—I couldn't see a

thing. I resorted to using my Indiglo watch to find my way to the bathroom. And when I looked out the window, it wasn't just the hotel that had lost power. As far as I could tell, it was the city.

Power was out as far as I could see. My mind went to a terrorist attack. In my mind, George Bush International Airport was a perfect target for a terrorist attack. It just seemed like it made sense. And so my mind proliferated with fear. The fear was quite strong.

In that experience of the fear being so strong, my practice kicked in. I'm so grateful for the practice, how it seems to take care of me when suffering gets strong. The fear was arising, and the practice came in almost automatically—I started doing metta practice. *May I be happy. May I be safe.* As I expressed that wish, that one really landed. That wish, *may I be safe*, really landed. And then I expressed it outward: *May all beings be safe. May all of us be safe.* That one really, really landed. Yes, that is what I want—for all beings to be safe.

As I stayed with the metta, the fear disappeared. The feeling of connection and love and care and wish for safety for all beings was really strong. Then the mind would slip into its thoughts: *This power is still out. Oh my gosh, if it's a terrorist attack, what are we going to do?* I created images of all the people in the hotel lining up in the hallways. And then the mind kicked back into the metta, returning to that wish for well-being and safety.

That experience really showed me just how deeply connected fear and the wish for metta were. The flip side of that fear was a very deep, profound feeling of love and connection. Then the mind would slip into its habitual ways and the fear would explode again, but I could see there was a link. The wish for safety and the fear that safety was not possible—the uncontrollability, the recognition that I didn't have control over safety—that's where the fear came from. But the wish for well-being was a valid wish.

So when these core wishes meet these core truths, that collision, the seeming irreconcilability of these two, is often where suffering is born. We meet the truth of the uncontrollable and we say, "No, no, it's wrong. It shouldn't be uncontrollable." We meet the truth of impermanence and we think, "What have I done wrong?" Reactivity is born when we resist the truth. And yet that reactivity is also connected to this wish for well-being.

Through our practice, we may begin to orient toward the teaching of impermanent, unreliable, out of control, and recognize the vulnerability of experience—the impermanence, how we respond to the uncontrollable, that vulnerable feeling. We may ex-

plore that by bringing wisdom to the situation: "Oh, this is just the way it is. Things are uncontrollable. Vulnerability—it's the way it is." This can be helpful. Bringing wisdom in can help to balance our mind.

And yet I've seen in my own mind at times, and heard as I listen to retreatants and students report what's going on in their minds—I sometimes hear that orientation toward "Okay, it's impermanent, it's unreliable" as a subtle way of almost denying that wish for safety and well-being. We're trying to convince ourselves: impermanent, unreliable, out of control—that's the way it is, so that should be okay. Almost as if we have an unseen belief that since things are impermanent, unreliable, and out of control, the wish for safety, the wish for happiness, the wish for well-being is not valid, that it's not the right wish.

We can use an intellectual understanding of this teaching of things as they are to deny and repress those deep wholesome wishes. The wish for well-being and happiness is love, is compassion. And yet our relationship to those wholesome wishes often includes a craving or a belief that if I were doing things right, those wishes would be fulfilled. This is a paradox for us in a way. Part of our mind holds the belief that the wishes are only valid if they can be fulfilled in the way I would like them to be fulfilled—as opposed to connecting to the wish itself.

I mentioned this the other night in the compassion practice, that sometimes we struggle in wishing for freedom from suffering for someone or a situation that seems impossible to change. And yet we do wish for that freedom from suffering even though it's not always possible to change the conditions. The wish is what we are connecting with. As I said the other night, if my wish for war to spontaneously cease on this planet and for peace to be spread across this planet could be fulfilled—that is what I wish.

The connection to that deep wish is not invalid simply because the wish cannot be true in this moment. And so this is an exploration we make around our wishes as well.

The hidden demand for our wishes—the wish of love, of compassion—to be fulfilled in a certain way, that hidden demand creates anxiety and fear, confusion, frustration, anger, rage when those wishes are not met. Wisdom asks us to let go of the expectation, the hope, the craving for a particular outcome around these wishes. But it doesn't ask us to let go of the wishes themselves. In fact, I think wisdom asks us to embrace those wishes.

And so this is a paradox to hold—for our heart to stretch to hold both these wishes for well-being and the truth of uncontrollable, unreliable, impermanent. Our heart can stretch to hold both. And yet the way we do that is by noticing where it's not, where it's struggling.

We've talked about our suffering offering us the lessons we need, and this is partly why. Because when we are suffering, it's a pointer back to these two very crucial things: this truth of love and this truth of truth. And so the exploration around suffering is one of honoring, because the suffering itself contains those threads—the threads of love and compassion and the thread of truth.

In some of the early days of my practice, or not even just the early days, as I explored suffering I often had this really dive-in kind of approach. It was like, "Oh, suffering!" and I would get kind of into it. And yet I still believed at some level that this suffering was like some tumor, and what I needed to do was find the perfect scalpel that would just cut this out and take it away. That was my approach. I believed that the suffering, the anger for instance, was wholly bad.

And yet it's not wholly bad. There are misunderstandings in the anger—misunderstandings, misattributions around these wishes and these truths. And so a way to explore this is to honor our suffering, to allow it to reveal the love and the truth.

It's not that we can dive in and say, "Oh, where's the love in the middle of this anger?" In my own practice around this, it really has felt much more like an embrace of whatever struggle it is—wide arms holding it as softly as I can, with as much openheartedness as I can muster in this moment, to meet that struggle and let it reveal itself.

Our struggles, our reactivity, have so many layers. Underneath anger might be confusion, might be fear, might be vulnerability, might be a wish for safety. And yet we can't just dive into the middle and say, "Okay, well there's anger here, where's the love in the middle of it?" It has to be much more organic. Much more: "Okay, struggle. I'm willing to sit with you. Show me what you are. Show me the layers. Show me the thread of wisdom. Show me the thread of love"—but not demanding how it reveals itself. Patience in this exploration. Very soft, gentle.

I kind of settle back in my approach when it's possible—when I can meet reactivity and know it without it getting stronger, without it feeling like I'm getting swamped or pulled into the rabbit hole of that difficulty. Whenever I can meet it and hold it, that's my approach: "Okay, I get to see a little bit of this, how this thing is put together this time." And then maybe it lasts for a certain length of time and goes away and comes back later, and it's like, "Okay, I get to see a different perspective on it that time."

Over the course of one stretch of a few weeks at Shwe Oo Min, the monastery where Sayadaw U Tejaniya teaches, I was watching depression. Depression coming and going, just willing to meet it, noticing the conditions, noticing it arise, recognizing that sometimes it arose when I was really calm. That was kind of interesting. And so I just started getting interested in the pattern itself—not to get rid of it, but to understand it. Just to understand it.

Many of the tools that I've shared on working with difficulty have come from my own practice exploring. I've offered you several of the ones I used at that retreat. The exploration of, "Oh, there's depression. Okay, well, there's many other things happening. Let me just... there's depression and there's seeing and there's hearing"—broadening the container so it's not the dive-in kind of thing. Noticing when it's absent.

Recognizing, "Oh, it's not always here." Seeing when it arises. The conditions—wow, it comes out of calm. How does that happen? Just curiosity to explore it.

And then one day, as I was feeling into the depression, I was walking back to my room to do my meditation. I had been doing walking meditation, exploring a lot of this, and I went back to my room to do my sitting practice, which I was doing in the lying posture. And the heart felt—the depression felt very vast. Really big, but kind of diffuse. So it wasn't heavy-vast, but it was pretty vast.

As I sat down and began exploring the vastness of this depression, just feeling into that—I couldn't really point at it, but it was like being in a fog. And there it is. And at some point in that exploration, it just expanded. It got bigger and bigger. And at some moment it flipped and became metta.

That was not what I was expecting to find in the depression. I couldn't have really looked for it. And I feel that the power of the allowing was what gave the love the opportunity to show itself.

And then the next moment of my experience—the very next split second—as the mind was in this space... the depression had been very vast, and the metta was equally vast. This vast field of metta I was sitting in. The next moment my mind said, "This is stupid. This is sappy. This is corny." I smiled and laughed. It's like, "Ah, I see." A kind of understanding of the mind's relationship to that quality—creating a feeling of depression. There was an understanding of how the depression was put together, laid on top of this vast feeling of metta.

I tell that story to encourage a not-knowing in the exploration, a not-searching for anything, but a willingness to allow the struggle to reveal what's there. And it will reveal something.

This morning as I was reflecting on this topic, I came up with another analogy. I think I've heard it before, but I can't remember who said it, so I can't give credit, unfortunately. But it arose in my mind, so I'll share it.

The experience of these constrictions, these struggles—it's like ice. It's hard, it's solid, it's frozen. And we feel frozen sometimes with our struggles. And the mindfulness, the allowing, creates the conditions for the ice to melt. There's no change in any of the molecules of that water. It's a different state, but they're all still water molecules. It's kind of like our craving, our clinging, is the cold temperature that solidifies things. And it's not like we have to throw the ice cube away. We throw the ice cube away, we lose the water. The melting will reveal these threads back to love and truth.

To me, this quality of allowing in practice—cultivating an allowing attitude—is so helpful. We allow the fullness of our human experience. Allowing mindfulness, loving awareness, rejects nothing.

In so many ways, I think some of our struggles in life come from really wanting to be seen. Our wanting, our reaching, our feeling of something being off or wrong is a feeling of not being seen, not belonging. And in this practice of cultivating loving awareness and allowing attention, we can see ourselves more fully than anybody else ever could. And discover in that process that that full allowing, that full loving heart towards whatever is happening, may be the very thing we were looking for from someone else.

Through this practice we can belong to ourselves. And in that process, support a community of belonging in the world.

A poem by Izumi Shikibu:

Watching the moon at dawn,
solitary, mid-sky,
I knew myself completely—
no part left out.

Let's sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 124

Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)

Andrea Fella · 58 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella offers a detailed and accessible exploration of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), one of the Buddha's most profound teachings. She presents it as an elaboration of the Second Noble Truth, explaining how craving leads to suffering through a chain of twelve interconnected conditions. The talk references the famous exchange between Ānanda and the Buddha about the depth of this teaching, emphasizing that true penetration of dependent origination is equivalent to full awakening.

Fella walks through the twelve links—from ignorance (avijjā) through mental formations (saṅkhāra), consciousness (viññāṇa), mind-and-body (nāmarūpa), the six sense bases (saḷāyatana), contact (phassa), feeling (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), clinging (upādāna), becoming (bhava), birth (jāti), to aging and death (jarāmaraṇa). She pays particular attention to how feeling tone conditions craving, and how this process operates largely outside our awareness when mindfulness is absent. Drawing on Bhikkhu Bodhi's analogy of a thief reaching for and grasping an object, she illuminates the subtle distinction between craving and clinging.

The practical heart of this teaching lies in understanding that this is not a deterministic process but a conditioned one that can be interrupted. Fella references the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta (MN 9), which applies the Four Noble Truths framework to each link of dependent origination, demonstrating that awakening is possible wherever we find ourselves in this chain. Whether we're caught in screaming rage, depression, or subtle wanting, bringing mindfulness and wisdom to any experience can lead to freedom right here and now.

Tonight the topic is dependent origination. This is one of the foundational teachings of the Buddha, fundamental to understanding how suffering is created in our minds. I think of it as a detailed exposition of the second noble truth—the truth that craving is the cause, the origin of suffering.

I've been giving many talks on dukkha lately, and yet this is what continues to arise. The Buddha taught, as I mentioned last week, "What I teach is suffering and its end." There is something profound about this teaching as a description of how suffering arises. I don't think of it as a practice; we don't practice dependent origination. We don't practice the arising of suffering—suffering simply arises. And yet this description of how suffering comes to be can be tremendously supportive for us in our practice.

The teaching is quite complex and profound. There's a famous story of Ānanda expressing his appreciation for the Buddha's teaching and for dependent origination in particular. Ānanda says, "It is wonderful, it is marvelous how profound this dependent origination is, how profound it appears. And yet it appears to me as clear as clear." The Buddha responds, "Don't say that, Ānanda—that this teaching of dependent origination is profound and appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine that this generation has come to be like a tangled ball of string."

Essentially, the Buddha is pointing to Ānanda's confidence—"Oh, this is so clear to me"—and saying, "Well, there's probably more for you to understand there, Ānanda." The Buddha continues: "It is through not understanding, not penetrating this teaching that this generation has become like a ball of tangled string, unable to pass beyond states of woe." Here the Buddha is connecting the lack of understanding of dependent origination with being stuck—stuck on this cycle of struggle and suffering, caught by these patterns. Elsewhere, the Buddha seems to indicate that one who deeply penetrates dependent origination has fully seen the Dhamma, is fully awakened. It is a deep teaching, a profound teaching. We're probably not going to get it tonight.

And yet, in my own exploration, I find that meeting teachings works in a cyclical way. There may be some piece of a teaching that resonates with me, speaks to me. I practice with it, I understand a little bit of it. Then I might hear the teaching another time, and because there's been some level of understanding, the teaching goes a little deeper. We can hear these teachings over and over again, each time perhaps understanding something new, seeing something new in our experience.

I think it's helpful to explore this teaching of dependent origination, the teaching of how suffering comes to be. There are a couple of aspects of the overall picture I want to point to that have been supports for me. I do want to try to make this talk both practical and accessible. For me, this teaching has been a direct support for practice, and that's what I hope to convey, what I hope to transmit to you.

The first thing I want to point to about this teaching is that the Buddha described suffering coming into being as a process. It's a detailed description of how craving leads to suffering, and in this description he's pointing to processes that work in our minds—processes that we all share as human beings. As we start to investigate this teaching in more depth, as we look at what it says, we can begin to recognize some parts of this process at work in our own minds.

Instead of taking the process of creating suffering personally, instead of taking it as "poor me," thinking we're the only ones who ever suffer, we can recognize it as part of a human process that the Buddha articulated almost 2,600 years ago. We are not alone in

how our minds do these things. The genius of the Buddha was his ability to articulate how these processes work with such clarity. We can start to see these processes and recognize, "Oh, this is what the Buddha was talking about. This is how it works"—not just in this mind, but in human minds. He's articulating a human process.

Another piece of this teaching is that it points to the arising of suffering—the arising of struggle, dissatisfaction, discontent, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair—as a conditioned process. It doesn't arise randomly. There are conditions that come into being, that create, that tend to head us in the direction of suffering. The chain of dependent origination contains twelve links, and we will briefly touch on all of them tonight. These twelve links describe conditions that support each other in the creation of suffering. It describes a conditioned process, and yet not a deterministic process.

This is how the Buddha taught dependent origination in brief. He said: "With ignorance as a condition, mental formations come to be. With mental formations as condition, consciousness comes to be. With consciousness as condition, mental and physical processes come to be. With mental and physical processes as condition, the six sense bases come to be. With the six sense bases as condition, contact comes to be. With contact, feeling. With feeling, craving. With craving, clinging. With clinging, becoming. With becoming, birth. With birth, aging and death. And thus is born the entire mass of suffering."

So it describes conditions that lead to the entire mass of suffering. And yet these are conditions, not determinism. Much of what leads us on in this conditioned direction is the lack of mindfulness and wisdom. The very root of the chain of dependent origination is ignorance—ignorance about suffering. Because of that ignorance, because we are caught and not mindful of what's happening, typically our habitual patterns or tendencies are tumbling on, and those habits and patterns basically lead us through this cycle over and over again.

And yet, if we introduce the conditions of mindfulness and wisdom, a very different process can unfold.

This chain, this description of "with this as condition, that comes to be," is laid out in twelve links as I described. It's interesting to notice that the last link—aging and death—is equated with suffering here. The Buddha says, "Thus arises the entire mass of suffering." It is also understood that suffering, when met with bewilderment rather than mindfulness and wisdom, tends to reinforce ignorance. And so this chain becomes a cycle: with the arising of suffering, when mindfulness and wisdom are not meeting that suffering, more ignorance is born and the cycle perpetuates itself.

Yet the hope, the possibility revealed in this understanding, is that while this cycle tends to perpetuate itself when mindfulness and wisdom are not present, the cultivation of mindfulness and wisdom can begin to shift the unfolding.

Still, it's useful to understand this chain, this cycle. The teachings in both the suttas—the words of the Buddha—and in the extensive commentaries that have built up around these teachings describe dependent origination in different ways. In one interpretation, dependent origination describes how suffering can arise based on conditions from the distant past, including former lives, and can propel into the distant future, including future lives. This understanding suggests that the ignorance being cultivated in this life may be perpetuated very far into the future and come from very far in the past.

There's also a description in the suttas and commentaries about this teaching being a moment-to-moment description of how suffering comes to be. This second perspective is the one I will speak to more this evening. It's the one I resonate with more fully. I don't have any direct experience with past lives; that's not part of my experience, and so I can't apply this teaching in that way in my own practice. Yet this teaching has provided profound support for me in my practice of looking at moment-to-moment suffering.

I think we can also understand that this teaching, whether or not you believe in past lives or future lives, points to the ways that ignorance and suffering are perpetuated over time as well as being created in a moment. We see this in our practice. We're sitting here, perhaps calmly with the breath, the mind fairly calm, and then for some reason we do not see—although it is conditioned—a memory of the past arises. Things that have happened in the past come into the present through thought. In this way, the conditions of the past contribute to and influence what's happening now.

This teaching of dependent origination has many layers, many feedback loops, many feed-forward loops. In the classical description, as I said, it begins with ignorance. Ignorance is the ground out of which the entire mass of suffering is born. If we see through ignorance, the whole thing falls apart.

Yet I've found in my own exploration of this teaching that it's helpful to start partway through in exploring what it means and how we can see it in our own practice. So I'm going to skip the first four links or so right now and jump directly to exploring the sense bases in our experience.

This is one of the links. The fact that we have mental and physical processes conditions the sense bases. We have these bodies, we have these minds, and therefore we have sense bases. We have eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and the mind. Because we are conscious—because we're not corpses—these sense bases are receiving sense impressions.

With sense bases as condition, contact arises. Because we have sense bases, we experience sight, sound, smells, taste, touch, and things arising in our mind. This is sense bases conditioning contact. With contact as condition, feeling comes to be.

All of these contacts—we've talked about this—every single contact that we have, every sight, every sound, every smell, every taste, everything that arises in our mind is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is a universal factor of every moment's experience: it contains this flavor of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. With contact as condition, feeling tone comes to be. Very simple—just pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Based on this feeling tone—and we've talked about this link quite a bit outside the context of dependent origination—based on pleasant feeling, we tend to want. We like that feeling; we want more of it. If unpleasant, we tend to not like it; we want to not have it. In this way, with feeling as condition, craving comes to be.

We discussed this especially as we explored mindfulness of feeling. As we begin to bring mindfulness to feeling tone itself, we might see the power of how mindfulness and wisdom can start to turn this chain in a different direction. When mindfulness simply sees pleasant experience—"Oh, this is a pleasant experience"—and many of you have seen this—"Oh, pleasant"—it doesn't lead onward to wanting, to leaning towards. It's just a pleasant experience. It arises, it passes.

When we are not mindful, when ignorance is present in the mind, that feeling tone tends to condition craving. It conditions wanting. This points back to that very beginning link. Ignorance is actually the link that conditions the entire unfolding of the chain. When ignorance is present, feeling leads to craving.

This is a lot of what we look at in our experience—the craving, the wanting. It's very simple, feels kind of automatic: something's pleasant, we want it, we move towards it; something's unpleasant, we move away from it. As we talked about, it's a kind of organic, amoeba-like response to pleasant and unpleasant. And yet in our own minds it's not hardwired. It is possible to simply notice pleasant without having a subsequent reactivity, without having that craving follow on from the feeling. Craving here represents both the leaning towards and the leaning against.

When ignorance is present, we kind of automatically want to act on that wanting—to do something, to get the thing, to get rid of the thing. We take some kind of action to hold on to the experience, to grasp an object, to push away an experience, to figure out how to control or fix or change an experience, or to push away an object. This is the movement in the direction of clinging. With craving as condition, clinging comes to be.

There's a gradation along the line of craving and clinging. It's almost like clinging is an intensification of craving. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the English translator of many of the suttas in the Pali Canon, described the act of wanting, the mental state of wanting, as being like a thief who has spied something they like and is reaching out to get it. The act of clinging is the picking it up. It's a kind of intensification, but there is a distinct congealing or grasping, a holding to, that happens with clinging.

Once we've clung to something, it sets in motion processes of mind that want to serve that clinging. I like this description by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

He says that the next link in the chain, called becoming—clinging conditions becoming—is "the intentions and actions that rally in the service of clinging." It's the process of behavior that's generated in order to keep that thing, to hold something at bay or maintain our grip on it. The thief grasps the object, and then there's a whole set of processes involved to help them keep it—the sneaking out of the house, finding a safe place to store it. A whole sequence of activity unfolds in this process.

Essentially, I think of this becoming as the intentions that lead us to a place of feeling like we're in control of our destiny. We like becoming. It feels like we're in charge, like we know where we're headed and how we'll get there. We feel like we know how we're going to control something, fix it, change it, or keep it. So there's the act of grasping, and then there's this whole complex of mental processes trying to figure out: How can I keep this going? That's becoming.

Following from becoming is birth into some kind of identity. Things become "mine" or "me." This can take an obvious form of identification—"This is my cup. It's mine. It's got my name on it." Or it might be something along the lines of "I'm the kind of person who does things right"—a kind of owning. Like the person who thinks, "I am the one who can control things." Becoming is the movement in the direction of "I know how to do this," and birth is like "I am doing this." It's almost the same gradation we saw between wanting and clinging—the movement and direction, then the full taking birth into that identity. "I can control this. I can fix this. I can hold on to this. This is mine." Not "this is how I'm going to keep it," but "this is mine."

From here, the Buddha says suffering is inevitable. It might result from the obvious separation from something we consider ours, or it might arise in a subtler way. When we take birth into an identity—not just of owning something, but of being "a good yogi" or "the one who can fix things" or "the one who can control this"—we inhabit those identities. Then, as we've discussed, the truths of impermanence, unreliability, and lack of control manifest. We see that we don't always have control of our destiny. We cannot always be the good yogi. We cannot always be the one who controls the outcome of events.

When we see this, that identity is proven in some ways to be a myth. If we've clung tightly to it, we'll suffer. We may feel like a failure—"I did something wrong"—or we may feel the world is to blame, that others are responsible for this suffering.

This process of taking birth into identity quite often also comes with the birth of "other." Sometimes this process of becoming and birth is actually experienced more as creating other—"That person is to blame. That person is wrong. That person is something." There's this separation, and in that separation there is also a sense of self. So sometimes we can explore this process of becoming and birth by noticing when we're "othering"—when we're making somebody into other, projecting some identity onto them.

We sometimes suffer when others do this to us, putting identities onto us. There's enormous suffering in this world from this selfing and othering. Racism, sexism, homophobia, all forms of discrimination have this process at work. And so the exploration of birth is important. You might notice that sometimes a sense of birth has a clear feeling of "me here," and sometimes it has a sense of "you there"—them.

The other. So noticing both sides of this process—this separation, this congealing into identity—leads to so much suffering in our world.

This cycle we've gone through so far—from sense bases to contact, to feeling, to craving, to clinging, to becoming, to birth, to suffering—tends to perpetuate itself. It tends to reinforce itself. Because we don't understand suffering, because we don't understand how this whole process works, we are very much driven by this pattern, especially the deep pattern around feeling tone: pleasant leading us towards something, unpleasant wanting to push us away from something. We're really driven by that process at such a deep level.

This includes the cycle itself, this chain. Many of the links in this chain are mind states, are processes in our mind. Craving, clinging, becoming—all processes, all mental formations—and they come with a feeling tone. Wanting feels unpleasant. Have any of you noticed that? When you start to look at wanting, you see the feeling of wanting itself doesn't feel good.

Along with this process of there being something out there that we think we want, we're separated from that, and there's a little bit of unpleasantness about the separation from that thing or the wanting of that thing. But there's also this: when wanting springs up, there's immediately a feeling of offness. Wanting comes with unpleasant. The experience of wanting is unpleasant. And so because of that, there's also the drive to get rid of the wanting. There's not only the desire to have the thing we want; there's the desire to get rid of the wanting. So we've got this double process going on.

And then, if we act on that wanting—which is likely if we're not paying attention to what's happening—and we get the thing we want or get rid of the thing we don't want, we get the moment of some pleasure from having that thing. We also get the pleasure of becoming in that moment. When we've got it, we've got the control: "Yes, I've figured it out. I know how to get concentrated. I know how to do this." That becoming, that sense of feeling like we have control, feels really good.

So not only when we get what we want do we have the little bit of pleasant from having it, we get the pleasantness that comes from the wanting going away, and we get the pleasantness of feeling like we've figured it out. These cycles tend to reinforce themselves. Without mindfulness, it's very hard to break through this cycle of wanting, craving, clinging, becoming.

And there's more. Let's go back to the links we haven't talked about yet: ignorance conditions mental formations, conditions consciousness.

Because this chain describes a cyclic pattern, as I described, suffering tends to lead to more ignorance. We can think of this as almost the first link in the chain. Suffering tends to lead to ignorance. When mindfulness and wisdom are not present, suffering heads in that direction.

When suffering is met with mindfulness and wisdom, there's the possibility—actually, there's another chain that's described, the chain of transcendent dependent origination—where when suffering is met with understanding, suffering conditions the arising of faith. And faith conditions the arising of delight, joy, happiness, and concentration, moving in the direction of freedom.

So at this point in the chain, suffering without mindfulness and wisdom leads to more ignorance. With mindfulness and wisdom, we step onto a completely different path towards faith, towards freedom.

A main definition of ignorance is not understanding suffering, not understanding the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha says, "Not knowing about suffering, not knowing about the origin of suffering, not knowing about the cessation of suffering, not knowing about the way leading to the cessation of suffering—this is called ignorance."

With ignorance, in ignorance, we tend to think that cycle we've talked about—that deep pattern around getting what I want will bring me happiness, getting rid of what I don't want will make me happy—we tend to believe that is the way to happiness. That very belief keeps us caught on this cycle.

With ignorance as a condition, when we have this belief that getting what I want will bring me happiness, when we do not understand experience to be impermanent, unreliable, out of control, it conditions our mental formations. It conditions intentions, actions about how we decide to do things, how we behave.

Mental formations is a whole set of things that go on in our mind—everything from anger, frustration, confusion, irritation, pride, conceit, arrogance, to concentration, mindfulness, faith, wisdom. All of these are mental formations.

With ignorance as condition, certain mental formations tend to arise. When we have these beliefs about what will make us happy, if we think what will make us happy is getting what we want, we tend to condition the mind in that direction. Essentially, these mental formations are the whole set of our habits and patterns that we've been looking at—all of these patterns that we see arising in our minds.

We think that we're acting to alleviate our suffering when we engage in our habitual ways of trying to get rid of something unpleasant or hold on to something we think we want. We believe we're acting in our best interest, and yet we are seeing very clearly here that this is not a way to a deeper kind of happiness. Yes, it can create a kind of happiness in the moment—a short, momentary kind of happiness. And yet we're learning about a deeper kind of happiness that's possible here.

So with these habits, these patterns conditioned by our beliefs about what leads to happiness, the next link is: consciousness comes to be. I've spent some time reflecting on what this means—that with mental formations as condition, consciousness comes to be. The way I'm understanding it at this point is that because of the way we think, because of the habits and patterns of our mind, we have filters in our experience. We're seeing the world through certain lenses.

We see this a lot, I think. We notice certain patterns or habits, familiar ones particularly. Somebody the other day was talking about seeing the world through an angry filter—like looking through an angry lens. It didn't matter what the attention was turned to; anger resulted.

I've had this experience. Anger is one of my most familiar patterns. One time I was doing walking meditation in the lower walking room here, and I was noticing that anger was the state of the mind. I was working with it and exploring it and being with it, yet it was pretty predominant, so I was kind of stuck in it. I turned around at the end of my walking path, and at the other end was a pair of shoes. My mind landed on that pair of shoes and exploded in anger. Who put those shoes at the end of my walking path? This is the filter of anger.

With these filters—these mental formations, our agendas, views, ideas, beliefs, emotions—we tend to see things in the world in a certain way. What we take in, what consciousness connects with, is filtered based on our ideas, agendas, views, opinions, and emotions. We think that our senses are taking in experience as if our eyes were cameras, our ears were microphones. And yet that is not the way our minds work; that's not the way our senses work.

There are studies on this factor of mind in psychology; it's called selective attention. When we are focused on something, there are things we simply do not see. We can be asked to look at a video and do a certain task—focus on something, watch someone doing a magic trick. I just watched a TV program where they were playing with this selective perception, and they said, "See if you can figure out how I change this liquid into a bunny." So I was watching really closely. At the end, I thought I'd seen maybe where that switch had happened, but I was really focused on it. Then they ran the video back and said, "Well, did you see these other things that were happening at the same time? This very large bunny walking across the video?" No, I didn't see the very large bunny walking across.

The agenda to focus meant consciousness did not take in the bunny. This happens to us all the time. And yet we believe that we're seeing things clearly, that we are seeing things exactly as they are. Even something as simple as an agenda can screen certain things in and certain things out. Imagine what a whole history of a pattern can do in terms of taking in information about the world. We do not see things as they are. There's a famous quote: we don't see things as they are, we see things as we are. This to me is mental formations conditioning consciousness. Consciousness lands on things in a certain way—or may not land on things at all. Consciousness may not come to be. The bunny consciousness did not come to be.

With consciousness as condition, the next link is: mental and physical processes come to be. Based on these mental formations and what we're taking in, our minds and bodies are influenced. If we've got the angry lens on, our bodies are impacted—our face may become distorted, our body may be tense and tight. Mental formations and consciousness conditioning mental process, physical processes. Mental states of mind tend to condition more mental states of mind.

We tend to filter in or out certain things that agree with our perceptions and keep leading us on toward suffering. This cycle tends to reinforce itself. Our filters tend to reinforce our pre-existing perspectives.

So the cycle continues. We come back to this beginning point. We've looped all the way around now, back to the sense doors. When we first started talking about this, it seemed straightforward: there's a body, there's sight, I'm seeing things, there's pleasant and unpleasant. But now we see that we're not coming at this from a neutral place. We are already skewed, already influenced by mental formations, ideas, agendas, views, and beliefs that influence what we take in.

This cycle has a very strong tendency to condition and reinforce itself—reinforcing our views, our beliefs, our opinions, our patterns.

And yet it's not hopeless. It's not hopeless because mindfulness and wisdom can completely change the direction of this pattern. Again, dependent origination describes a chain of conditions with ignorance at the head of the list, leading to the entire unfolding of this pattern. When we bring mindfulness and wisdom to our experience, we are undermining ignorance.

There's often an emphasis on breaking the cycle of dependent origination at the feeling-craving link. It's a very powerful practice to explore feeling tone. The Buddha emphasizes exploring feeling tone over and over again in the suttas. He emphasizes it in the second foundation of mindfulness: when feeling arises, when pleasant sensation arises, know it's pleasant. Know unpleasant. As we open to this exploration of feeling tone with mindfulness and wisdom, we see the possibility for it not to lead on to craving. Bringing mindfulness and wisdom to feeling tone undermines the possibility for ignorance to be there, because we are noticing in the moment: this is just feeling tone.

And yet, while that's a very powerful place to break this chain—bringing mindfulness and wisdom to feeling tone—the Buddha describes that attention to any place we find ourselves, anything we wake up to, anywhere we are in this chain, can be liberating. Mindfulness arises in the midst of, let's say, screaming rage. We have not seen the

feeling that led to that. Screaming rage is present, and mindfulness arises there. The Buddha says: right there, it's possible to understand that screaming rage. Screaming rage is a mental formation.

In one sutta, the Buddha describes how we can practice for freedom right in the midst of exploring every single link in the chain of dependent origination. If we look at mental formation—when one understands mental formations, when one understands screaming rage, the origin of screaming rage, the cessation of screaming rage, and the way leading to the cessation of screaming rage—in this way, one has arrived at right view and has arrived at the Dharma. In this way, one has freedom here and now.

The full quote reads: "When a noble disciple has understood craving, has understood the origin of craving, the cessation of craving, and the way leading to the cessation of craving, that one here and now makes an end to suffering." That same pattern—a pattern you probably recognize—is repeated over and over again: when one has understood clinging, understood the origin of clinging, the cessation of clinging, and the way leading to the cessation of clinging, one here and now makes an end to suffering.

At every link in this chain, the Buddha applies the pattern of the Four Noble Truths as an insight into that particular experience. It might be screaming rage. It might be depression. It might be confusion. It might be feeling tone. It might be love. We understand the state of mind. We understand the experience, the origin of the experience, the end of the experience, and the way leading to the ending of the experience. We here and now make an end to suffering.

Whatever is happening, no matter what is happening, the practice can in that very moment lead to freedom.

I talked about my belief that I had to get over or get beyond certain hindrances, especially around self-hatred—feeling like, okay, well, this is my self-hatred retreat, I guess I have to wait for enlightenment later. That kind of belief lived in my mind. I felt I had to wait for insight.

But when I finally surrendered to recognizing: this is self-hatred, this is how self-hatred arises, oh, this is how self-hatred ends—the mind understood in that moment something very deeply, right in the midst of exploring. I wasn't seeing feeling leading to whatever it was. I was just noticing the experience. I did notice that the experience of self-hatred was unpleasant, but right in the middle of whatever's arising.

To me, this is an inspiring part of this teaching. For those of you who like references, the sutta I'm quoting from—which applies the formation of the Four Noble Truths, this pattern of the Four Noble Truths, to all the links of dependent origination—is in the Majjhima Nikāya, number nine, called Right View.

I find that very inspiring because it keeps me coming back to waking up here and now. No need to create anything else. What's happening now we can meet, we can wake up to. It doesn't matter what we bring our attention to, what we are noticing in the present moment. It doesn't have to be something else. This experience—Alexis pointed to this in his talk the other night—everything is showing us the Dhamma. Everything. Even screaming rage can show us the Dhamma when we bring mindfulness and wisdom to bear on it.

Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 125

Wisdom at Work, Taste of Nibbāna

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this profound talk, Andrea Fella shifts focus from understanding suffering to exploring its cessation—Nibbāna. She examines the Four Noble Truths not merely as descriptions but as practices: understanding suffering, abandoning craving, realizing freedom, and cultivating the path. Drawing from suttas including the Saṃyutta Nikāya's poetic descriptions of Nibbāna as "the unfashioned, the end, peace, the deathless, bliss, refuge, the ultimate," she emphasizes that this freedom is "immediate, visible in this life"—not some transcendent state removed from everyday experience.

Fella offers practical guidance on recognizing "wisdom at work" in ordinary moments of practice. She describes how wisdom operates: putting the mind into neutral when recognizing anger as "just anger," seeing thoughts as simply present-moment phenomena, witnessing the conditioned nature of experience, and sometimes experiencing the rapid disappearance of defilements upon being clearly seen. She shares a pivotal personal insight involving anger, where seeing the mind's intention toward reactivity allowed it to simply let go.

Referencing Buddhadāsa's concept of "temporary Nibbāna" and the Buddha's analogy of the rotting rope—where daily practice imperceptibly wears away at greed, aversion, and delusion—she encourages practitioners to trust the gradual path. These small tastes of freedom, while not final liberation, serve as pointers confirming we're on the path, building confidence that freedom from mental suffering is genuinely possible in this very life.

As we've said a number of times, the Buddha said he teaches only suffering and the end of suffering. We've spent a lot of time talking about the suffering part—exploring how to work with it, how to open to it, how to meet it, how to understand it really. The first noble truth, the foundational teaching of the Buddha, encouraged us to understand suffering. Tonight I'd like to look at the other side a little bit: the possibility of the end of suffering.

In the context of the Four Noble Truths—the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the ending of suffering, and the truth of the path, the way leading to the ending of suffering—I sometimes think of the first two Noble Truths as being a description of our usual lives, how we get caught in the cycle of wanting and suffering. There's the truth of the origin of suffering, the cause, the craving, the wanting, and the suffering itself. In some ways we can look at the second noble truth as being the

conditions for the first noble truth. It's sometimes said of the second noble truth that the arising of craving is the arising of suffering. That's the condition for suffering to arise. And so we see this dependency or conditionality between these two truths.

These two truths describe the dependent origination, which we explored a little bit last week, as a depiction of this cycle of wanting and suffering and wanting and suffering and how it perpetuates itself. In a way, these first two noble truths just toggle back and forth, indicating this cycle.

The third and fourth noble truths are a description of the possibility for ending this cycle. The fourth noble truth is that there is a path that leads to the ending of suffering, the third noble truth. So again, the fourth noble truth describes the conditions that create the possibility for the third noble truth, the freedom from suffering. We cultivate the path and it creates the conditions for freedom. This is the way out, the possibility for being released from the cycle described by the first two Noble Truths.

And yet there's another way of understanding these Four Noble Truths. The Buddha associated actions with each of these truths, turning them into practices really, instead of being descriptions of the conditions of our life and descriptions of how that pattern can change. They become actions, things that we explore directly.

As I said a few minutes ago, the action associated with the first noble truth is to understand suffering—understand in the way that we've been practicing for these last weeks and months. Exploring the experience, not thinking about it, not trying to figure out why it's happening in our usual way of thinking back about what I did and what that person did and what happened next. But more: What is the experience? What is the experience of frustration, of anger, of pride, of greed, of confusion? That's the understanding the Buddha enjoined us to undertake with respect to suffering.

The action associated with the second noble truth is abandoning the cause of suffering, abandoning the arising of suffering, abandoning the craving that leads to the arising of suffering. In my own experience around this abandoning, sometimes there are occasional times when I can recognize that the mind is headed in a certain direction and that's not helpful, so let me see if I can redirect or let go of that direction, that inclination, that movement. And yet what I see most of the time is that the letting go, the abandoning—we can think of the abandoning as being something that happens naturally when suffering has been understood. The deep connection with suffering leads to the understanding which creates the conditions for the mind to simply recognize this is not helpful. The mind abandons the craving. Wisdom has been cultivated and wisdom abandons the craving.

The definition of abandon, actually—I looked this up just to get some inspiration at one point when I was offering a talk on this second noble truth—indicated that abandoning is something that happens when you understand you're in a place of danger. For instance, the term "abandon ship" is to leave that ship because it's going down. It's not like you want to hold on to it, because holding on to it means being pulled under. And so abandoning comes about through understanding the consequences of holding on to something. This is not helpful. There's a kind of natural abandoning that happens around craving as we understand suffering.

The action associated with the third noble truth is to realize the freedom from suffering. And again, to me this follows very naturally from these first two noble truths. We understand suffering; through that understanding the mind lets go of the craving; and through that letting go, realizes the ending of suffering.

In some ways I feel like the Buddha laid out a path of practice for us in associating these actions with the noble truths and pointing out that most of our work is in the understanding of suffering, which is done through cultivating the fourth noble truth—the path, the Eightfold Path leading to the end of suffering. We can think of the Eightfold Path as being those tools: wise view, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration. These are the tools that allow us to understand suffering.

And so the Four Noble Truths have a kind of cycle in them. We cultivate the Fourth Noble Truth in order to understand suffering, leading to the release, leading to the letting go of craving, leading to the realization of freedom.

And so this release—nibbana, the term in Pāli for this ending of suffering—I understand means something like "to cool" or "to go out." I think the word in Pāli would have been used to describe a warm meal sitting on the table that is cooling as it sits there. It's nibbana-ing. So it's a kind of everyday word in Pāli. And yet we create these exalted words for it—"enlightenment." But really, it's a cooling, a release.

Primarily, nibbana is described in the suttas by what it is not: non-clinging, the ending of craving, the absence of greed, aversion, delusion. It's not described in terms of what we get, what we attain, what we accumulate. It's not described by what kind of person we become. There are some descriptions of a person who is free, but largely these descriptions again are in terms of what they don't do. They are not killing. They are not stealing. They are not holding on to things. They are not craving. And so the description of someone who's enlightened is a description of someone who has let go.

I'm going to read you some descriptions from the suttas about this. These are not from one sutta, but I like the way they flow together, so I'll read them as if they were one:

The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called nibbana. Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbana—immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise. And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done and nothing remains to be done. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, nor tastes, nor contact of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is the mind gained as deliverance. This is peace. This is exquisite—the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana.

The Buddha also offers some similes for nibbana. Some of these give a sense of what's been released, what's been let go of—that it is a letting go and not a having of something. These similes can give the flavor too of the other side of how nibbana is described. Not as nothing, but as the great happiness. Mahāsukha, nibbana is sometimes called—the great happiness.

Here are some similes from the Saṃyutta Nikāya. I'm just going to read the similes, and they come together almost like a poem:

The unfashioned, the end, the effluent-less, the true, the beyond, the subtle, the very hard to see, the ageless, permanence, the undecaying, the featureless, non-differentiation, peace, the deathless, the exquisite, bliss, solace, the exhaustion of craving, the wonderful, the marvelous, the secure, security, nibbana, the unafflicted, the passionless, the pure, release, non-attachment, the island, shelter, harbor, refuge, the ultimate.

These descriptions of nibbana might seem almost irrelevant or hard to fathom. Some of them might even sound like, "Why would I want that?" I'd like to point back to two things that inspire me personally from what I read earlier. First: "This is nibbana—immediate, visible in this life." This possibility of freedom. And second: "experiences no mental pain and grief."

The description of the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion brings in the flavor of a possibility I can envision—walking around in my life, potentially not motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion. Having watched these forces a lot in my mind, having seen how they function, having tasted little moments of greed, aversion, and delusion ending, I can envision the possibility that this kind of freedom is visible in this very life. Visible in this life where I am driving a car and using a cell phone and talking to people and buying groceries. This possibility of freedom in this very life. And the description of no mental pain and grief—again, this is to me inspiring, that possibility.

It's not that this description of nibbana says you'll be removed from the world. It leaves open the possibility for so many different expressions of what it means. This is something I love about this teaching.

When I first heard about enlightenment, I thought it must be some big kablooey thing—some major mind-altering experience, not connected really to ordinary life. I envisioned it as something transcendent, not something in this life, in this world. And so this inspires me, this description of the possibility that it's visible in this life. Freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, freedom from delusion. I like keeping it simple in that way.

And I'd say in my own practice, most of the practice has unfolded in a really gradual way. Little tastes, little shifts, small releases. There have been a few larger aha moments. But the Buddha describes the path largely as a gradual path, a gradual awakening. We may have sudden moments that reveal something, or the mind shifts quickly, or sees something in a moment really differently—a kind of breakthrough moment, a sense that something has been revealed that was not seen before. We have some of those. And some are described in the suttas, where the Buddha gives a dharma talk and somebody becomes enlightened. I think Greg mentioned that the other day. But those poems he read—the poems of the nuns—and a lot of the other descriptions in the suttas are more like, "I've been practicing for twenty-five years. I'm doing everything the teacher tells me. And yet still the mind is caught." It's a gradual process, often imperceptible.

I talked about the chopping wood analogy a few weeks ago—that for chopping wood, we may not see the fibers of the wood weakening, but at some point there's a kind of dramatic breaking of the wood. Well, the Buddha gives a more gentle analogy actually. He talks about a rotting rope. Envisioning a shipwreck, he says the rope, the rigging of the ship, lies on the beach, and every day the sun, the sand, the wind, the water, the waves wash over the beach, wearing down the fibers of the rope. The wind, the sun, the waves, the sand—these are like our mindfulness practice. Each day if you go back to

that beach and look at the rope and ask, "Is it different today?" it's not going to look any different day by day. It's a gradual process, a gradual wearing away. You don't notice the difference day to day, but a year later you come back, maybe try to pick up that rope and it falls apart in your hands—has worn through, through that gradual process. That's a lot of what we're doing here.

So often I find, and I definitely had this on retreat, and I'm hearing some of you report this in your meetings: the looking for something to prove I'm doing it right. Waiting for some insight. I spent so many retreats waiting for that insight to prove I wasn't a failure. And at this point I understand it's just every moment of practice wearing away at the greed, aversion, and delusion. And I don't know when a release will happen. I don't have control over that. We don't have a say over when insight happens. But the process of the wearing away, the commitment to wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration, leads to the conditions for that release.

And so through this gradual wearing away, there are some hints along the way, pointers along the way that help us to recognize these little shifts. They're not these big kablooey things—they're just little shifts of the mind saying, "Oh, it's just anger. I can be with anger right now." You see these little shifts, little moments when greed, aversion, and delusion weaken or fall apart for just moments. We often don't tend to notice these moments, at least through our lives—they're subtle. It was one of the similes the Buddha offered: the very hard to see, the subtle, this moment of greed, aversion, and delusion falling away. We are attuned to watch things coming into being. We are attuned to watch the creation of things and not the falling apart of things.

Buddhadasa wrote in a little pamphlet called *Nibbana for Everyone*—he wanted to make nibbana accessible to the people in his village, so he started just talking about nibbana. He said, "Anyone can see if states of greed, aversion, and delusion were with us all day and all night, every second without ceasing, living beings must either die or become insane. Let us consider that we survive because there are moments when the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion are not burning."

And so part of our training here in understanding the suffering is to begin to recognize these small moments, these little shifts. They're a pointer for us. They give us a taste, a tiny taste of that possibility of freedom in this very life. Maybe the flavor of no mental pain or grief. I'd like to describe some of the ways I've noticed this.

Wisdom at work. Really, it's wisdom that does this for us. It's wisdom that frees the mind. It's wisdom that releases greed, aversion, and delusion. It's wisdom that releases craving. And we have all been cultivating wisdom here, and you've all seen wisdom at work. It can operate in some very quiet ways.

At one point when I was in Shwe Oo Min, practicing with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, he said, "Notice when wisdom is at work." And I was confused by that instruction. Wisdom—I thought of it as some grand thing. But wisdom is a function in the mind that allows release.

And so I began holding that instruction. It was kind of like a koan for me. I held it in my mind: what does it mean to see wisdom at work? As I began, not trying to look for it but just holding the question—and this is part of the practice with Sayadaw U Tejaniya sometimes, just holding a question and then doing your practice, not trying to look for the answer, but somehow just holding the question begins to orient the mind to recognize things in relationship to that question—I began to notice many ways wisdom was at work. And actually, many ways I'd seen wisdom at work for years that I'd not noticed. Little moments.

You will recognize some of these flavors that I'm going to describe. You are recognizing wisdom at work. Already you're recognizing wisdom at work. And this seeing wisdom at work is a pointer to that release, a pointer to seeing those little moments of Nibbana—temporary Nibbana, which Buddhadasa called those moments. Not final Nibbana, not full Nibbana, not full release from delusion, but little tastes.

So one of the first ways we begin to see wisdom at work is just the recognition that we can meet some experience, like frustration or confusion, and know it. "Oh, this is just confusion." Just recognizing something as something that's arising in the moment. The pattern might continue, but the mind can know it. This is a huge difference.

The way wisdom is working here is that instead of our minds being caught into the state, believing the state in a way, there's a separation—a little bit of a separation in understanding. An independence. Sometimes the term "independent abiding" is used in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: "One abides independently." I think of it as mindfulness being independent of whatever it is mindful of. So our minds take a step back and are freed from being hooked by a pattern and can just watch the pattern.

I think of this kind of wisdom as being akin to putting a car into neutral. If a car's going sixty miles an hour down the freeway, that momentum is kind of like a pattern in the mind—like anger or aversion. One way to deal with that fast momentum, maybe the safest thing to do on a freeway, if you discover something's wrong, isn't to slam on the brakes and have somebody plow into you from the rear, but to put the car into neutral and gently steer yourself to the side of the road. You put the car into neutral and the car will come to a stop, because you're no longer fueling it. You're no longer fueling the forward momentum.

Very similar with this kind of mindfulness. "Oh, this is just anger." It's like you put the mind into neutral. It's not feeding the pattern anymore. The pattern will come to a stop. We can watch that momentum unwind in a way. Sometimes it takes a while.

So that's one way we see wisdom at work. We understand, we see that shift from being caught by something, believing it, believing the story of that pattern, believing the anger, believing "I have to fix this, I have to do something about this"—to "Oh, wait a minute, I'm just sitting here. This is just anger." Huge difference in those two. Wisdom at work, right there, seeing that.

Related to this is recognizing something happening in our experience as just something happening in the present moment. We see a thought arising in the present moment and know it's a thought arising in the present moment. We see a thought arising and recognize that a response to that thought, an emotion, is also simply arising in the present moment. We might begin, through this kind of recognition, to see, for instance, if we're having a reaction—we see somebody, we notice seeing, and then we see a reaction to that person.

We may be able to see that the reaction is related to something else arising in the present moment—a thought, a view, a belief in our minds. Seeing this at work, recognizing that while the reaction has arisen, it's not based in reality; it's based in a belief, in an idea. So again, we're seeing just what's happening in the moment as something. A thought is just a thought happening in the present moment.

We see past and future not as past and future, but as a thought arising in the present moment about something that happened in the past, or a thought in the present moment about something that might or might not happen in the future. We see experience this way—seeing experience as something happening in the present moment. Wisdom is present to support us in that seeing. And that wisdom being present often creates a sense of release, relaxation around a reaction, for instance.

If we see that a reaction is simply something arising in the present moment and doesn't have... In this case, it's like on retreat sometimes we see somebody and we've got some story about them in our minds. I've had whole relationships unfold in my mind—a relationship where I fell in love with somebody, then met his brother, fell in love with the brother, broke up with the first person. This whole huge story, my relationship to that person, and I'd never even spoken to them. Seeing that happening and recognizing, "Oh, that relationship is a creation, a construction of the mind"—seeing that helps the mind to be more at ease around what's going on.

So again, the wisdom at work creates a kind of container in which the experience is held with more ease. And that ease, that peace around what is arising, is a taste in the direction of freedom. The feeling in the heart of softening or relaxation often comes with that, even as something is unfolding, even as a pattern is unfolding.

Sometimes we witness or see the conditioned nature of experience. We see how we go outside on a cold day, feel the cold wind, unpleasantness, and our mind creates the image of sitting inside with a warm cup of tea—and then, "Oh, it's time to go get a cup of tea." We see the conditioned nature of this unfolding. We see how one thing conditions another, and how the sense of self picks up on some part of this process. In this case, it picks up on "Ooh, being inside having a cup of tea, that sounds nice." We become that and then follow through on it, take birth into it.

So we watch this arising, and sometimes we can just watch it arise, recognize the becoming around "Ooh, having a nice cup of tea," feel that urge, see the urge as arising based on that image, and recognize, "Wow, who's deciding to do this anyway? This is all a conditioned unfolding." We see that. Again, wisdom sees the not-self nature of experience there and recognizes how that construction of a sense of self creates constriction, creates unease.

So we begin to see our experience as a process. We begin to notice when we attribute an "I" to that process. And we do this with insights too. Something happens, something unfolds, and "Oh, I did that. I figured that out." We begin to see how that creation of a sense of self constricts, and how the seeing of the natural unfolding creates more of a sense of ease. Seeing the conditioned nature of experience.

Sometimes this wisdom at work, the release of something, happens in a more dramatic way—a quick release of some defilement, some pattern of reactivity, upon being seen. We may see it arising. We may see the very beginnings of something putting itself together, and in the seeing of it, it just vanishes.

I remember the first time this happened to me where I recognized it. But I thought I'd done something wrong. I was in the welcome room—it was a yoga room at that point. I was doing some stretching, and it was between the two halves of a three-month course. I was feeling abandoned by my part one teachers and was feeling pretty sorry for myself, feeling a lot of loneliness, sadness, loss, grief—those kinds of things. I was watching them, noticing them, bringing compassion to them, practicing with these feelings.

At some point I got a little more curious. I was hanging out with them with the compassion, and I think in retrospect—as I said, I noticed that I'd seen wisdom a lot in retrospect, as I began to understand what it looks like to see wisdom at work. In retrospect I see that what happened was that wisdom got more interested in the emotion itself. It was like, "Huh, I wonder what this loneliness actually is."

And it vanished. It wasn't like the car went into neutral. It was like the car disappeared.

I was very confused. I actually had the belief that I was not very good at looking at emotions. And I had the belief somehow that I made it go away because I repressed it, or something. So I went and talked to my new teacher, who was Carol Wilson, and reported this to her. I described what happened, and I think I led in by saying, "I don't know how to observe emotions. I don't know how to watch emotions, because this is what happened—when I turned to look at it, it was gone. So help me learn how to watch emotion."

She said, "Did it feel like there was anything lingering there?"

I said, "No, it just felt like it was gone."

She said, "Trust your experience."

I was like, wow. Trust my experience.

So that kind of quick disappearance of something—really, the mindfulness just kind of comes close sometimes. Sometimes we have that quick disappearance. Now, we can make the mistake of thinking—and this happens a lot—once we've had those kinds of experiences, they're kind of mind-blowing at times, those quick, rapid disappearances of a defilement. We might believe that it means when it doesn't disappear, when I turn my mindfulness to it, that I'm doing it wrong. We might believe that.

But in my experience, sometimes the conditions are there for a quick disappearance and sometimes they're not. Sometimes our practice is putting the car into neutral. It's just the conditions at this moment. But that too, that quick disappearance of a defilement—the mind is seeing something and releasing, just releasing something it was holding on to.

Sometimes we recognize wisdom at work because defilements are not arising. The Buddha actually encourages us to notice this in the Satipatthana Sutta. He encourages us to notice the non-arising of greed, encourages us to notice the absence. When greed is not present, the instructions go something like: when greed is present in the mind,

one notices greed is present; when greed is absent in the mind, one notices greed is absent. This is attuning to recognizing that certain of the defilements are not there at the moment.

This is a really useful thing to explore, particularly around patterns or habits that are very entrenched, ones that we really identify with. Recognize when it's not happening.

I thought I was a miserable person for much of my early adult life. And there were times I noticed that the misery wasn't there. This was before I started practicing. I noticed sometimes that I was happy. And yet when I noticed that I was happy, the mind didn't kind of take that in. It said something like, "Well yeah, I'm happy now, but what I really know is that I'm miserable"—attributing a kind of ongoing reality to the miserableness and not really taking in that in this moment, it was not there.

So noticing the non-arising of greed, aversion, and delusion. Sometimes this happens more in reflection, more in recognizing, for instance, a pattern that we might have, a particular situation in which we might have been reactive in the past, that is not happening right now. "Gosh, I'm having this conversation with this person and I know habitually in the past I've gotten really charged about this. But it's not happening right now." Recognizing that that pattern is not arising.

Sometimes it happens through simply recognizing that a pattern isn't being activated. It's almost through reflection, more of a recognition than a direct experience in a way. It's not really noticing the direct experience of the absence so much, but it's more like a reflection: "Yeah, usually I'm reactive here."

There are also times when we can actually see the mind moving in the direction of a defilement, and then, seeing it's headed there, it lets go.

In my exploration around anger—I don't think I've told this part of this story—at one point, having spent quite a bit of time noticing anger directly, noticing the experience of suffering that comes when we're angry, noticing, "Wow, this hurts, it doesn't feel very good"—I got much more attuned to anger, got much more attuned to its arising, got much more of a sense of recognition when I was in a state of ease or peace. And then at one point—this was several months into my practice—this insight actually happened. It was one of the pivotal insights of my entire meditation practice, my entire practice, this moment.

It really was—I would say it's the moment that I knew I'm going to do this forever. I'm going to do this as long as I live. This is really useful.

I was cutting an apple. I wasn't even trying to be mindful, but I was in my kitchen cutting an apple, and I noticed a thought arise in my mind about a person I was angry with. I recognized that there was a connection between what I was doing—cutting the apple—and the thought, because the thought was about being with this person at a fruit stand. We were buying fruit in my memory. So I saw the conditioned nature of that thought in that moment.

And also in that moment—this all unfolded in about a split second—I saw the mind kind of reaching out, like, "Oh yeah, let's get angry at that person." I felt the mind headed in that direction, but I knew in that moment that I wasn't angry yet. I could see it was like the intention for anger—the mind headed there. Seeing that intention, and knowing where it was headed, which was suffering, the mind let it go.

It was kind of like if you reached out to touch a pot on the stove without a pot holder and your body just recoils from the heat. The mind said, "Hmm, not going to do that." It just let go of itself. This was wisdom at work—wisdom seeing that the mind's heading toward suffering, recognizing that doesn't make any sense, and releasing it. Poof! That kind of thing happens occasionally when we are witnessing our experience.

It was a profound moment for me, though it certainly was not the end of my anger. I will tell you that. It was not the end of years of looking at anger. But it gave me a sense of confidence in the power of the practice and the possibility for freedom, for wisdom to release.

Actually, I stood there in the kitchen with my knife in my hand waiting to get angry, because I hadn't had this person arise in my mind without anger arising. Within a few moments it hadn't arisen, and after a few more moments, something else arose—which was awe for the practice. Awe at the power of witnessing to free the mind.

These moments can bring confidence, trust. They help point us. They help us recognize that we're on the path. They give us a taste of that freedom—a small taste. They're a pointer.

There's a difference between these moments of release and Nibbāna. These moments of temporary freedom, these temporary releases—they probably still contain some layers of delusion. It's like we've broken through certain layers, freed the mind from certain layers, but deeper layers remain. In that moment of witnessing the non-arising of anger, I was still there. I recognized that I hadn't done that, that it was a process, but I kind of took ownership of some of it. Some delusion was right there.

And also, these small moments of freedom—we have to recognize and let go, because these insights too are impermanent, conditioned. As I said, I spent years watching anger after that moment, and that one insight allowed me to see the possibility and gave me the confidence and courage to keep witnessing it, keep watching it.

Sometimes when we move into states of wisdom or insight, when the mind has moments of clarity or even slightly longer times where it's really just settling back and watching experience arise and pass away—some of you have described this—it just seems so obvious. How can I not see this? And yet, it's not that obvious, because it doesn't take much for delusion to come back, for delusion to obscure what seemed so clear.

Yet we now have a new perspective from which to see our experience. In this way, we can begin to recognize delusion at work. Because having seen it gone, knowing the sense of something different, a different way of being—when our old patterns and habits come back, when there's a veil or filter in front of our experience, something blocking us, obscuring our sense of knowing clearly—we know that obscuration is there now. We can begin to recognize: oh yes, that's delusion at work.

That's anger at work.

Coming back to some of those other ways I mentioned that wisdom can work: we can remind ourselves, yes, this is just a thought. This is just frustration. We've seen the possibility of release from it. We can release from our filters, our distortions. We can more clearly know when they're working.

It's like before we saw it fall away—those distortions—we don't know them. They're so close to our minds that it's like the air we breathe; we don't really notice it's there. Or the fish swimming in water, not being aware of the water. It's always there, so how can we know what it means for it not to be there?

When we have those moments of freedom, we get a taste of what it's like for them not to be there, and then we can much more easily recognize them at work.

And so this practice has this spiral-like nature. We get little tastes, sometimes slightly bigger tastes of freedom. It's not a mistake. It's not like you failed when delusion comes back. It's the momentum of our habits, our patterns. And yet we can now see them more clearly.

And so we just continue.

Let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 126

The Story of Aṅgulimāla

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella retells the story of Aṅgulimāla from the Aṅgulimāla Sutta (MN 86), examining how this ancient tale illuminates the workings of our minds in contemporary times. The story traces how Ahiṃsaka, meaning 'harmless,' became the notorious Aṅgulimāla, 'finger garland,' through a chain of events beginning with jealous students spreading propaganda to his teacher—a pattern Fella connects to modern phenomena like fake news and confirmation bias.

The teaching explores several key themes: how propaganda and repeated misinformation sow seeds of doubt; how our minds filter evidence to match existing beliefs; the dangerous power dynamics between authority figures and those who follow them, illustrated by the Milgram experiments; and how ethical conduct serves as protection against delusion. Fella emphasizes that each person in the story had opportunities to stop the cascade of harm through ethical awareness and personal responsibility.

The talk culminates in Aṅgulimāla's transformation through his encounter with the Buddha, his struggles with meditation while haunted by memories of his victims, and his eventual awakening. Fella highlights how his heart gradually opened to empathetic connection—demonstrated when he felt compassion for a woman in difficult labor—showing that ethical conduct creates the ground for wholesome relationships. The teaching concludes with Aṅgulimāla's enlightenment verses, affirming that no one is irredeemable and that aligning with truth and non-harming leads to liberation.

So tonight I'd like to take my turn at telling a story, a story from the time of the Buddha.

Partly I'd like to offer this story and some teaching reflections about it because over the course of the last few months, given what's happening in our country, threads of this story kept arising in my mind. I realized there's quite a lot here that speaks to us in terms of what's happening in our country, in our cultures—not only here in the United States, but around the world. So I thought I'd offer it as a teaching parable that points to the ways our minds work, how we get caught and act out of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The story, which will probably be familiar to most of you, is the story of Aṅgulimāla, who was a mass murderer at the time of the Buddha and who met the Buddha and had his life—and the community around him—transformed by that meeting.

Some elements of this story seem to be possibly factual. There are indications that perhaps this was a person who actually lived at the time of the Buddha, who was committing murders during that period. There are stories in the Vinaya about Aṅgulimāla—the Vinaya being the teaching on the monastic ethical guidelines. Those stories often describe very human situations and how the Buddha worked with those situations in his community. This also indicates to me perhaps the non-mythical nature of this person. And yet there are elements of the story that do seem magical or mystical or mythological. Still, many parts of the story—which is a lot of what I'd like to look at—describe how our minds work, not only internally but in relationship.

This is where we're headed in our trajectory at this point in the transition of our retreat. We are moving more and more into relationship—just how much we influence each other in what we do, what we say, how we act, how we are.

The sources for this story: the main one is the Majjhima Nikāya. There's a whole sutta on Aṅgulimāla—it's Majjhima 86, for those of you interested in these references. Yet the story in the Majjhima starts basically from the point where the Buddha meets Aṅgulimāla. The commentaries actually give quite a backstory. Some of you may not be as familiar with the backstory around Aṅgulimāla—how he came to be, how he transitioned from being called Ahiṃsaka, meaning "harmless," to being called Aṅgulimāla, "finger garland," for the garland (māla) of finger bones he is said to have collected and worn around his neck from his victims.

So I'd like to start with the backstory.

Aṅgulimāla's father—let's call him Ahiṃsaka at this point—Ahiṃsaka's father was a chaplain in King Pasenadi's cabinet. One night his wife gave birth to a boy, and in his joy and delight, the father cast his horoscope. The horoscope had bad news in it. It is said that it showed the child was born under the robber constellation, meaning he was destined to become a thief, a robber.

The same night the child was born, the king—and actually all throughout the kingdom—the weapons began to glitter. The king woke up in the middle of the night and saw the glittering arms at the foot of his bed. He was terrified, thinking it was an evil omen, and wondered if he needed to somehow protect the kingdom.

The next day he told his minister, Ahiṃsaka's father, about these glittering weapons. Ahiṃsaka's father said, "I think it may be because of my son, who was born last night under this robber constellation." And so they debated in that moment about killing the child, saying that the omens were so poor, so bad around this young child that perhaps they should kill him to protect the kingdom.

But they decided instead to raise Ahiṃsaka with as much love and affection, with as much emphasis on ethical conduct and behavior, as they could. They gave him the name Ahiṃsaka, meaning "harmless," hoping that he would live up to his name. And so he became a model son, a dutiful son, loving and caring towards his parents. They felt they had done the right thing—that they had overcome the omens around his birth.

His father sent him off to the big college in India at the time, Taxila. There too, Ahiṃsaka was very dutiful, very studious, and did what his teacher asked. He became the teacher's favorite, in fact.

Because he became the favorite, the other students began to get jealous. They felt pushed aside by the teacher. They felt they weren't being respected in the way they had been in the past. They decided they needed to put a wedge between the teacher and Ahiṃsaka.

So what they decided to do was send a bad report of Ahiṃsaka to the teacher, in separate cohorts. Three separate groups of people, as if coming from different sources, went to the teacher saying, "We've heard that Ahiṃsaka is threatening to do bad things to you. He's threatening to take over. We believe Ahiṃsaka is plotting against you."

The teacher, having such great respect for Ahiṃsaka, said, "This is ridiculous."

A second time a group went, and a second time again, the response was the same: this is ridiculous. "I know my student, I know Ahimsaka, he's not plotting against me."

A third time the students added, "If our teacher does not trust us, he may examine the evidence for himself."

And so here we have human emotion—jealousy—inciting action, trying to divide people, trying to divide Ahimsaka from his teacher. In this case, they did it quite cleverly. This is how propaganda works. We hear something repeatedly, and it begins to sow a seed of doubt. We begin to hear something, and we begin to question our own perspective.

With that extra suggestion—that the teacher can check this for himself—a little seed of doubt was sown, and the teacher began looking for evidence. Having had this perspective planted in his mind, it is said he found the evidence, even though it was not true.

This also points to a way our minds work. We talked about this a few weeks ago—how when we have a particular view or perspective, we take in information that corroborates that view. In this case there was a little bit of doubt, and so in a way the teacher was looking for evidence to support that doubt. And he found it. What he thought was evidence. He found what he thought was evidence.

So this pattern right here—first of the propaganda and the way our minds are so easily swayed, and then how our minds, once holding a particular perspective, struggle to see things that are not in line with that perspective—these two pieces are very potent forces in our minds.

Right now, there was a news story a couple of days ago. Yes, we're going to talk about news. I feel since the retreat is coming to an end, I can bring in something very current. There was a news story about fake news. There is a kind of industry in fake news. It makes money, partly because of the way things work these days around the internet. Somebody can put a story out there, and if people click on that website, they will get money from the advertisers on that website. So there's this whole industry around creating fake news. And sometimes even news outlets pick up this fake news, don't corroborate the information, and then it becomes much more widely disseminated.

So this is essentially what these students were doing. They were putting out this information multiple times. We need to take care, I think especially right now, even with what we're taking in through the media, that we are not just taking it in at face value. It's sad to say, but we have to do our own research and not fall into the trap of the teacher—to try to look for evidence that supports what we've heard, but instead look on both sides. It's a challenging world that we live in, with information coming from so many different angles.

This pattern around the way our minds see things from a perspective—I talked about that a couple weeks ago when we discussed dependent origination and how even an agenda to look at something in a particular way might have us miss information. Or see things, not see things. That's one of the key things: looking from a particular perspective, we see certain things and we don't see other things. This happens all the time. It doesn't just happen around news stories and major misinformation. It happens in small ways too.

When I was a child, when I was in first grade, I had an art teacher who taught us how to draw fruit—draw apples and carrots and fruits and vegetables. Apples and carrots, those are the main ones I remember. But another piece I remember about the apples in particular is that whenever any of us would draw an apple that was lopsided, she would make us erase it and draw it perfectly round. And she said, "Apples don't

grow lopsided." Even at five, we had seen apples that were really lopsided. And we were like, what is she talking about? But we would erase our circles and draw them the way she wanted.

One day, one of the other students brought in an apple that was really lopsided. She did not seem to even notice that it was lopsided. I was really puzzled by this for much of my life. I have no idea what was going on with her. But every now and then it would come up in my mind—what was that about? And one day—some of my insights happen around cutting apples; there's another one that happened around cutting an apple—one day I was in my kitchen and I cut an apple.

When I cut apples, I tend to cut them along their line of symmetry. Most apples have such a line, unless they are diseased or misshapen. You can find a place where the two halves will be mirror images. Even if an apple is quite lopsided, you can cut it along its line of symmetry.

As I cut that apple and watched it fall into two halves, appreciating the symmetry, this story came back to my mind. Again I wondered, what was going on there? And a plausible explanation occurred to me. Perhaps she had been told in some biology class that apples grow symmetrically, and she misunderstood what symmetrical meant. From then on, that perspective filtered out all evidence to the contrary.

It is rather stunning how something as obvious as a lopsided apple can be filtered out of our perception. We simply don't see it. This force—when we receive information, especially from a reputable source—makes us more likely to believe it, more likely to take it in a certain way, or perhaps misunderstand it in a particular manner.

This is a frightening aspect of our minds: so much of our experience can go unnoticed, and yet we believe we are seeing things reliably. This is one of the reasons why, personally, I do not feel that single eyewitness testimony should be used for sentencing someone for murder. I know from my own experience just how easily evidence coming through our senses can be skewed. It is a frightening aspect of how our minds work. And yet knowing that our minds work this way becomes a real support for us.

Coming back to the story of Ahimsaka and his teacher: this seed of doubt was sown, and the teacher found evidence—or what he believed was evidence—that made him think the students were telling the truth. The students, of course, knew they were lying. So this entire story actually springs from an unethical action by these students, the lie that planted the seed of doubt in the teacher's mind.

From what he believed was now corroborated evidence, the teacher decided he had to act. He felt threatened enough that he believed he needed either to kill Ahimsaka or be killed himself. For those of you interested in this backstory, it is written in a book called *Great Disciples of the Buddha*, which contains a whole chapter on Angulimala. From that chapter: "I must kill Angulimala or get him killed. It will not be easy to kill such a strong man," he reflected. "Besides, if he is slain while living here as my pupil, it will harm my reputation and students may no longer come to me. I must think of some other device to get rid of him as well as punish him."

Again, the teacher is acting out of what he believes to be truth, yet his actions are motivated first by delusion—because he is driven by a story that was false—and also by aversion and fear. These are prompting him to consider unethical action.

It happens that Ahimsaka is nearly finished with his studies and preparing to leave the university. His teacher says to him, "In order for your studies to bear fruit, you must offer a gift back to the teacher." Ahimsaka asks, "What gift should I offer you?" The teacher replies, "You must offer me the finger bones of the right hand small finger of a thousand human beings."

Presumably the teacher believed Ahimsaka would be killed in the process of attempting this. Ahimsaka said, "I cannot do that. My family has always been harmless. We have never harmed anyone. How can I do this?" His teacher replied, "You must either do this, or the teachings you have received will not bear fruit." And so Ahimsaka decides to do it.

There is some question here. Why didn't Ahimsaka push back harder on his teacher? Why didn't he refuse or question this more thoroughly? Several reflections have been offered. One involves the aspect of guru devotion—the teacher-student relationship may have involved an unswerving commitment to the teacher. Again, a kind of blinding of Ahimsaka to the implications of his own actions. It is also suggested that this situation touched upon or opened a karmic thread within Ahimsaka, the tendency that had caused him to be born under the robber constellation. This inclination toward becoming someone who harms may have run deep within him.

This piece too, I feel, is important for us to examine: the power dynamic between Ahimsaka and his teacher. It is only a story, and we might think we would not be swayed by such a situation. Yet power dynamics are truly potent. The dynamic of teacher and student, combined perhaps with an unswerving commitment of student to teacher, can play a very strong role in making choices that go against our own ethical inner compass.

After World War II, there were some studies done on this very topic. One famous study, the Milgram experiment—some of you may have heard of it—basically pointed out how this power dynamic might be played out. They had people come in to participate in an experiment in which the participants were offering electric shocks to somebody to support them in learning something. It was a kind of negative reinforcement experiment. The person who was receiving the shocks actually wasn't receiving any shocks—they were an actor. The person who was offering the shocks was the real subject of the experiment. How far would they go, even when the person being shocked started saying, "Whoa, that's really painful! Stop! Don't do that anymore"?

Surprisingly—I won't go through the entire details of the study—but surprisingly, two-thirds of the people gave the severest level of shock. Something that would have been very damaging to somebody had they really been receiving shocks. Possibly even fatal.

Milgram writes: "I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he or she was ordered to do so by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the participant's strongest moral imperatives against hurting others. And with the participant's ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won out more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation."

There had been some thinking that somehow the conditions in World War II Germany were different. How did all these people end up doing these things under the Hitler regime? This experiment showed that all it took, really, was someone in a lab coat saying, "Please continue. The experiment requires that you continue."

They followed on to explore what variables around this experiment were the strongest ones. Those two were particularly powerful: the experimenter wearing a lab coat. If the lab coat was not on, if the experimenter was in normal clothes, compliance dropped way down. And if the participants were reminded at the beginning of the study that they were personally responsible for any harm that might happen during the study, compliance dropped to almost zero.

This, to me, is a strong pointing to the power of ethics and being reminded of our own ethical responsibility. The power dynamic is potent for us, but if we are reminding ourselves, "I'm responsible for the actions I commit. I'm responsible"—that reminder of our own ethical responsibility strengthens us in the face of that power dynamic.

And so ethics has really played a strong role in this story so far. We have the students motivated by jealousy lying about Ahimsaka's behavior, his conduct. We have the teacher motivated by fear wanting to kill Ahimsaka. We have Ahimsaka picking up the power dynamic and perhaps stepping back a little from responsibility: "This is required by my teacher." At any point in this, if people had looked at their own ethical responsibility, the story would have probably played out very differently.

This is a big piece of what I think is one of the messages of this story: how in our action in the world, committing to ethical conduct can be a great source of strength for us to overcome and combat delusion—in the world and in ourselves. This, to me, is a powerful message. I think that ethics can help to counter some of the deep forces of craving and ignorance in our minds. This is one of the reasons I think it's so firmly on the Eightfold Path.

And so the story doesn't go that way. It goes the way of murder and mayhem. Ahimsaka goes around finding ways to kill people so that he can get the little finger of their right hand, string it on a garland, and put it around his neck. This is now Ahimsaka becoming Angulimala.

The story says that he actually began to enjoy killing people. Perhaps at the beginning it was hard, but repeatedly doing it somehow seemed to harden his heart. Again, this is another piece around ethics. When we routinely engage in unethical conduct, it can shift our hearts. It breaks us off from the capacity to feel that empathetic connection with others. To me, ethics and connection are so closely intertwined that as we behave ethically, it connects us with others. It creates community.

So Angulimala now, terrorizing the neighborhood, hiding in the forest, and basically at first waiting for individuals to go by and killing them. That was pretty easy. After a while, people began avoiding that part of the woods.

People began avoiding that part of the woods, and so Angulimala had to go into towns, into people's homes when they were sleeping, and murder them in their beds. He was creating havoc and mayhem in the neighborhood. The people of the villages went to the king and said, "This is not okay. We cannot live in our villages. We are terrified of this person." And so the king decided to send out a party to find and kill Angulimala.

At that point, Angulimala's mother—her son not having come home from college—began to worry about him. She wondered if this person who was killing people all over the neighborhood might be her son. Believing it was, she decided to go and see if she could reason with him, to try to stop him.

By this time, Angulimala had killed 999 people. He had one more finger to get.

Also at this time, it is said that the Buddha, in his meditation, scanning the world, saw this scenario playing out. He saw Angulimala in his mind and recognized that they shared a deep karmic connection from many lives in the past. He saw that Angulimala, in spite of his behavior in this life, had a great deal of wholesome karma buried in his heart beneath his actions. The Buddha actually saw that Angulimala had the capacity to become completely liberated in this very lifetime.

And yet, in this psychic surveying of the universe that he could reportedly do, he noticed that Angulimala's mother was on her way to try to stop her son—and that Angulimala would kill his mother.

In Buddhist cosmology, killing a parent is one of the actions that makes it impossible to become free in this life. In this cosmology, no one is irredeemable for eternity. There is always the possibility of turning the course of our minds through meeting the Dharma and practicing the Eightfold Path, from any circumstances whatsoever. And yet in a particular lifetime, it is said that certain actions can prevent you from reaching freedom in this very life. Killing a parent is one of those. Killing a Buddha is another.

So the Buddha saw that Angulimala's mother was on her way, and he decided to intervene. He walked the thirty miles to where Angulimala was and put himself between Angulimala and his mother.

Angulimala, seeing this, recognized: here is a monk, probably slow, probably not very strong. This person would be much easier to kill, and then I don't have to kill my mother. So I'll kill this person instead.

I'm going to read from the sutta at this point:

So Angulimala took up his sword and shield and followed close behind the Blessed One. Then the Blessed One performed such a feat of supernormal power that the bandit Angulimala, though walking as fast as he could, could not catch up with the Blessed One who was walking at his normal pace.

Then the bandit Angulimala thought, "It is wonderful, it is marvelous. Formerly I could catch up even with a swift elephant and seize it. I could catch up with a swift horse and seize it. I could catch up with a swift deer. But now, though I am walking as fast as I can, I cannot catch up with this recluse who is walking at a normal pace."

He stopped and called out to the Blessed One, "Stop, recluse, stop!"

The Blessed One responded, "I have stopped, Angulimala. It is time for you to stop."

Then the bandit Angulimala thought, "These recluses speak truth, assert truth. But though this recluse is still walking, he says, 'I have stopped, Angulimala. You stop too.' Suppose I question this recluse."

Then the bandit Angulimala addressed the Blessed One: "While you are walking, recluse, you tell me you have stopped. But now when I have stopped, you say that I have not stopped. I ask you now, oh recluse, about the meaning. How is it that you have stopped and I have not?"

"Angulimala, I have stopped forever. I abstain from violence towards living beings. But you have no restraint towards things that live. That is why I have stopped and you have not."

In this part of the story, the stopping that the Buddha refers to points, to some extent, to ethical conduct—the stopping of unethical conduct, the stopping of harming. And possibly it also points to the stopping of ignorance in our minds. How easily, when we are motivated by ignorance, our perceptions, our views, our opinions, our beliefs can sway us to create harm.

The path in its fullness is about stopping that ignorance, creating the conditions of non-harming.

Through this encounter with the Buddha, Angulimala had a powerful change of heart. It is said in the story that he realized the Buddha had actually come to the forest in order to help him, and he was deeply moved by this. He asked for ordination. The Buddha, understanding through his capacity of mind to see deeply into human beings, recognized that this was not a surface change of heart but a profound transformation, a genuine wish to turn away from harming. And so he said to Angulimala, "Come, monk," in that way ordaining him.

It is said that Angulimala decided to keep his name as a reminder for himself of how he had been spending his life killing people.

For a time, Angulimala became the Buddha's attendant, and together with a group of monks they wandered back through the forest. In the meantime, the king was trying to find Angulimala in order to kill him. On his way out to the forest, the king passed by the place where the Buddha was staying and decided to stop and pay his respects.

The Buddha, seeing the king and all of his army gathered to go out and fight Angulimala, asked, "What's going on? Is there a war in the neighboring kingdom?"

The king replied, "No, there's a murdering bandit Angulimala in the neighborhood, and I'm going to put him down."

The Buddha, given that Angulimala was standing right next to him, fanning him as his attendant—the king not recognizing Angulimala, who had shaved his head and put on robes—said, "Great King, suppose you were to see that Angulimala had shaved off his hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, had gone forth from the home life into homelessness, that he was abstaining from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, and from false speech, that he was refraining from eating at night, ate only at one part of the day, was celibate, virtuous, of good character. If you were to see him thus, how would you treat him?"

"Venerable sir, we would pay homage to him. Offer him requisites. But he is such an immoral man, one of evil character. How could he ever have such virtue and restraint?"

The Buddha gestured. "This, great king, is Angulimala."

It is said that the hair on the back of the king's neck stood on end, so frightened and terrified was he to be in the presence of Angulimala.

The Buddha said, "Do not be afraid, great king. There is nothing for you to fear from him."

Here we have the Buddha essentially telling the king: trust me. There's a kind of counterpoint in this that I find interesting. The Buddha is asking the king to trust him, and the king, who reveres the Buddha, does trust him. In the earlier part of the story, the teacher said to Angulimala, trust me. What's the difference here? How does one know?

My sense, in reading this and reflecting on it, is that the Buddha, in asking the king to trust him—trust me, you have nothing to fear from him—is encouraging the king in the direction of non-harming. He's encouraging the king not to kill Angulimala. This is a trust that's in alignment with ethics.

I realize there may be times when the situation is not so clear. And yet I think this reflection on ethics is a very powerful resource for us in navigating our lives.

There are the kind of apocryphal stories people discuss. If you were in Nazi Germany and a Nazi came knocking on your door while you were hiding Jews, would you lie? A lie is a breach of ethics. And yet I hope I would have the courage to lie in that situation—knowing that if I couldn't come up with something else to say, some plausible re-

sponse that wasn't a lie, in that act of lying I would be protecting the person I was hiding from being killed, and protecting the Nazi from doing the killing. So in another way, it aligns with ethics.

And yet this understanding around ethics and karma—in many ways I think the teaching on Angulimala is a teaching on karma, although that's not the thread I'm carrying through this particular version of the story tonight. The karma of telling a lie doesn't somehow vanish because it's in the service of non-harm. There's still going to be some kind of consequence. Perhaps even just in one's own mind—oh my gosh, I've told a lie to this person. Are they going to find out? Just in that agitation of mind, there is karmic repercussion.

And yet I hope I would have the courage to take those karmic consequences.

So, continuing this story, this first part has really been about relationship—about people in relationship with each other, how people influence each other, how people impact each other, especially along the lines of our behavior, ethically or non-ethically. So much of our interactions have this dimension to them.

The next part of the story really comes into Angulimala's inner life as a monk. He practiced meditation, he went on alms round, and he struggled as a monk. He had a hard time—probably had a harder time than most of you have had here, is my guess, having killed nine hundred and ninety-nine people. Just imagine. I mean, I can't even imagine what my mind would be like if I had killed someone and sat down and tried to meditate.

It is said that Angulimala had not been able to focus his mind on the basic meditation subject he had received, though he tried day and night. Before his mind's eye appeared the place in the jungle where he had slain so many people. He heard their plaintive voices imploring him, "Let me live. I'm a poor man and have many children." He saw the frantic movements of their arms and legs in fear of death. When faced with such memories, deep remorse gripped him and made him get up from his seat and leave.

So he struggled in meditation, having killed nine hundred and ninety-nine people. No big surprise. He struggled in community too. Going on alms round, people knew who he was. They knew he had killed their brothers and sons and wives and daughters. Husbands. So he would basically go on alms round and come back with an empty bowl. And worse at times—if I have a moment, I'll get to that in a bit.

In the community he didn't receive much support, his meditation was a challenge, and yet he kept going. He kept practicing.

And one day while he was on alms round, he hears a woman having a very difficult labor in childbirth. And his heart just opened with compassion. He said, "Oh, how beings are afflicted, how they suffer."

This really begins to point to the inner transformation Angulimala had undergone. He had killed so many people. The image he describes of people writhing and screaming, "Please don't kill me"—his heart had been closed to that empathetic connection with others. And now his heart is opening to that empathetic connection. That's a major shift. His heart is no longer so hardened.

And this, I think, points to one of the benefits of behaving ethically. I mentioned that connection earlier. Ethical conduct also creates the terrain for us to have that empathetic connection with others—a kind of ground out of which wholesome relationships can grow, that empathetic connection.

And so he went back and told the Buddha this story about this woman having difficulty giving birth and how painful it was for him to see that and feel that. And the Buddha said to him, "Go into Savatthi and say to that woman: 'Sister, since I was born, I have never purposely deprived a living being of life. By that truth, may you and the infant be safe.'"

And Angulimala said, "I can't say that. That's not a truth. I've deprived many hundreds of beings of life."

And the Buddha said, "Then say to that person: 'Sister, since I was born with the noble birth, I have never purposely deprived a living being of life. By this truth, may you and the infant be safe.'"

Angulimala reflected and said, "Yes, I can do that. Since I became a monk, I have never purposely deprived a being of life. I can say that."

And he went back into the village and said that statement of truth to the woman. And it is said that she had a successful childbirth and that both the child and the mother lived.

So this is to me one of the magical elements of the story—that a statement of truth would have this power. And yet, we can think about it mythologically perhaps too.

I mean, truth does free us from suffering. We see this in our own practice, in our own meditation. We see how when we align ourselves with the truth, when we recognize, "Oh right, this is what's happening," our hearts can relax. We see the way that truth, when we align with truth, the heart can relax.

The story in the commentaries points to the reason why the Buddha gave this, potentially gave this paired statement—the first saying to declare that you haven't killed any beings, and then the refinement: say that since you have taken birth as a monk, you haven't killed any beings. This was to point out to Angulimala his transformation around sila in his life, to support him in his meditation. That is part of the reason it's said—not so much actually to support the woman in giving birth, but more to help Angulimala reflect on his transformation around ethics.

And it is said that following this time, Angulimala's mind could settle in meditation, and that he became fully awakened.

So for us, struggling in meditation—sometimes we mention this in meetings—reflect on your goodness, reflect on your ethics, reflect on wholesome qualities that you're cultivating. It supports the mind to relax. Recalling the wholesomeness in practice is a supportive condition for us meeting our own minds.

I will end leaving aside a piece of the story—you can read it yourself. I'll end by reading some of the verses that Angulimala wrote. These are in that collection of enlightenment poems written by the monks. Greg mentioned some of the ones written by the nuns. This is the poem Angulimala wrote following his freedom:

Who once did live in recklessness and then is reckless nevermore,
That one shall illumine the world like the full moon unveiled by cloud.

Who checks with profitable deeds the evil kamma one has done,
That one shall illumine the world like the moon unveiled by a cloud.

Oh, let my enemies give ear from time to time—these enemies refer to people who threw things at him on alms rounds—*Let my enemies give ear from time to time and hear the doctrine as told by men who preach forbearance, by those who speak as well in praise of peacefulness and suit the while their actions to their words. For sure such foes would not then wish to harm me, nor would they think of harming other beings.*

So those who would protect all beings, frail or strong, let them attain the highest all-surpassing peace.

Conduit makers guide the water. Fletchers straighten out the arrow. Joiners straighten out the timber. Wise men seek to tame themselves. Wise ones seek to tame themselves.

"None-harmer" is the name I bear, who was a harmer in the past. The name I bear is true today. I hurt not anyone at all.

And though I once lived as a bandit with the name of Finger Garland, whom the great flood swept along, I went for refuge to the Buddha.

And though I was once bloody-handed with the name of Finger Garland, see the refuge I have found. What leads to rebirth is no more.

I stayed in forest, at the root of a tree, in mountain caves, but with an agitated heart. But now I rise and rest in happiness and happily spend my life. For now I am free of Mara's snares.

Oh, for the compassion shown me by the Master.

Let's sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 127

Exploring the Comings and Goings of Mindfulness (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a fresh perspective on the universal experience of mind-wandering by reframing it as an opportunity to study mindfulness itself. Rather than focusing on the wandering mind as a problem to fix, she invites practitioners to observe mindfulness as a phenomenon that naturally arises, persists, and ends—just like all mental processes. This shift in perspective helps dissolve the self-judgment that often accompanies distraction.

Fella distinguishes between mindfulness (satī) and attention, clarifying that attention operates continuously whether we're mindful or not, as illustrated by the familiar experience of arriving at a destination while lost in thought. She introduces the concepts of prompted mindfulness—when we consciously remind ourselves to be present—and unprompted mindfulness—the effortless return of awareness after distraction. The latter, she emphasizes, is particularly valuable to notice because it demonstrates that mindfulness can arise without effort.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with states where mindfulness habitually gets lost, including boredom, planning, sleepiness, and spaciness. Using the analogy of a steam-covered mirror, Fella challenges the assumption that certain mental states are inherently incompatible with mindfulness. She encourages practitioners to approach their experience with curiosity rather than agenda, recognizing that awareness can know any state—even fogginess or dullness—when we stop demanding that meditation feel a particular way. This exploration becomes what she calls 'Your Mind 101'—an ongoing education in understanding the patterns and processes of one's own mind.

We're all starting to settle into the rhythm of our retreat together, our time together. At least for me, I'm already feeling like the beginning, the first days of the retreat have receded, and we're entering into the middle phase of the retreat—the almost timeless phase where days just tumble on with the same pattern each day.

It can be a really beautiful time where the beginning of the retreat has receded and the end of the retreat is far enough away that we're not really even contemplating it. I appreciate this time both as a teacher and as a yogi, where we just begin to settle into this rhythm, start to watch our minds, start to get familiar with the patterns of our own minds.

There's a pattern that I know every single one of you has experienced in these last few days: the pattern of the mind wandering. Of course the mind wanders. We get caught in thought, lost in thought, and yet mindfulness returns.

I'd like to explore this pattern not so much from the side of thinking about the mind that wanders, but rather from the perspective of exploring mindfulness, because the mind doesn't actually wander anywhere. Mindfulness disappears for a time, and then mindfulness reappears. This exploration can be thought of as just watching or exploring what we can learn from the comings and goings of mindfulness, from the appearance and disappearance of mindfulness.

I think we often identify with being the one who's doing the practice and doing the mindfulness. But exploring it in this way is to watch it just as a process at work, just like all of the processes of our mind. Mindfulness is a phenomenon that arises, persists for a while, and ends. We can explore what conditions we can encourage for that process to continue, and some of that exploration comes around noticing what happens as mindfulness comes and goes.

Exploring it like this, at least for me, has taken some of the attachment out of the doing of the practice—taken some of the attachment out of being the one doing the mindfulness. We get to see a lot about our minds as we explore this. One of the main things we get to understand is what are the conditions that lead to losing mindfulness.

We're also reminded over and over again that our minds are out of control. This is not a mistake that our minds wander. It's conditions at work leading to the disappearance of mindfulness, conditions at work leading to the reappearance of mindfulness. So it's a reminder of the not-self nature of mindfulness.

I'd like to approach this exploration with curiosity rather than judgment. What can we learn about our minds by being curious about this phenomenon rather than judging ourselves about the fact that our minds do this? Anybody's mind not wander today? I didn't think so.

We begin to learn about mindfulness itself, begin to get familiar with the experience of mindfulness, which actually turns out to be pretty useful—to get familiar with what it's like, what it feels like, what the experience of being aware, of being mindful, actually is.

During this talk I will be using the terms mindfulness and awareness interchangeably. I don't mean something different when I say them. I like to clarify that because sometimes teachers use the term awareness to mean other things, but in this talk I'm just using it as another term for mindfulness. I like the term awareness partly because it's evocative. It points to that simple capacity for being with experience, being present.

Mindfulness can almost sound like a technical term. Awareness is more familiar or tangible. Are you aware? We can ask ourselves that question and get a hit of, "Yeah, I know I'm aware." I may not know exactly how I know I'm aware, but I know I'm aware.

Other ways to feel into this quality of mindfulness: being with, being present for, resting with experience. Abiding is a term used in the suttas—it's a translation of a term related to vihara, which in the brahma-viharas means "divine abode." The suttas use that term to talk about abiding, being the abode of mindfulness. When you think about that word "abide," what does that evoke?

Abiding with experience. It's not so much a doing or a trying to churn up anything—it's more of a resting back.

Mindfulness is related to the natural reflective capacity of our minds, the capacity that our minds have as human beings to know that we know. It's a very natural human possibility. In some ways, I think it's part of what makes us distinct as creatures, as animals—one of the qualities that really highlights a difference between us and many other animals, although I understand there are some other animals who have this self-reflective capacity. They can test it in some ways.

So mindfulness is related to this capacity to know that we know. And yet right mindfulness directs that capacity with a certain view—the right view that Carol was talking about—which I'll frame very simply right now as directing that capacity towards understanding what's happening in the present moment as something that's happening in the present moment.

Now that sounds like almost nothing, but it's very different from our usual relationship to knowing that we know. I think often when we know that we know something, we relate it to what it means about me or others. It's not simply recognizing, "Oh, this is what's happening in the present moment." It always seems to be filtered through some view of me, I, mine, or them, they, theirs.

And so we are exploring this capacity, cultivating this capacity to know that we know, being interested in phenomena that happen as phenomena in the present moment. Interest in what's happening as human experience, rather than personal experience.

The qualities of right mindfulness—there are many, actually. When the mind is really present and balanced, many qualities are cultivated there. But two in particular: it's a non-judgmental, non-reactive state that has more interest and curiosity about what's happening as a human phenomenon. "Oh, this is what anger feels like. This is what love feels like. This is what tingling in the body feels like."

There's a piece I'd like to also clarify around mindfulness. There are many functions in our mind that take care of us and do things. Mindfulness is one of those functions. As I said, it's related to that capacity to know that we know—that's its function. Mindfulness's function is to know that we know, to know what's happening as what's happening in the present moment.

There's another capacity of mind that's related to it and sometimes is confused or conflated with mindfulness, and that's the factor of attention. Our minds have this capacity to pick something out of the field of experience and attend to it. Right now I could ask you to check in and see what's the experience of your hands. Notice your hands. Notice the sensations of your feet. Notice the contact of your hips against the chair or cushion or bench. This is a way of directing attention. This is using that capacity we have to choose what we're paying attention to.

So this is one way that attention works sometimes. We can direct the attention; it's amenable to conscious control. We can choose what to pay attention to, and we use this a lot in our meditation practice. We choose, "Okay, I'm going to practice with seeing if I can stay with the breath." That's using the factor of attention to cultivate the mindfulness, to help support the mindfulness.

The factor of attention can also be receptive rather than directed. It's kind of like an analogy with the breath. We can choose, "Okay, I'm going to take a breath in now, and I'm going to take a breath out now." We can choose to regulate our breathing; we can control that with a conscious choice. And yet if we don't choose to do that, the breath will breathe itself. It does its own thing if we're not consciously directing the breathing in and breathing out.

Attention has a similar possibility. We can choose to direct the attention, but if we are not consciously directing the attention, processes in our mind—habits, patterns, conditioning—are choosing what to pay attention to. And I would call this, in a way, receptive, because we're not engaged with a conscious choice.

There is a choice being made about what to pay attention to, but it's not a conscious choice. It's not a sense of me saying, "I'm going to pay attention to the breath." If we settle back and relax and don't consciously direct the attention, attention will pick up

on something or other. And so attention is functioning every single moment of our experience, whether we're choosing what to pay attention to or not. Attention is always happening. Attention happens whether we're mindful or not.

Here's an example to give you a sense of what it means that the mind is paying attention when we're not mindful. Many of us have had the experience of driving and being lost in thought, then suddenly arriving at our destination. It's like, "Oh, I'm here. Where have I been?" Mindfulness was lost. It wasn't paying attention. And yet something was paying attention, because you managed to drive and arrive at your destination safely. We can see that attention is working when mindfulness is not. There's a distinction between attention and mindfulness.

One of the ways that attention and mindfulness can get confused—at least in my own mind, especially early in my practice—was that I thought if I was not directing the attention, then it wasn't mindfulness. If I wasn't choosing what to pay attention to, then I must be doing something wrong. It can't be mindfulness. But mindfulness can know what's happening in the present moment receptively, whether it's attention doing its thing or whether we're directing the attention. Both possibilities are there.

We can settle back and be aware and mindful without choosing what to pay attention to. That's the beginning of exploring what we might call open awareness—or undirected awareness. I like to call it receptive awareness, because the feeling of it is settling back and letting experience come into awareness, just receiving what's already happening, not involving ourselves with choosing what to pay attention to.

Right now, are you aware? It's that simple check-in: Are you aware? And what's obvious? Not looking for anything in particular, but just knowing, "I'm aware," and maybe seeing is what's obvious, or hearing the sound of my voice. Just really simple.

We begin to explore what it means to be mindful, what it means to be aware. There are different ways that mindfulness comes about. A lot of how mindfulness arises is through what we're doing here. When we're mindful, it's like we're reminding ourselves to be mindful, either through connecting with a collecting or gathering experience like the breath, the body, or hearing. Essentially that is a kind of reminding ourselves: be mindful. So when we are mindful, we can remind ourselves to be mindful. This is one of the best ways to cultivate mindfulness. It does require that we're already mindful to do it, and this is often the way instructions are given. This is sometimes called prompted mindfulness—we prompt ourselves, we remind ourselves to be mindful.

We can do this in many ways, and we'll talk about this during the retreat. Simple ways of just staying connected to a particular experience, or just reminding yourself: Am I aware? Checking in: Am I aware? That's a kind of prompting, asking the question. You're probably not going to ask the question unless you're already aware, so it's a prompting, a reminding. Check in. What is it like to be aware?

That's one way mindfulness comes about—through prompting it, reminding ourselves to be mindful when we're already mindful. The other way mindfulness comes about, and fortunately this happens quite a lot, is what's sometimes called unprompted mindfulness. This is the mindfulness that happens every time you get lost in thought and come back.

That moment when mindfulness returns is like waking up—oh, I'm back. This is the other side of the wandering mind. The mind has wandered, lost in thought, and at some point it's as if the lights come on. We're back. Mindfulness has returned.

This experience of mindfulness returning happens far more than you're aware of. Often what happens when mindfulness returns—especially in our daily lives, but also here on retreat—if we're doing our yogi jobs or something and we notice we've been lost in thought, a little bit of mindfulness comes back, and then we start doing something with it. Instead of noticing, "Oh, mindfulness is back," we start doing something with it. We might say, "Oh, I'm back, let me come back to the breath." Or in daily life it might be that we just pick up what we've become mindful of and start thinking about it or planning what to do next. Because we're not really that interested in just noticing mindfulness itself.

And this is what I'd like to encourage. Cultivating the recognition of mindfulness returning after the mind has been wandering, noticing that moment when mindfulness returns, getting familiar with what it feels like for mindfulness to come back—this is powerful. At least in my experience, when I really started doing this practice of being curious about what it's like, something shifted. In fact, the question I explored was: what's the difference between not being mindful and being mindful? Joseph had given me that instruction, and I thought, how do I notice what it's like not to be mindful? I couldn't really, in a way, but I noticed that in the moment when mindfulness returned, there was a kind of distinction. I could notice almost like my mind remembered what it was like not to be mindful in that moment as mindfulness returned. There's a recognition of the fuzziness or haziness or stuckness to a thought, a kind of delusional process going on, versus the recognition of, "Oh, I'm back."

When I started doing this exploration of what it's like to recognize mindfulness returning, it cut through my judging mind about the mind wandering. It had a really powerful impact because I realized that what I was exploring was noticing the difference between being mindful and not being mindful. And so it doesn't matter how many times my mind wanders—every time that happens, I get another opportunity to notice that difference. Each time I was more interested in the return of mindfulness than in judging myself for the fact that I hadn't been mindful. That was really helpful.

The other piece that's really helpful is that it began to highlight for me, to point out, this experience of being mindful. Oh, this is what it feels like when mindfulness comes back. As we get attuned to that experience, as we feel into that moment—this is what it's like when mindfulness returns—the sensitization, the conscious recognition of that moment, begins to help us recognize it when it happens. Because, as I said, it's happening far more often than you are aware of. So just this simple process of being curious about that return of mindfulness basically helps us recognize the return of mindfulness more. A very simple kind of process.

Another great thing about that moment, about this unprompted mindfulness, is that you didn't have to do anything. It is effortless. Completely effortless. It's mindfulness without effort. Take that in. In that moment, that was another great learning for me. Oh, wow, here's mindfulness without really trying to turn it up. Here it is. So it's a pointer to that possibility of being aware with ease, of the simplicity of just being aware and knowing what's happening.

And so when you remember, in that moment of remembering, first simply recognize: awareness is back. What's that like? And again, it may not be so clear at first. It's okay if it doesn't seem really obvious to you what it means to be aware. Just take in: okay, aware. I know that I'm aware right now. And then it's often helpful to simply recognize what's obvious in this moment. There's awareness, and there's something that awareness is aware of in that moment. When awareness comes back, there's something it's already aware of. And so here it is—mindfulness has returned, and it's already aware of something. There's nothing that we have to do in that moment other than explore: what is this moment?

Often in that moment, particularly early in our retreat practice, we suggest that when mindfulness returns, come back to the breath. But I'd like to suggest you might explore hovering for even just a few moments in that place. See if you can take in the return of mindfulness. Notice what mindfulness is knowing in that moment. Then, if you're practicing with the return to the breath or return to a primary experience, that's fine—doing that, coming back to that experience.

We can also explore the possibility of recognizing: already aware. And now already aware of something else. And already aware of something else. At times—not always, but at times—we can rest back in that very simple awareness and receive experience. Instead of choosing to direct the attention at that point, we receive what the attention is knowing. We can explore mindfulness in that way. That is a form of mindfulness. It is a form of awareness.

Another useful piece about noticing what's already happening is this: if the mind has been wandering, if the mind has gotten lost in thought, it's gone off and been doing stuff—thinking about the past or the future, wandering around lunch or dinner, ruminating on something, or perhaps caught or lost in a state of mind as opposed to thoughts. In any case, when we return, the mind has been doing something else for a few moments or even minutes. And that something else has been conditioning our experience. It's been creating a new landscape while we weren't looking.

When mindfulness returns, it's often really useful to recognize: what's the landscape like now? Sometimes when the mind wanders, it wanders off into the past and gets involved in conversations with partners or friends or co-workers, and emotions arise. We can wake up and find—whew—there's a lot happening here. It's really useful to acknowledge that, to know exactly what we're waking up into. If we're not clearly aware of what we're waking up into, there could be a pull back out into the wandering mind. If we don't acknowledge that the mind is confused and frustrated, we miss something important. Let me know that.

The mind can also wander into wholesome states of mind. This is fantastic when this happens. I remember at one point I was seeing the mindfulness, and the mind kept wandering, kept wandering, and I kept waking up thinking about old friends from the Peace Corps. And I thought, okay, just come back to the breath or whatever—just trying to come back. But the mindfulness kept getting lost. The mind kept wandering into these thoughts about these friends. Finally I decided, well, let's see what's there when I come back. And what was there was mettā—a very connected feeling of love that I hadn't really touched into. But it had a very strong pull on the mind, and that's what kept my mind going back out to thinking about these friends. As soon as I recognized, oh, the landscape that's been created is mettā, I just stayed there. Mindfulness could be present for that.

So that's the side of looking at waking up from the wandering mind—getting curious about the awareness itself, what awareness is aware of, the landscape that's been created when the mind has wandered and mindfulness has gotten lost.

The other really useful side to explore is where the mind gets lost. Where does awareness get lost? There are many, many ways our awareness gets lost. Where does mindfulness get lost? I'd like to encourage a curiosity about this. At one point I was in a group and somebody said, "Well, either I'm mindful or I'm not. I just don't see how it's possible to see where the mindfulness goes." It is actually possible to get curious about mindfulness getting lost. It doesn't simply turn off like a switch. There's a process that happens, and we can get curious about that process.

This kind of curiosity is one of the great supports for the continuity of mindfulness. As we start to get curious about where mindfulness gets lost, it supports our recognizing the places and ways that mindfulness gets lost. Then we can add some interest to those times, those things that we get lost in.

This is not so much about trying to force ourselves to stay present. When we begin to notice that the mind gets lost under certain conditions or in certain places or times, what I'm going to encourage here is not doubling down to try to hold onto the mindfulness, but rather being curious. What happens in that situation?

We might lose awareness—we might notice going through our day that we tend to lose awareness doing specific activities. Maybe we notice we tend to lose awareness in our yogi jobs. Or maybe we lose awareness when we go back to our room and close the door. It's like, "Whew, don't have to be mindful now." Or maybe we lose awareness when we walk down the hall for lunch, or when we enter the dining room. Just begin to get curious.

When we wake up after a period of being lost, sometimes we can recognize or remember: "Oh yes, I lost it as soon as I stepped into that dining room and saw the table," or "I lost it as soon as I closed the door to my room." We can reflect a little, recognizing when we come back what we were doing, or what times of day, places, or events tend to be where we lose mindfulness.

And then, rather than doubling down and saying, "Okay, I am going to be mindful when I walk into that dining room—I'm going to hold on to that mindfulness"—I encourage curiosity instead. What happens? What happens there? What thoughts arise? What sights arise? What emotions arise that the mind is not seeing, that you're not noticing? Because when the mind wanders like that, there's something we're missing. The attention has picked up on something and our conscious mind didn't notice it. So this factor of attention was at work doing its thing—it was interested in something. We can be curious about that.

I did this exploration myself. At one point during a long retreat here at Spirit Rock—I think it was a two-month retreat—I noticed that I would wake up finding myself staring at myself in the mirror in the bathroom. I did not notice the intention to look at the mirror. Something about being in front of the mirror—I just got lost in that. So I started being curious about it. Again, not trying to double down. I was more curious about what was going on in there. Can we figure out what's going on? Why on earth am I looking at myself in the mirror, just gazing at myself?

So I just started getting curious. Each time I walked into the bathroom, I knew, "Oh, here's an opportunity." And I would miss it over and over again. I'd find myself staring. "Oh, I missed it again. Look at that. Wow, look at that."

At some point, when I was there in the bathroom, I noticed that while washing my hands, I just glanced up at the mirror. There was this kind of habit to look at myself—what's going on there? What do I look like? It wasn't some deep-seated need to be seen or reflected or anything. It was just a habit. But it was a powerful habit that had been unseen. And then, seeing the intention there, mindfulness just continued.

So sometimes when mindfulness gets lost in these areas, don't attribute a big story to it. It might not be any deep thing. It might just be a habit.

We can also find our mindfulness getting lost in states of body—pain, or really pleasant states in the body. Sometimes when we get concentrated, there's very pleasant bodily experience.

And we can just get lost in it. We can lose mindfulness—not because we're thinking, but because we get checked out or zoned out into the pleasantness. Beginning to be curious about that, we discover that when we get lost in pleasantness, we're actually not fully experiencing it.

We can also get lost in pain. Our minds often have strategies for dealing with pain—many of you have spoken about this in our meetings. When the mind gets stuck by pain, it wants to go off thinking about something pleasant. That's a strategy. I noticed this too: when my body was in pain, I would often find myself checked out into a spaciness. Not particularly thinking, but just zoned out. And when I woke up into that, I recognized that in that place where the mind was zoned out, the pain was not overwhelming.

So I recognized, well, that's a strategy the mind has figured out—how to not be overwhelmed by the pain. It was a non-mindful strategy for not being overwhelmed. But in that seeing, I could recognize: it is possible to have pain and not be all bent out of shape about it, not all aversive about it. So maybe I can know the pain and not be overwhelmed.

I played with that a little bit, just the possibility. It's like, okay, yeah, pain—you can be here. There's a lot of other stuff going on right now. It's like expanding the container. Yes, there's pain, but there's also seeing and hearing and pressure in the body and feet on the ground and temperature and thoughts and emotions. There's a lot going on in the present moment. Sometimes the experience of pain is kind of like a magnet, but expanding that container, we can see there's much more happening.

So I learned from seeing the strategy my mind used that there was a possibility of not being magnetized to the pain. But is there a way to do that mindfully? That became my next question. The mind knows how to do this—can I encourage it to do that mindfully?

We also often lose mindfulness in states of mind—familiar patterns or habits of mind where we tend to lose awareness. Boredom, depression, planning. What are our favorite thoughts, our favorite ways to get lost? As we wake up, that exploration I mentioned becomes valuable: notice the landscape that's there, what's been created over the last little while. This often helps us recognize the states of mind in which we get lost.

And in that moment of waking up—for instance, if the mind gets lost in boredom—there's the possibility of recognizing: awareness is here and the mind is bored. Boredom doesn't inherently mean non-mindfulness. Planning doesn't necessarily mean non-mindfulness. It's possible to be curious about these states of mind—the mind projecting into the future, or the mind feeling disconnected from experience.

So the moment when we wake up and recognize the landscape, that's a pointer to being able to be present for something we habitually aren't present for. In that moment of waking up, it's like, oh, this is what it's like to be present for planning. This is what it's like to be present for depression.

These habitual states that we get lost in can be very strong patterns or habits of mind—ones we've done a lot of, practiced a lot. Our minds have gone to them over and over again, and some of those patterns can be very strong. Some can be stronger than our capacity for mindfulness. So if we wake up and notice, oh, depression, it's almost like we just get pulled under again.

It's really useful to recognize whether a particular state is overwhelming, whether we feel like we're being pulled into a rabbit hole around these difficult states of mind. They're usually associated with the hindrances that Bonnie spoke about last night. Certain flavors of those can feel like they're pulling us under. That pattern is like a really strong wave, and mindfulness is like this little trickle.

When that happens, it's useful to explore some strategies. Often it's not so helpful to try to be mindful of something when it's an overwhelming pattern, when it feels like it's pulling us into a rabbit hole. Instead, try to redirect the attention or broaden the attention, as I mentioned earlier. There's a lot of other things going on right now. Sometimes we can redirect the attention.

It's like, "Yeah, okay, you can hang out in the room with me, but I need to pay attention to something else right now."

So this "not now" or setting aside isn't done with aversion, but with a very compassionate, kind attitude. It's like, "Okay, yeah, it's not helpful for me to try to pay attention to that very strong pattern right now, so I'm not going to try to stop you, but I'm going to put my attention on my feet and just walk right now." Just redirecting the attention onto something really simple. And often I find a neutral experience is helpful in that kind of situation.

Related to these states of mind in which mindfulness tends to get lost—familiar ones for each of us, like boredom or depression or planning where mindfulness tends to get lost—there can be some states of mind that more generally we think of as non-mindful. Habitually mindfulness gets lost in them, such as spacing out, sleepiness, dullness, fogginess. Some of these states of mind we may think of as inherently non-mindful. But it's not true. It is a state in which mindfulness is not habitually present, but it is not inherently impossible to be mindful of spaciness.

With certain of these states, there's an analogy I like to use. If you have a mirror, a mirror just reflects what's in front of it. It doesn't care what's in front of it—this is kind of the way mindfulness works. A mirror is a pretty good analogy for mindfulness in some ways. Mindfulness also doesn't care what it reflects. Its job is just to know, "Oh, this is what's happening in the present moment." Like that, that's the job of a mirror: it reflects what's happening in the room.

Now think about that mirror coated by steam. You're standing in front of the mirror, and you think, "The mirror's not doing its job. I need to clean it off. It's not doing its job." Well, the mirror doesn't care. It's actually doing its job perfectly. It is reflecting every drop of water on that mirror perfectly. It's just not doing the job we want it to do.

Likewise, often with states like sleepiness, dullness, spaciness, it's like that fog on the mirror. And often when we enter into those states, we fight them because we think, "I can't be mindful in this state." And so, while the mindfulness may be perfectly happy knowing, "Oh, this is what spaciness is like," we are not perfectly happy with that. We want the mind to be reflecting the clarity of every single little detail of the in-breath. Well, that's not what's happening.

It's possible to be curious about these states, these kinds of states of haziness or fogginess or fuzziness. A great thing to check there is—here's a little check: How many of you have had the thought, "I'm too sleepy to meditate"? Many of you. I'd like to propose to you: if you are aware of that thought, you have enough awareness to be aware of sleepiness. So just explore that. Usually when we have that kind of thought, it means we want to be aware of something other than sleepiness or dullness or fogginess or spaciness. Explore the possibility. It is actually possible to be mindful of that.

At one point I was exploring this—actually, I was exploring the opposite when I started. I was having a meal, and I noticed the mind kept spacing out. At that point my mind was saying, "Okay, being mindful means paying attention to the eating." So I had this agenda. And so I'd come back and I'd notice the lifting of the fork and the placing of the food in my mouth, the chewing, the tasting, and then the mind would space out again. Oh, come back. It spaced out again. It did this over and over again.

At some point, I began to realize, "Okay, well, hey, let's see if I can watch it space out." And I found that it was possible to be there while the mind spaced out. What I noticed in that moment, as I kind of hung out, was that it almost felt like the mind hovered up to the top of my head, a little to the right, hanging out up here with a little buzzy feeling. It was very restful, very easeful, kind of pleasant. And in that moment, the mind kind of relaxed.

It was as if the mind said, *Oh, thank you for letting me rest.* The mind had been looking for rest—it was tired, it wanted to take a break. I had been carrying this agenda: *Do mindfulness, do mindfulness.* And the mind was saying, *I'm tired, let's rest.* It was going to take its rest whether I wanted it to or not. Being aware of it, I could watch it rest. It rested for about thirty seconds, and then it was ready to be present for whatever came next. The spacing out dissipated, and then there was clarity—as if the fog had dispersed. Just from watching it.

There's a common belief, I think, that the mind needs to be in a certain state in order to meditate, or that meditation feels a certain way. Sometimes this comes with a familiarity we develop—we begin to get a taste of a certain experience, like really being able to touch into the detailed sensations as the breath arises, or being very stable while

thoughts come and go and sensations come and go. We may have a sense of that, and it can be very clear sometimes—a taste of precise moments of knowing. And we think, *Oh, that's what it's supposed to be like.*

Well, that's one way. That's one way it can be. If we're always looking for that, or something in particular—looking for a certain state, a certain configuration of what we think it's supposed to be like—we'll miss other ways that it can be.

There are so many different experiences possible when the mind is present. Sometimes it feels like the attention is really focused right down on very specific experience. Sometimes it feels very broad, panoramic. Sometimes it feels like the mind is staying right with one thing and just hangs out there. Sometimes it feels like things are popping in, one thing after another—pop, pop, pop, pop. Sometimes it feels like many things are happening at the same time. Sometimes it feels like we're an observer, kind of separated from experience, like there's a clear difference between the observing and what's observed—almost a separation in that experience. Sometimes it feels like we're right in the middle of the experience.

And so this encouragement to be curious: How is it for you right now? There's so much to see. We can't even fathom how much there is to see. Sometimes experience might just feel completely ordinary. Like, *Well, this can't be right.* But wait—I'm aware. This is what it's like to be completely aware and have experience feel really ordinary.

My hope is to encourage you to be interested in exploring your experience—exploring what is here now, recognizing the mindfulness, the awareness. Aware, am I aware? And what's here? Because there's so much to see.

As we explore this, we definitely begin to recognize that this body and mind are just processes at work, tumbling on, out of control much of the time. Not me, not mine, not who I am. It also gives us a great education about what our minds are up to. We could call this retreat Your Mind 101. You're really going to get to know your mind. And I still feel like I'm taking Your Mind 101—just different levels of it.

This encourages us to move from judging our experience, thinking *I need to figure out how to make it be a certain way*, to simply: *Oh, it's like this. This is how it is.* However it is, there's the possibility of waking up to that.

So let's just sit for a moment.

So.

CHAPTER 128

Effort & Energy (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of wise effort (sammā vāyāma) and energy (vīriya) as essential elements in meditation practice. She begins by establishing that energy is a neutral quality—the same force that drives anger or greed can fuel love and generosity—and thus requires wisdom to direct it skillfully toward liberation.*
>
> *Fella unpacks the four kinds of wise effort from the Noble Eightfold Path: preventing unarisen unwholesome states, abandoning arisen unwholesome states, cultivating unarisen wholesome states, and maintaining arisen wholesome states. Rather than presenting these as separate practices requiring aggressive doing, she demonstrates how wise mindfulness naturally encompasses all four efforts simultaneously. When we mindfully observe anger, for instance, we are both letting go of the unwholesome state and cultivating the wholesome quality of mindfulness itself.*
>
> *The talk addresses practical concerns about balancing energy in meditation, using the Buddha's famous lute-tuning analogy. Too much effort creates restlessness; too little leads to dullness. Fella offers the insight that recognizing these states as 'high energy' or 'low energy' rather than labeling them as hindrances can reduce the subtle aversion that compounds our difficulties. She introduces the image of a kick scooter—light, repeated taps building momentum—as a model for sustainable effort that doesn't exhaust us. Drawing on the pāramīs, she notes that patience follows energy in the traditional sequence, reminding practitioners that wisdom ripens in its own time: 'When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree.'*

One of my favorite parts of giving a dharma talk is sitting up here at the beginning, listening to all the sounds as people settle in—the rustles, the pops of chairs, the adjustments—and hearing it slowly settle. It brings a lot of delight to feel that settling happen.

Tonight the topic is effort and energy. In some ways this is connected to what we might call the art of meditation, because we all have to find our way to how we bring our effort and energy into the practice. The Buddha did offer us some guidelines and suggestions. In particular, he encouraged us to apply ourselves with wisdom and balance. So one of the things I'd like to explore at the beginning is: what is the wisdom that helps us in making effort?

In one of the Theravadan lists—the paramis, the ten perfections—we find a series of beautiful wholesome qualities that the Buddha is said to have cultivated in the many lives before he became the Buddha. In that sequence of ten beautiful qualities, wisdom and energy are positioned right in the middle. Wisdom directly precedes energy in that list, pointing to the way in which we need to have some kind of wisdom in how we use our energy in practice.

Energy itself is a neutral quality. It is the same kind of energy connected with anger, confusion, hatred, pride, greed, and irritation as it is with love, joy, kindness, and generosity. The Buddha really encouraged us to look at how we use that energy—to use it in ways that will help us become free.

Wisdom is really a foundation for us. It holds the first position in the Eightfold Path: wise view and wise intention. These first two factors highlight the importance of our perspective, of how we engage in the practice.

It's said that after his awakening, the Buddha reflected on the world and human beings and how they go about living their lives. He realized that while beings want to be happy and do things in order to find happiness, they are actually doing the very things that keep them stuck in struggle and suffering. Our usual worldview, in a simplified way, is something like: having things or being seen in a certain way will make me happy. And there is a measure of happiness when we get things we want, or people see us as we'd like, or we feel we can control what we're doing. But it is not reliable. Things are impermanent, and so having things is not a very reliable source of happiness.

We all know how our own minds change. Our views and opinions of other people are not very stable. To think that we can find our happiness in having other people's views and opinions be the way we want them to be—that's pretty unreliable. The Buddha recognized that the very way we go about our lives, we are placing our faith in things that are not reliable. We're trying to find happiness by placing our faith and trust in things that are impermanent, unreliable, and out of our control.

In his own awakening, his first teaching was connected to this understanding of suffering—recognizing that suffering is created or caused by craving and clinging in the mind, and that it is possible to be free from that craving, leading to a release from suffering. There is a path to cultivate this direction. An understanding of suffering, an understanding of what takes us toward suffering and what takes us away from it, is foundational to what the Buddha taught.

This is a piece of wisdom. There are many different ways that wisdom is pointed to in the Buddhist teaching, but here is the one I'd like to look at: certain qualities and states of mind tend to head us in the direction of suffering, while other qualities tend to lead us away from suffering.

The Buddha pointed to unskillful, unwholesome states as those based in greed, aversion, and delusion. These are all the states that lead to reactivity in our minds. Anger, hatred, confusion, pride, irritation, depression, boredom—so many different states, hundreds probably of different reactive emotions. But they all have this thread back to being connected with greed, aversion, and delusion.

The understanding is that when we act, and that intention toward action is connected with greed, aversion, and delusion, that's what tends to head us toward suffering. But when we act with intention connected to wholesome states—states based in non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—we tend to head in the direction of freedom. It takes us on a different path. This includes love, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, concentration, mindfulness, generosity, wisdom, ethical conduct, and truthfulness—many wholesome qualities of mind. When we act from those qualities, we move toward liberation.

And so this understanding of what leads us to suffering and what leads us away from suffering is what the Buddha grounded his teaching on wise effort in. Wise effort really points to recognizing and cultivating those states that lead us away from suffering, and letting go of states that lead us towards suffering.

So let's start there in this reflection on effort and energy. The Eightfold Path includes wise effort as a whole path factor, and it has a very clear definition. I'll name it first: there are four kinds of wise effort. The effort towards the non-arising of unwholesome states that have not arisen. The effort towards the abandoning of unwholesome states that have arisen. The effort towards the arousing of wholesome states that have not arisen. And the effort towards the maintaining or sustaining of wholesome states that have arisen.

Now, these may sound a little convoluted, but they're actually not when we start to look at them. The first one—the effort towards the non-arising of unwholesome states that have not arisen—has three negatives in that sentence. How do we parse it? Basically, it's understanding, looking at our experience, using mindfulness, observing what happens, and recognizing causes and conditions that tend to lead us towards suffering and struggle—and avoiding those causes. Another way to frame this first kind of effort is as avoiding unwholesome states.

The use of "avoiding" here, however—I mean, we have associations with that word, a relationship to it. And if we apply our usual relationship to avoiding to this path factor, we may find ourselves engaging in aversion towards unwholesome states. So I want to tease this apart. This is not about aversion to unwholesome states.

For instance, suppose you notice that every time you see a particular person, you feel agitation and reactivity. On the surface of it, you might think that avoiding the causes—looking at this in the big picture of what you're noticing right now, where seeing that person creates the conditions for being reactive—would mean you should avoid that person. We might think that's what is instructed here. There may be times when that is useful and skillful, a skillful means for finding a way to begin exploring what's going on in the mind with this particular situation.

But a deeper look reveals something important: fortunately for us, other people do not have the power to do anything to our minds. Seeing another person that we come into reactivity around—it's not as if that person is doing anything to us. There's something going on in our own minds. And I think what this teaching around avoiding the causes and conditions points to is beginning to get really curious about what's actually happening. What's going on in the mind? It's not just about seeing somebody, as if seeing them pushes some button that creates reactivity. There's a whole series of events that happen. Can we get curious about that?

Maybe that person has a gesture that reminds you of somebody who actually did you some harm in the past, and that gesture is what's leading to the reactivity. That gesture and that memory connection is what's creating the response. So we can explore the deeper conditions and begin to be curious about them. In this exploration, we might recognize that there's a thought that arises, and we can begin to decouple it from that particular person. It's not so much about them specifically. We see that it's more about the memory we're reacting to.

In this exploration, we discover that avoiding the state isn't so much about avoiding the person, but more about understanding the deeper reactivity. As we begin to meet in our minds with mindfulness the agitation that comes up as a result of a memory, a deeper kind of letting go begins to happen.

Here's another example, perhaps simpler in a way. You might notice that when you stand in the lunch line, when there are a lot of people around, you see yourself judging a lot. You notice people taking a lot of food or different kinds of food or filling their plate in a different way, and there's judgment: "Wow, they do it really beautifully. Look at how beautiful that plate is." Or, "They're taking too much or too little or just right," or "I'm not taking the right amount." Judgments arise.

Again, we might think that this teaching of avoiding the conditions that lead to judgment might mean going late to the lunch line so we don't have to watch people put food on their plates. That would be one way to approach it. But we could bring more curiosity to what's going on there—just being curious about the judgment.

And also being curious about where the mind leaves, because when the mind goes into judging, the mind is leaving the present moment.

Joseph Goldstein noticed this. You're in good company if you find yourself judging when you walk into the dining room. As Joseph said, this was a major practice for him. And at some point he recognized that what he should do when he walked into the dining room is note "seeing." Because his mindfulness was going out the eye door. And when he started noting seeing, he just noticed movement. He noticed that he was present for the seeing as opposed to being caught by judging what he was seeing.

This is a really useful practice. This is a form of containing, of guarding the sense doors in a sense. So instead of guarding the sense doors by avoiding the line entirely, we guard the sense doors with mindfulness. That's a way to explore this—avoiding the arising of the reactivity.

The second effort is the effort to abandon or let go of unwholesome states that have arisen. The word "abandon" here has certain connotations for us. We think of abandoning often as actively putting aside, actively getting rid of. And there are times in our practice when a kind of active recognition is helpful—recognizing, "Wow, I'm really caught by this. It's not helpful to try to be with this right now." A kind of setting aside, a "not now" approach. A recognition that this is overwhelming. You can be here in the room with me, but I can't put attention on you right now, so I'm going to put attention on something else. That can be a skillful means. That's a way of decoupling from reactivity.

Or sometimes replacing reactivity. If we're noticing that we're reactive—judging someone or confused about something—the Buddha taught a tool: if we have some kind of reactivity going, we can pick up another thought, a wholesome thought, and replace it. Replace the unwholesome thought with a wholesome thought. So if there's anger, for instance, replacing it with a thought of mettā. If you see somebody and you have anger arising, a way to navigate that, to begin to let go or move away from it, might be to bring in a mettā thought. May you be happy. May you be at ease. These are ways to work with this form of wise effort to let go of unwholesome states that we're experiencing.

And yet another way of letting go has an association with a different definition of the word "abandon." I looked up the word at one point because the Buddha uses it in a couple of different places, and I thought—since it's translated as "abandoned," it's not what the Buddha actually used—but it's an interesting word. In some places it has what we might think of as a negative connotation, like abandoning a child, where we're doing something that's not so helpful. But in other places, like the phrase "abandon ship," there's a very natural movement of removing oneself from a place of danger. That's another use of that term—when we abandon ship, we're abandoning something that's dangerous.

That's the kind of sense I think the Buddha means when he says abandon unwholesome states. We begin to recognize the danger of these reactive states. Our mind and our mindfulness begins to recognize, "Oh, that hurts and it's not so helpful." And the mind begins to let it go, to abandon it because it understands the danger. This is wisdom that understands that danger. This kind of abandoning happens through our practice of mindfulness, as we explore what it means to be with, to let be, perhaps, reactive states of mind.

We're doing a lot of this in our practice. This is so much of our mindfulness practice. We notice the arising of confusion and hatred and boredom and craving, and we see what we can do to allow holding it in our mindfulness. This morning in the Q&A we talked about bowing to our difficulties—not being swept away by them, but opening to them, allowing them to be known with mindfulness.

That practice has a potency and a power. My understanding of how that works is that with mindfulness, as we're mindful of reactivity, as we're mindful of these unwholesome states, our mind gets an education. Often when we're caught by reactive states—if we're caught by greed for something, if we're caught by wanting something—our minds are projecting into the future. Our minds are saying, "It's going to be so great when I get that thing."

The mind gets caught in that fantasy of having something, and the fantasy itself is pleasant. So the mind is going for that idea of some future pleasant experience—it has created this pleasant fantasy. And in doing so, it basically misses the fact that the wanting itself, the craving itself, hurts.

When we turn with mindfulness to the craving, when we turn with mindfulness to the reactivity, we cannot avoid recognizing: wanting hurts. Anger hurts. This is dukkha. We recognize that. The mindfulness recognizes the suffering of it. And mindfulness and

wisdom together begin to guide our minds in a different direction. Our minds have to get it that these reactive states are suffering. This is not a mistake—this is so much of how the practice unfolds.

Another beautiful line from Joseph, a great favorite of mine: we want insight into dukkha, into suffering, without experiencing suffering. And that isn't the way it works. The insight comes because we're willing to be with it, with wise effort, with wise mindfulness. And the understanding grows from that.

This kind of wise effort—the effort to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen—is a big part of our practice.

Then there is the effort to arouse or bring about wholesome states that have not yet arisen. We can do this in a couple of different ways. One is cultivating wholesome qualities through inclining the mind towards those qualities. We are doing that in the metta practice each day, in the brahma-vihara practice. That practice is a practice of cultivating wholesome mind states that have not yet arisen. It also serves the fourth wise effort of sustaining wholesome states that have arisen, because as the metta does begin to arise, the practice sustains it. We incline the mind through intention towards wholesome qualities.

Another way this effort works is by not engaging in actions or situations that directly oppose those wholesome qualities of mind. Refraining from unwholesome actions cultivates wholesome mind states. This is one of the ways that working with the precepts works. In fact, in the Buddha's teachings around the precepts, he links each one with a wholesome quality. He says that abstaining from killing living beings begins to cultivate compassion in the mind. Abstaining from taking what is not given begins to cultivate contentment. The action of avoiding unwholesome action begins to cultivate wholesome mind states.

This is also a way we can see the first wise effort of avoiding unwholesome states that have not arisen, because the precepts work there too. They are about avoiding actions that tend to lead to unwholesome states of mind—refraining from killing, refraining from taking what's not given. So the precepts are functional in that first wise effort. They're also, at the very same time, cultivating the wholesome. What a great thing.

We also explore cultivating mindfulness, which, as my teacher Sayadaw U Pandita said, is the most wholesome mind state. Wise mindfulness, he said, is the most wholesome mind state. And that's a lot of what we're doing here too—we are cultivating mindfulness.

The fourth wise effort is the effort to sustain wholesome states that have arisen. When I thought about this one for myself, I wondered: why would that take work? Why would it take work to sustain something that is wholesome? Then I began to recognize two tendencies in the mind. One is that when something delightful or a wholesome state is arising—like joy or bliss or concentration—we can have a tendency to indulge in it. We can get lost in it and lose mindfulness. And as we lose mindfulness of these wholesome states, we lose the conditions that support their arising.

And so mindfulness of these wholesome states is one of the key ways to encourage their growth. It not only encourages sustaining them, but it also encourages them to arise more in the future. So again, mindfulness functions both in arousing wholesome states that have not arisen and in sustaining wholesome states that have arisen.

Indulging is one side of what our minds can do with wholesome states. And to my surprise, I also sometimes found that when wholesome states were strong, they could be overwhelming. At one point I was sitting and having breakfast, and I was experiencing a lot of joy arising. I was just noticing the joy, and it was pretty strong, pretty intense. And I was kind of like, "Whoa, I can't handle this." There was some trying to tamp down on it—resistance to the joy because it was so intense.

And then a little bit of wisdom flitted through, which said, "It's okay, it's impermanent. It won't last." With that, the mind let go of trying to repress it. And it got really strong. It was kind of like a wave—it broke. And then tranquility came in. It was like a beautiful, peaceful joy that followed. So mindfulness there was also the medicine. Non-resistance.

Recognizing the beautiful qualities that are being cultivated as we practice is important. Sometimes people, in hearing about wise effort, notice that there are times when we actually take action, and these are skillful means. These tools of wise effort can be skillful means. There are definitely times when it's time to put something down, set it aside, say "not now." There are times when it's time to pick up the metta practice and actively cultivate it.

So the practice of wise effort can sound like a lot of doing. And yet what I want to also point to is that the practice of wise mindfulness—which is largely what we're exploring and cultivating here—is about inclining towards becoming present for what is arising. Sometimes people ask the question, "Well, we're practicing just looking at what's arising. How does that connect with wise effort? We're exploring settling back and just seeing what's coming." It can feel like there's a conflict there.

Well, as we practice wise mindfulness, wise mindfulness itself already contains the four wise efforts. Let's think through it for a moment. If you are exploring an unwholesome state—looking at the arising of anger, for instance, noticing anger, exploring mindfulness of that anger—that is that second kind of wise effort right there: the letting be, the exploring, the allowing wisdom to begin to support the letting go of an unwholesome state that has arisen.

And simultaneously, while that's happening, the mind is getting that education that "Wow, this anger hurts," which creates the conditions for anger to arise less in the future. That's the first kind of wise effort: cultivating the conditions for the non-arising of unwholesome states. As we open with mindfulness to our reactive states, it creates the conditions for them to weaken, for them to get less strong, for them to begin to appear less and less in our minds.

And then simultaneously with that, we're also cultivating mindfulness, which, as my teacher said, is the most wholesome mind state. So we're cultivating the arising of mindfulness—the third kind of wise effort. And at the same time, we are practicing sustaining mindfulness that has arisen—the fourth kind of wise effort.

So there is no conflict. As we practice noticing what's happening in our present moment experience with opening to it, we are already practicing the four wise efforts. And we find at times that we're not able to simply be with what's arising, and then it's useful to use some strategies, to bring in some other tools that help us let go of unwholesome states or cultivate wholesome states more actively.

This wise effort that we make—the Buddha connected it with a skillful energy. Often we equate energy and effort, and sometimes we speak about them as synonymous. The Buddha actually distinguished them a little bit. In one teaching he said that the faculty of energy—which is the faculty James talked about at the very beginning of the retreat, when he spoke about the five faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom—is the energy that supports our practice. It's the energy that guides us in the direction of continuing, of keeping on with the path. And the Buddha said that this spiritual faculty of energy is the energy that results from making wise effort. That's interesting. He says that energy results from effort.

We don't usually think of it that way. We normally think of needing to use energy to make effort. And we do have to have some measure of energy. We have energy, actually—the energy of life. There's energy in our bodies. Just because we're sitting here alive, that energy can be harnessed in the direction of wise effort. And then that wise effort begins to create this wholesome energy.

This is a beautiful thing, actually. The way we normally think about energy and effort is that making effort uses up energy—that when we make effort, we end up with less energy. And the Buddha says, no. When we make wise effort, we end up with wise energy. I told this to one of my daily life practice meetings, and somebody said, "It's green energy!" So wise effort leads to skillful energy.

There are some other supports for skillful energy that I'd like to briefly point to. Energy is actually in quite a few of the Buddhist lists. I mentioned the list that James talked about: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom. In that list, faith precedes energy. So this is another pointer for wise effort or wise energy. When there's a sense of trust, of confidence, of faith, that can bring a lot of energy to our system. That's another support for skillful energy.

Sometimes we can tap into this by reflecting on the ways the practice has benefited us, reflecting on our appreciation for the Buddha, reflecting on our appreciation for our community. This kind of reflection on the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha—can support faith, which can bring some energy into our system that we can harness for our practice.

In another list, the Seven Factors of Awakening, what precedes energy is investigation. Another clue for us. And this one I like to reflect on. Investigation is akin to or connected with the quality of curiosity and interest. When we are interested in what's happening—and we've been encouraging this, to be curious about what's happening, to be interested in what's happening—when we can tap into interest and curiosity, there's a natural arising of energy there. Especially when that curiosity is like, "What's this? What's this human experience of whatever this thing is that's happening right now?" That leads to skillful energy and brings a kind of natural energy into our system.

So as energy develops in our practice, we can then reapply it back to the practice. And yet it's helpful in our exploration of energy to begin to look at whether it's balanced. This is another aspect of the teaching on applying energy and effort that the Buddha really pointed to—that the energy needs to be balanced.

He used the analogy of tuning a lute, a guitar-like instrument. He asked one of his followers, "Did you play the lute when you were a lay person?" And that follower said, "Yes, I did." And the Buddha said, "Well, what happened when the string on the lute was too loose? Did it make beautiful music?" "No." "Well, what if the string was too tight?" "Well, then the string broke." "So you need to tune that string just right to make the music." He said, likewise with our practice, the energy has to be balanced and tuned. Too much energy we can often recognize because there's often restlessness in our system. Too little energy often results in sloth and torpor, dullness, sleepiness, drowsiness.

Sometimes I found that when exploring energy, exploring these imbalanced states of energy, it was actually supportive for me to recognize it simply as an imbalance of energy.

For instance, during one long stretch of my practice—a couple of years—sloth and torpor were a huge part of my experience, and I just had to learn how to work with it. I really had to get to explore it. One thing I began recognizing was that I had so many attitudes and opinions about this dull mind. I would hear myself saying, "This mind is way too dull to pay attention." And yet, at some point, I noticed: "Oh, it's too dull"—wait, seeing is happening. Hearing is happening. Okay, I guess there's mindfulness going on.

What I recognized is that in the very acknowledging of that state as "dull," there was already an attitude of aversion. When I started acknowledging it differently, recognizing "Oh, this is a low energy state," it made the acknowledgment more neutral. This can be useful for us sometimes in exploring those states of high or low energy—rather than attributing the hindrance to them, which can have a slight flavor of aversion, as it did in my case. "Okay, this is a high energy state. Can I be with high energy right now? Yeah, I can do that."

Recognizing that high energy, one way to balance it is through mindfulness. One way to balance low energy is also through mindfulness. There are times, as we've talked about, when there are strategies—useful strategies—to bring up the energy when it's low or to bring down the energy when it's high. But I'd encourage you to explore the possibility of mindfulness first.

Before standing up or taking a brisk walk or opening your eyes: "Oh, low energy, that's what's happening. Can I know that?" Yeah, I actually can know that pretty clearly. Right there, that acknowledgment, that mindful recognition of low energy—it's like it dials up the energy just enough to meet that experience. That's a way of increasing energy. That's the curiosity of "What is this low energy?"

In exploring this balance of energy, one of the keys is how much effort we make. Wise effort leads to skillful energy, and so the way we make our effort supports a balanced energy. Often when we're making effort—for instance, when we sit down at the beginning of a sitting—we may have the idea, "Okay, I'm sitting down, it's a forty-five minute sitting, I am going to be mindful for the whole thing." I certainly did this. It's like I picked up the entire forty-five minutes in that first second and tried to muster the energy to be there for the whole sitting in that first moment. And it doesn't work that way.

Right now, how hard is it to know hearing is happening of my voice? How hard is it to know the sensation of your hands? Just check in with the sensations of your hands. How about the contact of your hips against the chair or cushion or bench? How about a breath? Usually that is not too hard. In a moment, when I mention each of those areas, often it's right there. It didn't actually take too much effort to do that.

A moment of mindfulness takes a very, very small amount of energy, of effort. What's harder is to sustain it over time, to keep going with it. And it's often helpful, rather than thinking about picking up the whole forty-five minutes at once, to do it in small chunks.

Right now, notice an in-breath. And how about an out-breath? Just enough effort. How about enough effort for another in-breath? And just enough effort for another out-breath. Another in-breath. Another out-breath.

Often there's not a feeling of that taking a lot of effort. And so—small, small efforts over and over and over. Often the "over and over and over" piece is where our mind picks up and goes, "Oh..." And if we can, just enough effort for this half a breath. Just enough effort in the walking, for instance.

I would do this in walking when my mind was really scattered. I'd be doing walking maybe outside and I'd pick something on the ground, a leaf that's just three feet away. Can I be mindful till I get to that leaf? Yeah, made it.

How about that crack? Okay, I made it. How about that? So just picking up a small amount to try to be mindful for, and then doing it again and again and again. The light touch over and over.

As we do that light touch of effort over and over, a momentum tends to build. We begin to get the sense of not needing to push so hard—we can maybe go out six feet or ten feet. It's like the mindfulness seems to carry us.

There's an analogy I like to use for this kind of effort. The little scooters that kids ride, the kick scooters—they have a platform that's low on the ground, two skinny wheels, and you have to balance on this little platform and tap the ground to get the scooter to go. At the beginning, you have to tap quite frequently. You don't have to tap really hard to get going, but just tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap. Momentum builds, and then you begin to get a sense of that momentum, and you're riding the scooter for a little while. You don't have to tap for a little while. You get a feeling for when the scooter begins to get a little wobbly. Put your foot down, tap again to balance it out. Then you ride some more.

Mindfulness is kind of like that. We do the little bit of effort, just like tap, tap, tap—just enough for half a breath, half a breath. And then we begin to get a sense of the momentum of the mindfulness, recognizing the mindfulness as we talked about a few days ago. We recognize that we don't have to remind ourselves as frequently. And then we begin to get familiar with what it feels like for that mindfulness to get wobbly, and we reconnect again, remind ourselves—right, two steps out, three steps out. A light touch over and over. This is the way effort can build momentum skillfully and not lead to contraction in the mind.

Sometimes I also ask myself—because if you tend to over-effort, this is a good question to ask yourself—how little effort do I need to be mindful right now? Just backing off. It's like, oh, I don't need to make that much. Okay, a little bit less. Oh wow, still mindful without trying so hard. How about a little bit less? Wow, still mindful. Oh, gone. Okay, maybe a little more than that. Just beginning to check in for how much effort is useful right now.

Over time, this momentum of effort, skillful energy, begins to build. The mindfulness goes along with that. And we have wise mindfulness with a kind of continuity that feels more effortless. It doesn't feel like we're having to do it so much anymore. My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya says this isn't that there's no effort being made, but it is the Dharma making the effort then. He distinguishes between Dharma effort, Dharma energy, and personal energy. When do we need to actually engage with our sense of making the effort? And when can we kind of settle back and the Dharma begins to make the effort? It feels effortless, but the wisdom and the Dharma are doing the work for us.

And so we cultivate the conditions for skillful effort, for recognizing our experience, for the continuity of mindfulness. Really, wise effort is a real support for this continuity of mindfulness. And that continuity of mindfulness creates the conditions for freedom, for release, for wisdom to grow.

And yet we have to let go of expecting our effort to yield results on our timetable. On one long retreat, I was listening to a talk by Kamala Masters, who was telling a story about an experience, a teaching she had from her teacher Munindraji. She was talking about her impatience for getting results. And his response was just, "When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree."

That image for me became a really beautiful reflection. An apple on a tree—it looks red perhaps, it looks ripe. And yet you tug on it and it's not coming off. It's not sweetened on the inside yet.

We cannot make that apple ripen. It ripens in its own time. We can support the tree by creating the conditions—nourishing it, giving it water and food and light, making sure the bugs don't eat it up. We can take care of the tree. We cannot make the fruit ripen. It has its own time. And even if it looks ripe, it's still got some sweetening to do on the inside.

Sometimes it feels like that in practice. Surely, *surely* there must be some release just moments away. But no. When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree.

So we make the effort, and we let go. In the list of *pāramīs*, I think it's interesting that patience follows energy.

Let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 129

Five Aggregates (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 1h03

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat at Spirit Rock, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā), one of the Buddha's essential frameworks for understanding experience. She explains that the Pāli term 'khandha' simply means heap or bundle—a way of categorizing all our experiences into five processes: form (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhāra), and consciousness (viññāṇa).*
>
> *Fella guides practitioners through each aggregate with practical examples. Form is explored through the four elements—earth (solidity, weight), air (movement, vibration), fire (temperature), and water (moisture, cohesion)—offering a guided investigation of these elemental sensations in the mouth. Feeling is examined as the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral tone accompanying every experience, with the striking illustration of how the same apple taste changes dramatically depending on conditions. Perception is revealed as a memory-matching process, useful yet prone to error, as in mistaking a stream for a fan. Mental formations (saṅkhāra) are shown to be the conditioning engine that shapes all other aggregates—how anger conditions body, feeling, perception, and consciousness simultaneously.*
>
> *Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's fourth foundation of mindfulness, Fella emphasizes that understanding these processes helps us see how clinging and selfing arise. Rather than prescribing a technique, she offers this teaching as information that naturally supports practice—helping us recognize that these aggregates are conditioned processes unfolding on their own, not controlled by a self, and that wisdom arising from this understanding is what allows freedom.*

Tonight the topic is a teaching of the Buddha that really offers us a way to explore our experience—all of our experience. The name of this teaching is the Five Aggregates.

Many of you have probably heard a version of this teaching. But if you haven't heard this term before, the Five Aggregates, it can sound kind of technical. The word "aggregate" isn't a word that we use in English very much, and it sounds a little foreign and odd. The word that this is translating from the Pali is *khandha*. Apparently it was more of a common word, an ordinary word, an everyday word that means something like "heap" or "bundle."

This teaching on the five aggregates is a way the Buddha used to describe the various aspects of our experience. Processes is another way I like to think of the aggregates—they're processes of our experience. We could think of them as the five heaps, the five collections of experience, five different kinds of collections of experience.

The Buddha highlighted these five in particular. They are: form, basically our physical experience, the process of our physical body; feeling, the process of recognizing whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant; perception, the recognizing aspect of experience, how we recognize what's happening to us; mental formations, the volitional aspect of experience; and consciousness, the cognizing aspect of experience.

These aggregates in the teaching are understood as basically whatever's happening in our experience. Whatever experience we are having can be understood as fitting into one of these five heaps. It's a way of slicing up the pie of our experience. Whatever's happening right now, we could recognize: oh, that's an aspect of feeling, or that's an aspect of perception, or that's an aspect of form, of body.

The Buddha offered other ways of slicing up this experience, one other one in particular being the six sense spheres. We've talked about that—recognizing experience as being the five physical senses (sight, smell, sound, taste, touch) and then the sense door of the mind. Again, anything we experience can be understood as fitting into one of those six areas.

I think it's interesting that the Buddha offered these different frameworks. When I look at these two frameworks in counterpoint, the six sense spheres kind of emphasize a refinement of the physical realm. We've got the five physical senses and then the mind is one in the six sense spheres. In the exploration of the aggregates, there's one aggregate that is the body, and the other four talk about mental processes. So in a way, this teaching really begins to explore what's going on in the mind. What are the processes at work in our minds?

The understanding of the aggregates in the suttas is understood both as process—a process of feeling, a process of perceiving, a process of knowing, a process of intending, a process of having volition, and also a process of body—but the aggregates are defined both as the processes and as the results of that process.

For instance, around feeling, which we've talked a lot about: we can understand the aggregate of feeling as being the heap of experience that's pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant. There's a set of experiences that we have, and every

experience has one of those qualities to it. We can notice the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality to our experience. But the aggregate is also understood to be the process of feeling—how it comes about, the aspect of our mind responsible for feelings.

These aggregates are talked about in both ways, and I'll touch upon this to some extent. But in general I'd say that the easiest way to begin to get familiar with the aggregates is through recognizing just the simplicity of the results of the processes. So we can understand each of these heaps as both a noun and a verb. The verb is the process of how it comes to be, and the noun is the experience that results.

From that standpoint, I think "aggregate" is actually a pretty good translation, because aggregate has both the meaning of being a verb—to aggregate, to collect together—and something is an aggregate if it is something that has been collected together. The most common use of that word that I knew before I came to the Buddhist teaching was in geology: an aggregate rock is a rock made of other rocks. We can understand the aggregates as being, as Sallī said once, stuff made of other stuff.

The Buddha divided up experience in these different ways not just randomly, but because he saw particular value in understanding or seeing these particular slices of the pie. With respect to the aggregates, they're an excellent framework for us beginning to understand the actuality of our experience—what's actually happening in our experience, not our concepts or views or ideas about the experience. They help us begin to point to the processes of the mind, what's going on in the mind in particular, and to see what's happening in there.

The Buddha was really brilliant in describing how the mind functions, how it works. This teaching of the aggregates really begins to explore these functions of the mind. Also in this teaching, the Buddha emphasized—many times when the Buddha speaks of these five aggregates, he calls them the five aggregates affected by clinging. He talks a lot about how clinging happens around these aggregates: how clinging happens around form, how clinging happens around feeling, how clinging happens around perception and consciousness and intending or willing.

We tend to congeal and identify with experience, the clinging leading to "selfing." And so the Buddha often described the process of selfing—of I-making and my-making—with respect to these aggregates. As we begin to understand these processes of body and mind at work, our mind begins to understand how the creation of self happens, where we are identifying.

At one point, Bhikkhu Anālayo spoke about this identification around the aggregates. We think of the body as being *where* I am. Feelings as *how* I am. Perception as *what* I am experiencing. Volitional formations as *why* I'm doing something. And consciousness—this one's a little odd in his framing—as *whereby* I am knowing experience. All of that has the "I" in it. We tend to locate ourselves with respect to these aggregates. And so studying these aggregates, getting familiar with them as processes, can help us begin to undermine the way our mind believes in the sense of self.

Tonight I'd mostly like to talk about what these processes are, what these experiences are, how we can get to know them. They are discussed in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, and I'm going to paraphrase what the Buddha suggests there. He encourages us to take this as a study of mindfulness. It's in the Fourth Foundation, and he says that the Fourth Foundation is the contemplation of dhammas—*dhammānupassanā*.

Dhamma has a number of translations. Small-d *dhamma*, when used with a lowercase letter, basically means experience. It's a really simple word—it just means experience that's happening. Capital-D *Dhamma* refers to the teachings of the Buddha, the truth, the understanding of the truth. In this sutta, it's small-d dhamma. And so, while it's often translated as "mind objects," I like to think of it as simply the awareness of experience.

In this Fourth Foundation, the Buddha encourages us to look at experience through different lenses of the Dharma. One teacher pointed out that this Fourth Foundation is studying dhamma—small d, studying experience—through the lens of Dhamma, capital D. There are five different lists in the Fourth Foundation, five Buddhist teachings that are explored through this foundation, with the aggregates being one of those lists.

For this particular teaching, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta says, "How does one abide contemplating experience as experience?" I want to stop there for a moment, because this is something we've been talking about. We've discussed recognizing something that's happening in the present moment as something that's happening in the present moment—a very simple shift of perspective. It is not something our minds would normally do. We tend to impute meaning to what's happening in the present moment, believe there needs to be something done about it other than simply recognizing, "Oh, this is what's happening in the present moment." For our mindfulness practice, this is the essential perspective. We contemplate the body as body. We contemplate feelings as feelings. We contemplate experience as experience.

Then the sutta continues: How does one contemplate experience as experience in terms of the five aggregates affected by clinging? This brings in the framework of the five aggregates. Basically, how does one contemplate experience through this framework?

The instruction is really simple. One understands: such is form, such is its arising, such is its passing. Such is feeling, such is its arising, such is its passing. Such is perception, such is its arising, such is its passing. And so on for the remaining aggregates.

Pretty simple instruction—just encouraging us to get familiar with these aggregates in our experience. Tonight I'm going to explore mostly the "such" instruction.

What does it mean to begin to recognize each of these aggregates? There are different ways to approach an exploration of them. One way is to pick up each aggregate for a period of time. I did this when I was sitting with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma. It wasn't something I deliberately decided to do—it began more to happen—but I started looking at experience through the perspective of perception. I picked up that lens and became curious about how perception was working in my experience. So we can look at one aggregate for a particular length of time, examining what's happening there, taking it as an area of exploration.

Or we can simply notice what's happening in our experience and begin to recognize, "Oh, this is what's happening right now." Maybe hearing is happening. And in hearing, that's impingement on the ear door, which is form. Such is form. Or perhaps we notice pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—this is feeling. We can approach it in different ways.

Mostly I'm interested this evening in offering descriptions of what these aggregates are, to support the possibility that you might begin to see them. I'm not especially saying that for the next three days you should look at these aggregates. Sometimes Sayadaw U Tejaniya would offer a teaching like this, and I'd go off and try to do it. I'd think, "Oh, I need to go look at this," and I'd come back trying to report on it. He'd say, "Don't try to do that. Nothing I say is something for you to do. It's just information. It will support your practice to hear this information." So I offer this in that way—you don't have to try to do this. That said, I'll offer a little bit of guidance here and there to help you begin to see some of these during this talk.

Form points to our bodily experience, the bodily processes at work. What we experience in the touch sense, in the realm of our physical sense, is understood through the lens of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. This is really just a way to explore

the elemental nature of our experience. What are the component parts of our physical experience? Not the concepts of our experience—we talked about this distinction this morning, between the experience and the idea of the body.

We can feel the experience of hand through knowing a vibratory, pulsing, pressure quality—hardness, moisture, coolness, heat. We can know those sensations. Yet we often also have an image or an overlay of the concept of "hand" there. We often experience our physicality through the concept rather than the direct, actual felt experience. Beginning to get familiar with what we might call the language of the body—how the body communicates with us—is really helpful for touching into the actuality of our physical experience. It helps us begin to tease apart what is actually bodily experience and what are the mental processes that get conflated with it.

In the touch sense, these four areas of earth, air, fire, and water each have their character. The earth element consists of those aspects of the body that feel solid. Right now, in your experience, can you touch into a sense of solidity? These sensations include heaviness, hardness, softness, a sense of the body's weight sitting on earth. Perhaps a sense of the hardness of the bones. The language this element speaks to us through is hardness, solidity, weight, density.

The air element relates to sensations connected with movement. The breath, the movement of the breath right now—feeling into the expansion of the chest as the breath goes in, that movement is a manifestation of air element. The breath is directly connected to the intake of air, and then the release: the falling of the ribcage, the letting go. Physical movement is one of the most obvious manifestations of air element. When we move, when we walk, movement is understood as air element.

At a subtler level, air element communicates through sensations of vibration, pulsing, tingling. Right now, can you touch into this? Perhaps put your attention in your hand—it's often an easy place to feel these sensations: vibration, tingling, pulsing. Sometimes air element also manifests as a feeling of pulling or pushing, like the feeling of the chest as it expands. As the air goes in and there's pressure, that too is a manifestation of air element.

And then fire element is the temperature—heat and coolness all along that range. There's plenty of opportunity to feel this during the day as the temperature changes, as our bodies move indoors and outdoors. We feel that. Sometimes, if you put your hand on your cheek, that can highlight the temperature element. At least in my case, often there's quite a difference between the temperature of the hand and the cheek, and so that contrast becomes apparent. Warmth, coolness, heat.

Water element is the element that most obviously expresses in moisture. We might feel that with tears or in our mouth with saliva. There's a kind of fluidity or cohesion. Often I find the water element is most easily seen in dependence on some of the other elements. This is perhaps easy to see in the mouth.

So now we'll take a little exploration of these elements in the mouth. Take your tongue—Marcia Rose is the person I learned this from—take your tongue and push it against your teeth. See if you can notice in that the hardness of your teeth. And then shift to recognizing that a hardness is arising. We're knowing the hardness because of the pushing. We're pushing and feeling the hardness, but see if you can touch into the pushing itself. That's air element. You may or may not have a sense of temperature in your mouth.

Now take your tongue and run it across the surface of your teeth. Notice the kind of smoothness that you feel, perhaps. If your mouth is really dry, it may not feel so smooth. But the smoothness of the movement across the hardness—air and earth, the movement of the tongue across that hardness reveals a slipperiness, which is water element. And so we know these elements in dependence on each other.

I would encourage you not necessarily to try to figure out if an experience is water or air or earth, but to simply begin to get curious about this language of the body, how the body communicates with us.

In our other senses—sight, the basic elemental experience of sight is not what we typically perceive. As I sit here and look out, I see people, I see walls, I see tankas, I see candles, I see zabutans and zafus, but that's not elemental. That's the overlay of concept. The eye takes things in as form and color. The ear in pitch, tone, frequency. The tongue in sweet, salty, sour, pungent, savory. Smell in floral, woody, fruity. Apparently—I looked this up today, wondering what are the component parts of smell—it's got more texture than most of our senses, actually. It's got many different distinct things that we can smell, indicating perhaps the importance of that for our survival.

This exploration, particularly around getting familiar with the language of the body, how the body communicates with our mind, begins to help us distinguish and recognize the difference between what's physical and what's mental. This is actually much more easy to confuse than we might think. We might think, "Yes, I know the difference between body and mind." But we often confuse them, as in the example of seeing an image of our body and knowing our experience through that image. A mental perception of experience influencing our experience.

As we begin to get familiar with these very elemental experiences, it supports our beginning to recognize the mental processes at work. The first of those is feeling. We've talked a lot about feeling—Carol did a whole talk on it. This is the feeling tone of experience, whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We've discussed the importance of this: as we begin to recognize the feeling tone of experience, we see whole processes at work that leap off of that—craving, clinging, becoming. Guy spoke of this last night, that beginning to recognize the little space that can happen when we just know feeling. The possibility of it not necessarily—when we just connect, "Oh, this is pleasant"—it can short-circuit that whole movement to craving and clinging and becoming.

Feeling tone is understood as a mental experience. That's perhaps easy for us to understand when we're looking at mind states. Happiness, for example, feels pleasant. Aversion often feels unpleasant.

We know that those are mental feelings. But the body is also a rich terrain of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. How do we understand feeling associated with bodily experience as mental? What does that mean?

Actually, I was rather surprised to learn at one point that neuroscience agrees with this—that the understanding of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral is formed in a very basic part of the brain, in the brainstem. If there's damage in that area, we can't feel pleasant or unpleasant anymore. So this feeling of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral is indeed created in the mind.

As an example of how to understand this as something mental, let me take you through a little thought experiment. Imagine yourself standing on a busy corner waiting for a friend. There are many people going by, and you're waiting there. Right at the appointed time, you feel a gentle touch on your shoulder. Because you're waiting for your friend, that touch may be experienced as pleasant. You turn and it's your friend—exactly what you were expecting. Your friend came up and touched you gently. So that experience may be felt as pleasant in that situation.

Now imagine yourself on the same kind of busy street corner, standing there waiting to cross the street. You're not waiting for a friend. Someone touches you in the same gentle way. That may be experienced as a startle. You may actually experience it as unpleasant, because you're not expecting it.

So one of the things to begin to be curious about with feeling is the fact that it's conditioned. Feeling in any moment is not inherent in the experience itself. It is highly conditioned based on our mind state, our expectations, our agendas, our views, our conditioning, and the conditions in the world.

On one long retreat, I had an example of this—simple but very powerful for having my understanding dive deeply into how feeling is conditioned. It undermined the idea that feeling is somehow "out there," that somebody can make me feel a certain way. It really illuminated how feeling is conditioned.

It happened over tea at IMS, the evening meal. It was a very simple meal that evening. I had an apple and some bean dip. I took a bite of the apple—this was fall in New England—and it burst in my mouth with tartness and sweetness. It was so pleasant, one of the most pleasant apple experiences I've ever had. Very delightful. The whole body was bubbling with delight.

Then I tasted the bean dip, which had a very different taste. It was not unpleasant, but it didn't have the same delightful quality. But then I took another bite of the apple after the bean dip, and it was even more pleasant. Something about the conditions of having put the savoriness of the bean dip on my tongue—maybe the oil in it—highlighted the tartness and sweetness of the apple. There was even more delight, more ripples of pleasure.

I began playing with this, noticing the pleasant aspect and the variations of feeling tone. I noticed that if I took multiple bites of apple, one after another, the pleasure diminished. Have a bite of bean dip, then another bite of apple—the pleasure was stronger. After some time of all this, it just got more normalized. It ceased being quite so phenomenal. Maybe a little bit of pleasant. Same apple, different conditions, different feeling tone.

That simple exploration led me to see—and this is another encouragement for continuity—that we can see in the most unexpected places how processes work. So this is some of the process of feeling: seeing its conditioned nature. How does feeling arise? This is part of the satipaṭṭhāna—seeing that feeling arises in dependence on conditions. Stronger pleasant after the bean dip.

Less pleasant after the tongue had experienced the flavor multiple times.

Also with feeling, we can begin to recognize—kind of in juxtaposition to body sensation—the difference between raw sensation and our felt relationship to it. Heat, coolness. You're standing out in the cold and you come inside, and perhaps the heat in the

room feels pleasant. At another time, this particular temperature might feel unpleasant, depending on what the conditions are. So the heat, the coolness, are one thing. Our relationship to it through feeling is another.

All of our experience in the physical realm is like this, and we can begin to tease this apart. We can actually begin to recognize, in unpleasant physical sensation for instance, something quite interesting. At one point I was feeling a very powerful sensation of my ankle against the mat—strong pressure against the mat. What I might call pain, but it just felt like strong neutral experience.

A lot of what we call pain, and in turn unpleasant, is because we have the *idea* that it's painful. Check it out for yourself. The idea of pain, not necessarily the actual sensation of pressure or hardness—that actually might be neutral. But the idea of, "I've been sitting here a long time, that pressure feels strong, that's going to hurt, I'm going to have a bruise on my foot"—all of that is contributing to the experience of it being unpleasant.

So exploring this kind of dynamic between these aggregates is also a very interesting exploration.

Perception is the third of these aggregates. This is the process whereby we recognize what's happening. We talked about it a little bit—that it's a natural process. We couldn't function without it. We use it to navigate the world, recognizing that I look out here and see people and zabutans and hard floor and walls and doors. Really useful for me to know the difference between a wall and a door. This is perception at work.

It's a relationship that develops over time. We experience walls and doors when we're very young. We begin to understand that walls create a barrier—wouldn't want to run headlong into a wall. A door, on the other hand, you know that it gives. You can push through it.

This perceptual process happens because we come into contact with experience over and over again. Perception is related to memory. We've seen things over and over again. Now I've seen many zabutans in my twenty years as a meditator. I know what it is now. I didn't at first.

So the perceptual process, the recognition of experience, is how we know what something is based on our memory. It's almost like a memory lookup. We experience something—a sound—and our mind kind of searches for the nearest match in our memory banks and says, "Oh, it's that."

The other day in the hall, somebody mentioned this: the hearing of a sound and the mind attributing it to a fan. "Why is there such a loud fan in here?" And then recognizing, "Oh, it's not a fan, it's the stream outside." This is perception at work—we recognize what's happening, we do this memory matching. Really useful process for our survival, and yet really prone to error. It's not perfect by any means, as the example of the fan and the stream shows.

A kind of classic example of perception and misperception is the snake and rope misperception. You walk into a dim room and there's a coiled rope in the corner. You might misperceive it as a snake. This is a function of perhaps the dim light—coiled forms might be snakes—but the mind perceives it potentially as snake. A whole host of responses can arise based on that. Fear, for instance. Emotional reaction to, "Oh, there's a snake in the corner."

I walked up to a crack in the sidewalk at Spirit Rock some years ago, and it turned into a rattlesnake. When I walked up to it, there was no fear. As soon as it coiled, there was fear.

So perception influences our responses to the world. And misperception happens all the time.

We have to recognize that perception is useful and a natural function of our minds that helps us navigate the world. But what we tend to do is reify our perceptions. We take our perceptions to be the truth. This is in the realm of what Bonnie was talking about—the vipalas, the misperceptions of reality.

It's like somebody who walks into a room and sees a coiled rope in the corner and perceives it as a snake. Usually that kind of misperception can be easily corrected by turning the lights on and seeing that it's actually a rope. But our minds get hardened around our perceptions. Perhaps we've gone in there and seen that coiled form and believe it's a snake. We walk out of the room without ever confirming what it actually is, and we reify: "There's snakes in that room." We go tell everybody else there's snakes in that room. The belief gets hardened. We have everybody else being afraid to go into the room. This is a silly example, but this kind of thing creates a lot of suffering in our world—perceiving something in some way, reifying it, believing it.

As we start to see this process, one of the easiest ways, at least in my own practice, to really explore perception is in the realm of hearing. It's the first place where I could clearly see the difference between the experience of hearing and the perception. This happens all the time. We're sitting in the hall and some sound happens. We hear something and our mind recognizes and identifies it. Our mind says "bird," or perhaps we

see an image of a bird sitting in a tree. If you're a bird watcher, you might even identify the kind of bird based on the sound. That's perception at work. Based on the hearing, we know that sounds we've heard like that have come from birds, and so we perceive it as a bird. Now, it may be that somebody's got one of those little bird things making that sound. We may be misperceiving again. But we believe it to be what we perceive it to be.

As we begin to see this process, we recognize perception at work. We can have some measure of recognition that this is happening. "Bird. Think it's a bird." But recognizing that perception is so prone to error, we can begin to undermine the reification of believing our perceptions to be what's actually happening. What we're perceiving, in my understanding, is a reflection of what's out there. It is related to what's out there. But what we perceive is entirely constructed by our minds. All we can know is what has been constructed by our minds. We're not trying to stop perception from happening—we couldn't function without it. But we can recognize it as a function rather than reality. If we could all understand that we are perceiving the world in different ways, I think there would be a lot more peace in this world.

Then there are mental formations. Mental formations encompass the many mental activities involving volition, choice, attention, and intention. These include all of our emotions—anger, fear, confusion, pride, desire, irritation, rage—the entire emotional realm is within mental formations. All of the wholesome states of mind that we've been discussing—peace, mindfulness, concentration, tranquility—these are also mental formations. And thoughts are mental formations too. It's a huge category, encompassing most of what we observe in our minds. Intention, which we talked about seeing—that's a mental formation. Noticing attention—that's a mental formation. Recognizing beliefs, agendas, views—all of these are mental formations.

Those are mental formations. So it's a vast category, and we spend a lot of time exploring this in our mindfulness practice. We've talked a great deal about how to meet all of these through the instructions offered during the first few weeks of the retreat.

The Pali term for mental formation is *sankhara,* and it carries a dual meaning. It refers both to that which has been put together—the actual experience of anger or fear or confusion or joy or peace or mindfulness or intention—and to the process of putting together itself. When we see these experiences, we're seeing the result of what has been assembled. But *sankhara* also means "to put together," pointing to the active, dynamic nature of these formations.

This second meaning is particularly interesting. There's a teaching in the suttas that illuminates this verb-like, process-oriented aspect of mental formations. I'll paraphrase it here: Volitional formations condition the conditioned. What do they condition? They condition form as conditioned form. They condition feeling as conditioned feeling. They condition perception as conditioned perception. They condition mental formations as conditioned formations. They condition consciousness as conditioned consciousness.

Essentially, mental formation is the engine that conditions all of the aggregates. When we experience the volitional formation of anger, for instance, it conditions our body—we feel pressure and heat, our face may become distorted with contortions. Anger conditioning form. It conditions feeling—when we are angry, we tend to experience things as unpleasant. It conditions perception—when we're angry, we tend to see how someone has wronged us, shaping how we take in information. It conditions more anger—when we're angry, it breeds further anger in our minds. And it conditions consciousness—our awareness becomes filtered through anger, taking in certain things while missing others because of this frame we're looking through.

Understanding the conditioning nature of our mental formations is tremendously important. There's a powerful force here, especially in beliefs and views, to shape our experience—often in ways we don't see. So much suffering comes from unseen beliefs conditioning how we respond to the world. All the "isms"—racism, sexism, ageism—and the phobias around differences in gender and sexuality are rooted in belief.

Consider the pervasive view in American culture that this country is the land of opportunity, that anyone who tries hard enough can fulfill their dreams. That belief can lead to a kind of blindness, an inability to see how certain aspects of our society grant some groups access to privileges that make this belief more attainable for them than for others. So much suffering emerges from this conditioning power of the *sankharas*.

Yet we can also use this power skillfully. What we're doing here in practice is bringing in new conditions—mindfulness and wisdom—reconditioning our minds through this very capacity of mental formations to shape experience. So it's not wholly problematic, but we need to understand how it works so that our minds can head in a different direction.

Then the last of the five aggregates: consciousness, or knowing.

We've talked about this actually quite a bit. I think I spoke about it some last night, and this morning the guided meditation was pointing to this—the field of knowing, the process of knowing. Every experience comes with the experience and the knowing of it. And it's possible in our mindfulness to see either side of that experience.

Often we orient towards the object. We orient towards the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste, the touch, the emotion, the thought, the feeling. And yet with every one of those comes a knowing. We can begin to be curious about that. Some of the guided meditation this morning offered one way to step back into that field of knowing. We can begin to distinguish when the attention steps back into that field of knowing and when it's touching into the object. The mind has the capacity to do either one.

That question came up this morning too. In my own experience, it's often useful to just watch which the mind is doing. Neither one is right or wrong. The mind has the capacity to do both. Sometimes one may be more helpful for us than another. But if we try to say, "Oh, I want to rest in the field of knowing," and we try to find that experience, I've given myself headaches trying to do that when it wasn't just naturally there. We really need to honor where our minds are exploring in this moment. So it's not so much something to do. We can begin to recognize when we're aware of the knowing, when we're aware of the object.

There are a few ways we can explore this, and some of these tools have come up. We talked about using phrases like "seeing is known." We can notice seeing is happening, which orients us more towards the object of seeing. If we explore "seeing is known," it may begin to point us back to the knowing a little bit more. And again, distinguishing between physical seeing and mental knowing. Seeing is known. Hearing is known.

We can also recognize the knowing of mental experience. This was a little more challenging for me. But I found a way into this recognition—it was easiest when I was experiencing something unpleasant. Aversion. I was experiencing aversion, and at one point, while I was experiencing this intense aversion attack, my mind shifted to, "Oh, and aversion is known right now." When the mind made that shift to "aversion is known," it was clear to me that the mind was seeing it in a different way. Because when the mind was knowing aversion, the experience was unpleasant. When the mind was knowing that it knew aversion, the experience was neutral. Because the attention was in the knowing, which is neutral. Knowing has a very neutral feeling, which is partly why it's harder to see. Neutral is a harder experience to touch into.

An exploration of these aggregates begins to clarify the difference between body and mind. It helps us see how mind conditions body, how body conditions mind, how mind conditions mind. As we start to tease these processes apart, we begin to see how they interact. They are constantly going on. These aggregates are—we're not doing them. They are taking care of themselves. Whether we're asleep or awake, whether we're mindful or not, these aggregates are doing their thing. Perception is perceiving. Knowing is knowing. Feeling is feeling. Our volitional formations are forming. And they're in-

teracting. We have volitional formations that influence our feelings and our body. Our body, when we have certain experiences in the body, it influences our reactions, our responses in the mind. So they're all interweaving.

And we can begin to see this conditioned process at work, unfolding on its own. Not me in charge of it. Thank goodness we don't have to be in charge of it.

It helps us to see this, to see this conditioned nature. It begins to undermine our belief that I'm doing it. It helps us to see there isn't somebody here actually controlling. Nobody's in charge.

Through this seeing, wisdom grows. The understanding of how our minds work grows. And that wisdom begins to release this clinging. It begins to release the delusions that form around these aggregates, the confusions.

And that wisdom is what allows us to be free.

CHAPTER 130

Qualities that Support Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this dharma talk from the March Insight Meditation 1-Month Retreat, Andrea Fella offers a detailed exploration of how to establish right mindfulness according to the Buddha's teachings in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). She examines the crucial distinction between ordinary awareness and sammā sati (right mindfulness), noting that even the Pāli Canon references wrong mindfulness—awareness used in service of greed or aversion rather than liberation.

Fella systematically unpacks the sutta's foundational phrase: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, mindful, fully aware, free from desires and discontent for the world." Each element receives careful attention: "abiding" evokes a relaxed, homecoming quality related to the brahmavihāras; "observing the body as a body" points to knowing experience as impersonal phenomena rather than through our concepts and views; "ardent" brings wholehearted engagement; and "clearly comprehending" (sampajañña) includes understanding the arising, persisting, and passing away of experience—seeing impermanence directly.

The talk emphasizes that this quality of attention is inherently kind and allowing, creating a container where all human experience can be met with loving awareness. Fella addresses practical challenges like being overwhelmed by powerful emotions, offering skillful approaches for working with what arises. She clarifies that right mindfulness doesn't mean passive non-action, citing the Buddha's own interventions in worldly affairs motivated by compassion rather than reactivity. The teaching illuminates how this practice naturally frees the mind from suffering through understanding rather than force.

We're a little further downstream in our merging rivers. Still, it probably feels like separate streams to some extent, and that's okay. This is a natural process, much as the blending of two rivers is a natural process. It will happen. The nature of it is to blend, just as the nature of our coming together will be to find our community together.

Tonight I'd like to talk about mindfulness and explore it from the perspective of what the Buddha had to say, what the suttas have to say about how we establish mindfulness.

To start, I want to come at it from a more ordinary perspective, because in my sense of this quality of mindfulness, it is based on a very ordinary capacity of our minds. Just an ordinary capacity for us basically to know that we know, to be aware, to have a

sense of presence or witnessing our experience. Other words that may evoke the sense of what we mean by mindfulness when we say "I'm mindful" or "be mindful": connected with experience, being with experience, feeling into experience. This is, I think, what we basically mean when we come at this word mindfulness.

And yet it's interesting, because the more I begin to touch into and really get the sense of right mindfulness—what the Buddha taught of right mindfulness—there seem to be some depths and nuances to this experience of mindfulness that go deeper and beyond these words.

I think it was really brilliant of the Buddha to recognize this very ordinary quality as being a really useful quality when cultivated from a particular perspective or with a particular intention. He recognized that this quality of mindfulness is just an ordinary capacity of our minds, just a part of how our minds function. It's not often talked about, but there are some references in the Pali Canon to wrong mindfulness. Mindfulness, in the Pali Canon at least, is pointed to as a more neutral quality that is informed by what we do with it, how we engage, what our intention is as we meet it, what our view is.

This is very much, to me, why right mindfulness is embedded in the Eightfold Path. It's informed by wise view, right view, right intention, and the ethical components of wise speech, action, and livelihood. It has this framing around it. I don't think the Buddha actually anywhere just said, "Be mindful." He did say "meditate" at times. But when he pointed to being mindful, he framed it with other qualities and other intentions. This is how we should establish mindfulness, he said. Very much he talked about establishing this quality of mindfulness.

The Satipatthana Sutta, the sutta on what is often translated as the four foundations of mindfulness, contains the main meditation instructions we have from the Pali Canon about mindfulness from the Buddha, about meditation practice and mindfulness practice. That term Satipatthana—the *sati* means mindfulness, and the *patthana* piece means something like foundation, or something to stand on, or it could mean establishing. Bhikkhu Analayo really points to this translation of "the establishing of mindfulness" as what this sutta is pointing us to. How do we establish mindfulness? Meaning, how do we create the conditions for this state of right mindfulness to become established in our minds, stable, steady in our minds? That establishment of mindfulness creates the conditions for understanding—understanding how we struggle, how we suffer, how we get caught. That understanding creates the conditions for the mind to begin to let go of the ways that it suffers.

Sometimes people ask what wrong mindfulness might be. If we look at our simple definition of mindfulness—this knowing what's happening while it's happening, or being aware, being present—we can imagine a thief being very aware as they go through a house, taking care not to wake up the residents while they are stealing from that house. Very aware of every step, every move, how much noise they're making. In a way, present. Knowing what's happening while it's happening. And yet the intention behind that awareness is greed, or aversion if there's some motivation of anger or hostility towards the residents of the house. The motivation behind that presence of mind is not to understand suffering and its causes, but to get something. This is a very different effect or impact on the mind with a different motivation for this quality of knowing what's happening while it's happening.

One of my main teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, sometimes says, "Awareness alone is not enough." I think this is the kind of definition of awareness he's pointing to here—this just being aware of what's happening in the present moment while it's happening. That's not enough, because we need a framing, we need an intention, we need a direction, we need a purpose for that mindfulness. If we are trying to head in the direction of freedom, we need an aim, we need a compass, we need a direction.

And so the Buddha points out that we need to cultivate this mindfulness from a particular perspective. One way to frame this very simply is that we need to know, recognize experience that's happening in the present moment *as* experience that's happening in the present moment.

That sounds like nothing. It sounds like, "Well, duh—isn't that what we're doing?" But actually, no. Usually we are not aware of experience in the present moment as, "Oh, this is the arising of frustration," or anger, or love, or confusion, or pain, or pleasant, or unpleasant. We're not simply aware of experience as, "This is what's arising in this moment." We are usually motivated to do something with it—often to get rid of the unpleasant, to hold on to the pleasant, to try to construct our experience to be the way we would like it to be. And so this perspective is not our usual perspective.

For instance, around reactive emotions—anger, confusion, frustration, hatred, pride, greed, this vast range of reactive relationships to the world—often we are not just aware, "Oh, what's happening right now is there's anger arising." We are usually turned toward, attending to, trying to figure out: "What do I need to do about what's happening in the world that's making me angry, so that I can fix it or change it? How can I get somebody else to do something differently?"

This is essentially a turning. We can say that mindfulness is a turning from attending to the outer world to attending to this human experience. And there's an interface there. It's not that we ignore that we're seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. Not that we ignore that there's a content of a thought arising that has a particular feeling to it. But instead of following those sights, sounds, smells, instead of thinking about that thought, we turn and explore: What's it like to be smelling right now? What's it like to be seeing right now? What's it like to be feeling that feeling right now? What is it like to be a human being having this experience? That's a really simple way to look at this perspective that will support us to establish right mindfulness.

I want to say here—because it's easy for this understanding or teaching of turning towards inner experience and not emphasizing the outer experience, it's easy to think that means we're not supposed to act. That if something is happening in the world, all I'm supposed to do is notice how I feel about it and not do anything. And yet, there are many examples in the suttas of the Buddha acting in the face of injustice. Acting when the place where he lived, the kingdom where he lived and the neighboring kingdom, were going to have a water war. He went and stood out in the middle of the battlefield to try to stop that war. So taking action, but not from greed or aversion—rather from understanding that these actions out there in the world are creating so much pain, so much suffering, and being motivated from compassion and wisdom to act. That's my understanding, and so I just want to say that right at the very beginning, because it's so easy to misunderstand what the Buddha was pointing to here.

The Satipatthana Sutta offers a phrase that basically summarizes this establishment of mindfulness. The Buddha repeats it four times, once for each of the four foundations. He says: How does one establish mindfulness? And with each one it's: How does one establish mindfulness of the body? How does one establish mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of the mind, mindfulness of dhammas? He says, "One abides observing the body as a body, feelings as feelings, mind states as mind states, dhammas as dhammas"—and here dhammas we can understand as basically meaning phenomena, phenomena as phenomena. "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, mindful, fully aware, free from desires and discontent for the world."

This sentence, this phrase, offers us a number of different perspectives, different qualities that will support this establishment of mindfulness that frees the mind, that creates the conditions for wisdom, understanding, release, and peace to result. And so I wanted to explore the words of this phrase and see what they evoke for us.

The first part of the phrase: "one abides observing." Abide. How does that word land? Abide. If I just drop that word right now—just abide in your experience. The word "abide" is related to "abode," which means home. So to me it evokes a quality of coming home, resting, maybe relaxing, because when we're at home often we can relax. Dwelling, which has a sense of stability. Maybe even contentment.

I love that word. I love that it is a translation of the Pali word there, which is related to *vihara*, as in *brahma vihara*—divine abode. The mettā, karunā, muditā, upekkhā: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, those qualities that we'll be exploring in some of the afternoon sessions. So this abiding, maybe also resonating with those qualities of love.

And then "observing"—we know what observing means: to look at, to see.

The commentaries point to really connecting, repeatedly being with, a kind of being with experience. So it's perhaps a little more around continuity, but it's also around knowing what we are aware of. It's a connecting to what's present in our experience. Observing means knowing what's in the present moment.

These two together—one abides observing, abides observing the breath, abides observing the body as a body (that's the phrase that comes next)—this brings to me a sense of relaxed, receptive attention. Because "abides" has that relaxed quality, and yet it's also got this knowing what's there. So it's not just, "Oh yeah, I'm relaxed." It's not "the dude abides" here. That's not what we're talking about. There's this connection with what is happening in the present moment.

With each of the foundations, the Buddha points to observing the body as a body, feelings as feelings. Today I'm just going to explore "the body as a body," to give you a sense of perhaps what is being pointed to in this phrase.

My understanding of "observe the body as a body" is that the body is what we're exploring in this foundation. We're exploring physical contact, sight, sound, smells, touch also incorporated, included in body awareness. We're aware of the body, aware of the elements—the pressure, the hardness, the pulsing, the tingling. So we have this connection, we know, we're aware of the body.

And the encouragement: how are we aware of the body? We're aware of it *as a body*. Now this is pointing to what I talked about earlier—that we know present moment experience as present moment experience. This repetition of the phrase, "we recognize the body as a body"—not as *my* body, but *a* human body—brings in a little bit of wisdom here. We explore our experience of the body, and it brings in a kind of impersonal quality, the impersonal nature of the body. We know the body is simply a body. Not as

me, as my body. Not through any identities around bodies that we might hold. Not through any views, opinions, or ideas we might have about the body. Just the actual experience of the body.

I think a lot of us carry some perspective around the body. We like certain parts of our body; we don't like other parts of our body, perhaps. But if we touch into and actually feel... so if there's some part of your body that you particularly like, that you like looking at, or that you think is something special—if you feel into that area right now, what the actual experience of that part of the body is, does it have anything really to like or not like about it?

Now, sometimes there may be painful experience or pleasant experience, and that's a different layer of liking and not liking. Often we like pleasant, don't like unpleasant—a layer of reactivity to pleasant and unpleasant. But if we just have some concept around a certain part of our body, like the way our nose looks... We like the way our nose looks. We don't like the way our chin looks, looking in the mirror. But when I feel into my nose, there's nothing to look at there. It's just the feeling. And the chin too—there's just sensation. Nothing to like or not like about it. It's just experience.

So this pointing of "abide observing the body as a body" begins to direct us underneath our concepts, our opinions, our views of our body. It encourages us into that direct experience—knowing the experience as experience. To me it also points to a quality we often associate with mindfulness. We often say that mindfulness is a non-judgmental awareness. I think this aspect of knowing the body as a body brings a little bit of that in. It's encouraging a non-interfering awareness—just what's here, what's the actual experience.

I think it also points to a kind of allowing attitude towards our experience. At least for me, it begins to head in that direction. If I'm not all caught up in my views and opinions and ideas about what I'm experiencing, or about my body, this image, this body image—if I'm not caught up in that, and it's just the experience—there's a kind of, "Oh, this is just... this can be allowed. This experience is allowed."

This is an important aspect of my understanding of mindfulness: this allowing attitude towards our experience. It's an expression of kindness to ourselves.

We could call this kind of awareness kind attention, loving attention, loving awareness—bringing the brahmaviharas right together with mindfulness. They don't have to be so separate.

And also it's a pointer to allowing and opening to all aspects of our human experience, this whole framing of seeing our experience as this. What's arising in this moment is what's arising in this moment. No part left out. Nothing excluded. Nothing that mindfulness cannot meet. And nothing right or wrong around what's arising. It's just this is what's arising. This too can be known. This too can be felt into with this loving awareness, this allowing.

Sometimes I think about the word love in my own understanding, of where my mind was coming from before I really met the practice and began to understand connectedness at a deeper level. I think a lot of us, when we want love, we want to be seen by somebody. We want to be witnessed by somebody. We want to be accepted for just who we are. And we want to belong. We want to feel like we belong.

What this kind of attention towards our experience begins to do for us is to see ourselves more completely than anybody else possibly could. To allow and accept ourselves more fully than anybody else ever could—because they can't even see all the way down the way we can in our own minds. See the depths of how a particular pattern is structured from so much conditioning. And in a way, it feels like we begin to belong to ourselves. A very deep sense of belonging can come from this kind of attention.

So it's not always possible to say to ourselves, "Oh, this really painful memory and complex of emotions that have come up, dragged up from the nether reaches of our consciousness—oh, I'll just allow that." That's not always possible. It doesn't feel like it's possible to just allow it. There's often a lot of feelings of "Ooh, I don't want to see that," or "Oh, that's too much, it's overwhelming," or resistance to seeing some of what's underneath some of our habits and patterns.

And so, rather than trying to change the resistance into non-resistance, what we might explore is seeing if we can broaden the container a little bit and say, "Can it be okay that resistance is here?" Maybe that can be allowed too. That's human experience too. This thing came up and I don't want to see it right now. Okay, not wanting to see. Not wanting to see, not wanting to feel—this is what's happening right now. Fear about seeing it is what's happening right now. Confusion about this messiness is what's happening right now. And maybe if we take a step back and have a little bit bigger container, there might be room in which we can allow it all. So there's some kind of reactivity, some kind of reaction to that, maybe some resistance to that. That whole big mess—that's what's happening. Can the whole mess of it be allowed, just as human experience? And that's bringing in that loving attention right there.

And sometimes we may at times also have to just recognize that what is arising is so powerful, so deeply conditioned, that it's like a huge wave, a tsunami of experience that's meeting a little trickle of mindfulness. And so the mindfulness is not quite able to really meet it without just being pulled into the whirlpool of it. I've had this happen in my experience many, many times.

And so at that point, what's loving and supportive for us is to see if we can find some way to—I call it change the channel—redirect the attention, pick something else. Just not repress it. Not say, "Hey, you can't be here." Sometimes I would have a conversation with myself and say, "Yeah, oh, I see you. Yeah, I see you're asking for attention. Wow, you are strong. Okay, I bow to you. You are so strong. And this is not the time. My mindfulness isn't strong enough yet. And so you can stay in the room with me."

But I'm going to put my attention on my feet right now. I'm going to take a walk right now. I'm going to go look at trees right now. Something to let the mind, help the mind come back into some balance after it's gotten swamped.

And these swamps, these waves, will arise. We all have our own particular versions of waves that will overwhelm us, and they will come. Sometimes they come as the mind settles, as the mindfulness gets stronger and the mind settles into deeper terrain. Sometimes these waves can come then, and so it's not a problem. It's not anything wrong. It's just what's arising. It's this human being experiencing overwhelm right now. And can that be held with some compassion, love, care?

So abide observing the body as a body. Relaxed, yet receptive. Attentive, allowing experience to be as it is. To me, this is the first part of this phrase.

The next word is *ardent*. To me, this brings in a quality of engagement. Ardency has a kind of heart quality to it. It's got an energetic quality, that word. It means some kind of connectedness—alert, diligent, engaged, wholehearted, heartfelt connection to experience. Those are the resonances for me with that word ardent.

So it brings in a kind of commitment, our intention, our commitment to the practice. It also brings in this sense of persistence—staying with the practice, this gentle staying, staying with. It brings in continuity to me. This is a piece of what's being pointed to here. To establish mindfulness, we need to be attentive to our experience in a persistent way.

This area of persistence, I think, is where we can tend to grab on. "I'm going to pay attention to that breath. I'm going to be with this." And yet what's important is for us to recognize that we can only be present for a moment. And that's how much effort we need to make. How much effort does it take right now for you to be aware of the sensa-

tions of your hands? Contact of your feet on the ground? Contact of your hips against the chair, cushion, or bench? Usually it doesn't take a lot of work. Often when I name those, it's like, "Oh yeah, there's some sensation there." And so in a moment, for a moment, it doesn't take a lot of effort to connect.

What's your breath right now? In-breath or out-breath? Can you know that? It's not so hard for a half a breath to know that.

What is more challenging for us is to remember to keep doing it. And that's where we tend to grab. We sit down at the beginning of a sitting and think, "I'm going to stay present for the whole forty-five minutes." It's like we pick up the whole forty-five minutes at the first second of the sitting and bring all the effort we need to stay present for forty-five minutes in that first second. But all we can do is be present for that first second, that first half a second, that first quarter of a second—this moment. Be present for this. And then do it again. That light touch of effort. Just that little bit of effort. And then do it again. And again. And again. And again.

Hearing "again and again and again and again," sometimes our minds wilt. It's like, "Oh right, I have to do it again and again for forty-five minutes. I can't do that." But we can only do this moment. And so that sense of just a light touch, just this moment, just this moment.

So our ardency, our persistence, has a kind of really delicate flavor to it.

The next words: "fully aware, clearly comprehending." In this context, there are multiple uses of the word clear comprehension. One of the most familiar to us often is this teaching in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness—in the mindfulness of body—of comprehending bodily activities, daily activities. So there's a teaching where one knows, or one engages, clearly comprehending. When one is walking, one is fully aware that one is walking. When one is sitting or standing, one is fully aware that one is sitting or standing. That's the main way people know this phrase.

But there's another place where this phrase, "clearly comprehending"—*sampajañña* in the Pali—is defined as being that experiences are understood as they arise, persist, and pass away. That is clearly comprehending experience. An experience is seen to arise, then persisting or remaining present.

There are different levels at which we see experience remaining present. So sometimes it might be a sound that arises, and then it lingers. When we hit the bell, you know, you hit the bell and it lingers for a while—arise, persist, pass away. But then as you start hearing into the bell, you see that actually there's a rising and passing happening every single moment of that sound. And so we learn, we see more and more clearly

just how little there is that's stable in our experience. There's nothing stable in our experience. Everything is arising and vanishing. Even as we see it arising, it's already vanishing.

So this is a pointing—again, this is a pointing to how do we pay attention? How do we pay attention to our experience? The Buddha is pointing us to attend to impermanence here. Noticing that experience changes. That to me is part of what this phrase means: notice that experience is impermanent.

The commentaries also point to bringing in understanding the purpose for which you're doing something—another meaning of "clearly comprehending"—that we know the why, the intention behind our actions. So that's another way to look at this, that we understand why we're engaged in what we're doing. Again, bringing in some wisdom.

The purpose that Buddha pointed to for our practice is freeing the mind from suffering. Understanding suffering, the first noble truth: there is suffering. The encouragement in terms of acting on that truth is not "there's suffering, figure out how to get rid of it," but rather, "oh, there's suffering—understand it." The understanding will allow the suffering to release through the understanding. So we don't do the release. There's a kind of wisdom that is developed as we just explore: What is this experience? What is this body experience? Can I allow it? Can the mind be with this? Noticing its impermanence.

You see something unpleasant arise. Our first movement... And this was actually shocking to me at one point. I was noticing painful experience in my body, and it was pretty painful. I was recognizing there was some aversion to it and noticing the aversion. Every now and then the aversion would fall away, and there was just pain—just a painful experience. And I noticed that the pain was kind of flashing in and out. It was sharp on and sharp off. Sharp on and sharp off. And as the mind was attending to that, noticing the impermanence of that pain, every off—there was space.

There was ease. And the aversion was essentially locking the pain on—creating the conditions for the mind only to see the pain when it was present. When the aversion fell away, there was more of a recognition: this is on-off, on-off, on-off. And that allowed the mind to be at ease with that coming and going experience.

So that ease didn't come because I decided to have ease. It came because of the understanding of both the impermanent nature of the pain, the fluctuating quality of it, but also the relationship of aversion to the increase in intensity of pain—and the uselessness of the aversion. In fact, the harm the aversion was doing to my mind.

"One abides, observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, mindful." I spoke about mindfulness before, so I won't revisit that here. The last phrase is: "free from desires and discontent for the world."

When I read this, I wondered: how do I do that part? How do I just sit down and say, "I'm going to be free from desires and discontent for the world"? That didn't seem possible. It wasn't like I could flip a switch and become equanimous. I felt like that's what I was doing—practicing so that this could unfold.

One way of understanding this phrase, as Bhikkhu Anālayo points out, is that the Pali verb has an active quality to it: "freeing oneself from." In his first book on Satipaṭṭhāna, he explained that his understanding of this phrase is that it describes an activity happening simultaneously with the practice of mindfulness—essentially the result of the practice. As we abide, observing the body as a body, ardent, mindful, fully aware, this frees us from desires and discontent. It's the process of freeing us. That's the activity happening. Freeing from desires and discontent for the world is something that comes along with the practice.

And yet there are times when we can consciously recognize certain desires—perhaps wanting to go get that cup of tea—and set them aside. We can recognize that following them might not be useful. So I'm not saying conscious setting aside is never possible. At times we can say, "That's coming up... I don't need to go there right now."

Another perspective on this phrase comes from a retreat I recently taught with my colleague Gil Fronsdal. We used this phrase as the subject for the entire week, doing a talk each evening on each word. You're getting the condensed version tonight.

When it was his night to discuss "freeing oneself from desires and discontent," Gil suggested that perhaps the operative part of the phrase was actually "for the world." The word *loka* sometimes refers to the world of our experience—both our internal world and the world out there. Gil pointed to how this might describe a shift from our habitual orientation of looking outward when something arises. Who's doing what? What can I fix out there? "That person is making me frustrated—they need to stop doing that thing in order for me to be okay."

Instead of attending to the situation or person that seems to be creating the response, we turn toward the human experience itself. Perhaps that's what this phrase refers to: stepping back from our habitual orientation toward figuring out what's happening out there, and turning toward this—looking at what this experience is, in con-

nection with what's happening out there. It's not cutting ourselves off from what's happening externally. It's more like: that's happening out there. How does it affect this? What's happening here?

And so there's this kind of edge of our practice where it's not that we say, "Oh, that's happening out there, turn in here and ignore that." There's this edge of, "Oh, that's happening out there—what's happening here that's connected to that?" How is this being impacted, affected by the world? That's another way to look at this.

One abides. *Abide*. Sometimes I can just stop there. Abide. Kind of as a shorthand. *Abide*. Observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing oneself, setting aside desires and discontent for the world. This sentence is enough to practice with. And so this phrase offers us the direction towards establishing right mindfulness.

I want to say something about the use of "right" and "wrong" here—right mindfulness and wrong mindfulness. I understand right and wrong here, and the Pali is most accurately translated as right and wrong, though sometimes we say "wise and unwise," which seems more palatable for us. But in English we tend to give right and wrong an ethical dimension, like good and bad.

Let's think about another use of right and wrong—one that's simply in terms of directions. If somebody's giving you directions from point A to point B, and they've said turn right, turn left, turn right, turn left, and you turn right, turn right—you've made a wrong turn. There's nothing ethical about that. It's just not the direction you needed.

And so I think of wrong and right here as being based on the direction we are headed. What will help us get there is the right direction. The Buddha's saying go right, go left, go right, go left—whatever he's talking about—to get in that direction. And there are certain ways of being in this world that the Buddha said aren't going to get you there. In fact, they're going to take you into suffering. If you are acting from greed, aversion, and delusion, then greed, aversion, and delusion will be cultivated in your own experience. It will be cultivated in relationship to other people. When we are angry and put anger into the world, it tends to create anger in others, and then it rebounds. From the perspective of wanting to be free from anger, a different direction is useful. And so that's my understanding of why right and wrong.

Why is right mindfulness useful? I've talked about it, but I want to restate it. The way I understand this is that right mindfulness gives our minds an education about what leads to suffering, distress, unease, struggle—and what leads to happiness, ease, peace. As we explore that, our minds get more and more clear about this direction we're headed. It's a very natural feedback loop.

My sense is that as human beings we are pretty much designed to want to head towards well-being. And yet our minds have got many layers of confusion and delusion that are clouding the direction, clouding the clarity of what leads to happiness and what leads to suffering. Right mindfulness begins to clear that path, clear those clouds, that fog of delusion, and helps us to understand: oh yes, that leads to suffering. As the mind begins to understand what leads to suffering, because our system wants to head toward well-being, the mind begins to understand and reorient in a new direction.

My colleague Gil Fronsdal says that wise mindfulness helps us connect with a biological imperative towards freedom—that essentially our system wants to move in the direction of well-being. And yet we find ourselves caught over and over again doing the things that keep us away from it, because we're not in a situation of letting our mind fully understand itself. As we come into wise mindfulness, right mindfulness, our minds begin to fully understand themselves and will begin to reorient in the direction of peace, of freedom.

So let's just sit for a moment. Abide. Abide. Observing experience as experience. Ardent. Fully aware.

And mindful. Setting aside desires and discontent for the world.

CHAPTER 131

Exploring the Edges of the Wandering Mind

Andrea Fella · 1h03

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a profound reframing of the wandering mind—not as a problem to overcome, but as a doorway to understanding mindfulness itself. She explores the pattern we all share: the coming and going of awareness throughout each day. Rather than judging ourselves when attention drifts, she invites curiosity about these very moments of transition.*
>
> *Fella makes an important distinction between attention (vitakka) and mindfulness (sati), clarifying a common confusion in practice. Attention naturally picks out objects from our field of experience, while mindfulness is the quality of knowing that we know. She emphasizes that mindfulness is a saṅkhāra—a conditioned mental formation—arising and passing based on conditions, not subject to our control. This points directly to the truth of anattā (not-self): "If mindfulness were self, it would be possible to say of mindfulness, may my mindfulness be thus."*
>
> *Practical guidance is offered for exploring both edges of the wandering mind: the moment of waking up (when mindfulness spontaneously returns) and the moment of slipping away (where attention gets caught). Fella describes how we habitually lose awareness in certain activities, places, and mental states like boredom, depression, or spaciousness. She also addresses the natural cycle of purity and purification as practice deepens, and how shifts to subtler experience can initially feel like regression. Throughout, she encourages a light, curious touch rather than effortful control—trusting that this investigation itself cultivates the very mindfulness we seek.*

As we practice looking at our experience, noticing what's arising and exploring what we find, it can be useful at times to begin recognizing patterns that happen—things that occur over and over again—and to become curious about those patterns. What can we learn from them?

There's one pattern that we all share. I'm quite sure this is one we all experience all day long, over and over again: the wandering mind. Mindfulness gets lost into something or other, and then we wake up.

At some point I began to explore and get interested in this pattern itself, not necessarily its particular manifestations, but just this phenomenon of the wandering mind. I found that I could reframe it for myself—not as wandering mind, but as basically the

coming and going of mindfulness. The investigation around the wandering mind is really an investigation around mindfulness itself. Being curious about this quality of mindfulness: What is it? What is the experience of mindfulness? How can we recognize it? Can that recognition support us in cultivating the quality of mindfulness? How can we encourage its continuity? It seems to me there's a lot we can learn in this particular investigation.

One of the most obvious things we can learn, if we're simply curious about this, is that we may begin to recognize patterns within that pattern of wandering mind. We may begin to recognize particular ways we get caught, becoming familiar with our own versions of where we tend to really struggle.

Another aspect we can begin to recognize in exploring mindfulness itself is that we may have certain beliefs about mindfulness, certain beliefs about the practice that are actually getting in our way.

We also start to see a connection to some very deep truths—the deep truth of not-self evident in this pattern of wandering mind. We sit down determined: I'm going to pay attention. I'm going to be present. And yet the mind wanders. Did you decide to make it wander? Probably not. That's a manifestation of the uncontrollability of the mind, the not-self nature of the mind.

Mindfulness itself is a conditioned pattern. It arises based on conditions; it ceases based on conditions. It is not I, it is not me, it is not mine. One paraphrase of a text from the Buddha says something along the lines of: mindfulness is not self. Mindfulness is a mental formation, and this quote is about mental formations, so I'll put mindfulness in there. Mindfulness is not self. If mindfulness were self, it would be possible to say of mindfulness, "May my mindfulness be thus. May my mindfulness not be thus." But mindfulness is not self, so it is not possible to say of mindfulness, "May my mindfulness be thus." You don't have that control.

There are ways we can encourage and cultivate the conditions for mindfulness, support its increase, but we can't choose how long it will stay necessarily. And when it disappears, when it vanishes—in some ways even more amazing—the mind is off wandering, fantasizing, arguing, reflecting, remembering, and suddenly we're back. Who did that?

This exploration around the wandering mind begins to really dive in pretty deeply. We can also begin to learn about mindfulness itself, the experience of mindfulness. What is it like to be mindful? We know at times—I think the emphasis in many forms of meditation is to be interested in the objects, in what the experience is when we're

mindful. So often we're more oriented towards the qualities of the experience itself: the hardness, the softness, the pulsing of the body; color and form in sight; pitch and tone in hearing; the qualities of our mind states.

And this is one of the ways in which we can begin to cultivate a stability of mindfulness—to be attentive to experience itself. But in that, we may be missing a possibility to be curious about mindfulness. Mindfulness is a quality of the mind and can be recognized. And so this is the part of the exploration I'd like to offer this evening.

The other night in introducing Right Mindfulness, I gave some simple definitions such as being present, being aware, knowing what's happening while it's happening. But Right Mindfulness is oriented in a particular direction with a particular perspective that is especially interested in understanding suffering. It is interested in human experience as human experience—just the simplicity of "this is what's arising." We talked about that the other day, this mindfulness that brings in a kind of non-judgmental, non-reactive aspect, an allowing, receptive quality to this ability to know that we know.

There's an aspect of our minds, a functioning of our minds, that in my own experience early on in my practice—maybe even for the first ten years or so—there was some confusion around. I confused the quality or factor of attention with the quality of mindfulness. These two got mixed up for me. And so this is one piece I want to start with before we move into this exploration around the wandering mind: to point to this quality of attention in our minds and to talk a little bit about how it's different from mindfulness.

For myself, early in my practice, I used to think that if I wasn't consciously choosing to pay attention to an object, if I wasn't in control of where the attention was, it meant I wasn't being mindful. That's a fundamental misunderstanding.

The factor of attention—and we can see this in everyday life, we can recognize it—attention is a factor of mind that picks experience out of the multiplicity of things that could be known. It picks something to attend to. Attention lands on some particular experience. So the factor of attention is this selecting of experience out of the field of possible experiences. There are millions of things probably that could come into our attention, that could be connected with in a moment. And some aspect of our conditioning points us to some particular experience to pay attention to.

Now that choosing, that attending to something in this very pure definition of attention, does not have to be something we're consciously doing. And we can see this in daily life—how attention functions—and can see that attention and mindfulness are different.

A simple example: perhaps there was a time when you recognized that you walked down the hill to go to the dining hall and got halfway through putting food on your plate, and then realized you'd been completely lost in thought. Unaware really of the walking down the hill or putting food on your plate until that moment when mindfulness returned. In that moment of mindfulness returning and the recognition that the mind had been lost, we can see that something was paying attention. Some part of our mind was attending to the walk down the hill, or we would have just been running into other people and falling off the edge of the path. We wouldn't have been able to put food on our plate without having some attention. And so attention can be there without mindfulness. And attention can be there without our choosing it.

There's this factor of attention—the mind can aim at something. And that factor of attention is amenable to what we could call, in familiar terms, conscious choice. We can, with a sense of agency, choose to pay attention. We can sit down and choose to pay attention to the breath for a certain period of time. We can't be there for the entire sitting probably, but we can direct, aim, our attention to an experience. So that's the factor of attention where we are choosing to pay attention.

And this is where I think mindfulness and attention get a little confused, at least in my experience. Because of the instructions—"pick something to pay attention to"—I felt like if I wasn't picking that thing to pay attention to, then I wasn't being mindful.

But then as I began to practice more and really began to explore open awareness, I became more curious about settling back, not consciously choosing what to pay attention to, but allowing the conditions of experience to choose what to pay attention to. This is one way to describe open awareness. We settle back. We've described it in a familiar way: settle back and receive experience. You don't have to pick an experience; you can just settle back and notice what comes to you. In that coming to you, that is essentially conditions from our past, our conditioning, aiming our attention in some way. And we are consciously not choosing what to pay attention to.

Sometimes in the open awareness practice, where we are stepped back and receiving and not aiming at a particular anchor, one way to describe it would be following the attention. The attention will shift from object to object, and we might be able to stay connected to where that attention shifts.

I described this experience of following the attention to my teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya. And he got very excited and said, "Oh yes, yes, it's just like walking a dog! You have a dog on a leash, and that dog will go off here and smell this thing and that thing, and it's just jumping all over the place. But you've got it on the leash, so it's not going to go too far. That's your job—just to hold on to the leash."

So it's kind of like surfing or riding where the attention goes.

Although it doesn't always necessarily feel smooth—it doesn't always feel like a smooth shift from thing to thing. Sometimes it can feel more jumpy, as attention pops from thing to thing. And so mindfulness can be aware of this shifting attention. This is an aspect that comes into play as we begin to explore the wandering mind, because essentially, when the mind wanders, the attention has picked up on something. The attention has gotten interested in something. Conditions have directed the attention to something, and we haven't noticed that. Mindfulness hasn't noticed that. The mind wanders.

So this framing around attention is just a piece I wanted to start with. The first aspect of the wandering mind that I'd like to explore—and really the easiest place to explore—is one of the most familiar meditation experiences we have: that of recognizing we've been lost. That moment when, "Oh, I was thinking" or planning or judging. All of those recognitions that Brian pointed to around thinking this morning. Often when we wake up—not always by any means, but often—thinking has been one of the main ways the mind has wandered.

In that moment, we're often oriented towards it in a particular way. We often have a relationship to that moment. Does anybody recognize that sense of exasperation or frustration or disappointment that the mind had wandered?

One alternative way to explore that moment is this: first of all, mindfulness has to return before you can even notice that you've been thinking. So mindfulness returns. And sometimes we can just get curious about that. What is it like for mindfulness to come back? What is that experience when mindfulness returns? It's so common, so familiar, but mostly what happens there is either we're oriented towards the thing we've been aware of—whatever we'd wandered to—or we're judging ourselves. And that judging will block the possibility of being aware of the experience of mindfulness in that moment.

So this being curious about the moment of waking up—it's an amazing moment. It's completely effortless mindfulness. You did not have anything to do with it. It just happened.

As I began exploring that moment and the effortless quality of it, it really began to give me a flavor of what it's like, what it means to be aware in an effortless way. Not trying to hold on to mindfulness. In that moment it's like a free gift of a moment of mindfulness. And if we're curious about that moment, rather than judging ourselves for not having been mindful the moment before—and that moment's already gone anyway—if we're curious about this moment of mindfulness returning and that effortless qual-

ity there, what I've seen happening is that getting familiar with this experience of mindfulness returning, it's like it begins to point itself out when it happens. It happens a lot. Way more than you probably think. And we can begin to really appreciate that here on retreat in particular.

As we get familiar with that kind of waking up, that experience of waking up, and as mindfulness returns, there's sometimes a way—not always, but sometimes—that we can see a kind of contrast between this moment when mindfulness is present and a lingering sense or flavor or taste or memory of what it was like a moment before when mindfulness was not there. That contrast between non-mindfulness and mindfulness begins to highlight for us that experience of the mindfulness returning, that effortless mindfulness returning. You begin to get attuned to it. It's like mindfulness begins to get attuned to itself through this exploration.

As mindfulness gets attuned to itself, or as the mind begins to get more familiar with that quality of the mindfulness returning, the mind recognizes it more often. And you may start to recognize that while you're walking down that hill, largely lost in thought, there are these little bursts, little pop-ins of mindfulness.

But often what happens is when mindfulness pops in, when mindfulness kind of surfaces, it will often connect to some experience through some kind of attention to something. And as it connects to that thing, the habit there is often to start thinking about that thing. We see the worms on the road. We start thinking about the worms. We see other people walking down the hill and we start judging or thinking about what they're doing. So often when that moment of mindfulness returns or begins to come to the surface, it gets pulled back under because we get interested in the thing we have woken up to.

As we can be curious about that moment, it begins to...

It's almost like those little bubble-ups of mindfulness begin to... the mind begins to recognize them sooner as they start to emerge. And so we see more of them. We get more moments of that effortless mindfulness. Free mindfulness. You don't have to work for it. Such a relief.

We usually cultivate mindfulness through something called prompted mindfulness, where when we are mindful, we basically remind ourselves to be mindful. And that's how a lot of our meditation works. We're mindful and we recognize, "Okay, be aware. Connect to this next breath, the in-breath. Can I do it the next breath?" We talked about

that kind of "do it again." And again, this light touch—half a breath, this experience, this experience. That's prompting mindfulness because we are mindful and we're reminding ourselves, essentially reminding ourselves to be mindful.

The only way that's going to work is when mindfulness is already present. And so we have to have these spontaneous moments of mindfulness to even get the prompted mindfulness going. The more we can recognize these moments of spontaneous mindfulness, the more we have the opportunity to encourage that cultivation of mindfulness. And it is, at least in my experience, the recognition of that moment of mindfulness returning, the familiarizing with that, is a way of cultivating mindfulness too. Because again, we're getting more sensitive to it, and so we become aware of it more often.

For myself, as I did this exploration of noticing this—at one point on one three-month course at IMS, I kind of just set the intention to see if I could notice that moment of mindfulness returning. And so there was a lot of curiosity about that moment. How early can I see that moment happening? It's not something you can try to do, right? Because you're not in charge at that point. But sometimes we can set an intention and just be curious about it. And that curiosity may really support a reduction of judging mind around the waking up. It certainly did for me. It really cut through that tendency to think it was a problem that my mind had been wandering. Because every time the mind wandered, it was another opportunity—whenever the mind woke up—to experience that effortless mindfulness and be curious about it, to get to know that difference between being lost and being mindful.

And so in that moment when mindfulness returns, notice that you're aware in a very simple way. This is awareness. And what is obvious in that moment? There is this... the mindfulness is this knowing that we know, and the mindfulness knows something. So what is it that this mindfulness is already aware of as it's returning? Maybe it's the thought. Maybe it's interested in that quality of the brightening of the mind as mindfulness is returning. Maybe it's knowing a fear or a peace or an ease. What is there already in that moment of mindfulness returning? You are already mindful in that moment.

Often in these instructions, in the beginning when we're encouraging stabilizing the mind around the anchor of attention to cultivate some concentration, we often say, "When you notice that you've been thinking, note 'thinking' and then return to the breath." And in my beginning years, I thought that meant basically to come back to mindfulness, come back to directing the attention. And I had completely lost that I was already mindful. When mindfulness returns, we are already aware. What is there already in that moment when we know what's already present, what we're already aware of?

It may be that we are just curious about following the attention at that point, or we may choose to return to an anchor. But at that point we have some... because mindfulness is there and we can draw upon our wisdom, we can make a skillful choice. What's supportive in this moment?

And then we can explore from the other side of the wandering mind: Where does mindfulness get lost? This is sometimes a little more challenging because it's where the mindfulness is slipping out. And sometimes people feel, "Well, it's either here or it's gone, and I can't see it going." But actually we can. We can be curious about that. Sometimes we have to start being curious about that by basically noticing in retrospect when and where we got lost. But getting curious—again, I really want to encourage the sense of curiosity around this exploration.

Not a judgment. The mind is getting lost. And I'm also really wanting to encourage not a sense of doubling down to try to hold the attention to something. Because there's a lot to be learned by seeing, exploring the possibility of mindfulness kind of following where the mind is going as it slips out, as it gets lost. There's a lot that we can learn about that, and about the mind there. We can learn a lot about our minds.

So this exploration of where mindfulness gets lost—what I'm not encouraging here is to try to hold to some object, but rather to be curious. When you recognize certain patterns, when you notice where your mind gets lost, be curious in those times to see what happens there. How does it happen? What is being missed?

As I think I said earlier, when the mind wanders, there's something that the attention has picked up on that we have not seen. And that's where the mind slips out. Sometimes that thing the attention picks up on that we've not seen is some old habit that's just got so much momentum that that's why the mind wanders. But as the practice deepens, there are a lot of new experiences, subtle experiences, deepenings of the practice where the mind is slipping out partly because mindfulness is beginning to orient towards subtler experience. And we may not be quite able to recognize it.

I'll try to describe some of this, but I'll just go through a few places, a few ways we might lose awareness, simply to encourage some curiosity in these areas.

You might notice after the fact, for instance, that you're losing awareness in particular activities that you do, maybe places that you go. So check it out. Do you tend to lose your awareness when you go to the dining hall? Do you tend to lose your awareness while you're in the meal line and then get it back when you put your plate down on the table? Do you tend to lose mindfulness when you go into your room, close that door—yeah, whew, nobody looking, you don't have to be mindful now? Do you lose mindful-

ness when you go to the bathroom, or when you do your yogi job, or when you take a walk for exercise as opposed to doing formal practice? What are the activities in which you tend to lose mindfulness?

And you don't have to stop doing those things. I don't want you to stop going to the bathroom. I don't want you to stop going to your room or going to the dining hall. But be curious about what happens there. You go into those rooms—what happens?

It's likely that as you go through the day, you can be curious about this: Where are the holes in mindfulness? Where are the gaps? And then as you notice where the gaps are—if you notice that you tend to lose mindfulness when you go into your room or when you go into the dining hall—you can be curious. As you're approaching your room or approaching the dining hall, again, not doubling down or trying to hold to the mindfulness there, but curious: What happens? Maybe I'll be able to see it this time. Approaching the door, I'm mindful as I open the door. Okay, I'm here, I'm mindful, walking in the door. And then, three minutes later—what happened? I missed something.

And not to beat yourself up about that, not to judge yourself about that. This is normal. This is how we can learn about where our minds get caught. So just the next time you go into your room, be curious what happens.

Often with something like that it's some task. Tasks that we have to do are often places where the mind gets lost. We think of something that we have to do, and mindfulness gets lost. Now it's not necessary for mindfulness to get lost as we think of a task and start to do it. But it's kind of a habitual pattern. And so there's curiosity there, curiosity about that.

We can perhaps begin to learn something about intention here, because at least in my experience, in losing mindfulness in activities or things that I'm doing, it's often some intention to do something that is missed. The intention to look in the mirror when I'm washing my hands—missing that intention. At one point I was investigating and exploring, and I woke up over and over again staring at myself in the mirror, not seeing how that had happened. And it was simply not seeing the intention to look up.

It wasn't like some deep childhood thing of needing to be seen. It was just an intention, a habit almost, of looking at myself in the mirror. That's all it was. But in that habit there was a loss of mindfulness. So just curiosity about these different activities where you might lose mindfulness.

We might also lose mindfulness in states of mind, in familiar habits or patterns. I'm not going to be able to cover all the different ways I have in my notes here—I can see I'm not going to get through all of the different things I have for where we might lose awareness, so I'll just pick a few of them.

Losing awareness in states of mind. These will tend to be ones that we are habitually hooked to. And so again, we might notice in retrospect, waking up. When we notice the waking up, the moment of waking up, we may notice—as we recognize particular patterns of thinking, for example, planning or judging or remembering—those might point to states of mind that are associated with them. Anxiety or curiosity or fear or something that is happening. So when we wake up into those thoughts, sometimes in the moment of waking up, whatever we wake up into may be a state of mind that we habitually get lost in. And we may begin to recognize this for ourselves. Begin to recognize that we habitually get lost in boredom, or depression, or anger, or confusion. That these are states in which we tend to spiral into the quicksand and lose mindfulness.

And so in the returning, in the mindfulness waking up, the moment when mindfulness returns into something like boredom, something like depression—again, that's a pointing to, that's a moment of mindfulness of something where you habitually aren't mindful.

Another state of mind that we might habitually not be mindful in or get lost in is sleepiness or spaciness. These states that we basically attribute non-mindfulness to. We think perhaps that a spaced out mind is inherently non-mindful, or that a sleepy mind is inherently non-mindful. And that's simply not true. It is a state in which we are habitually not mindful. But it is possible to be mindful of spacing out. And the moment of waking up, the moment when the mind returns—this can become a doorway.

One day I was observing this happen over and over again. I was trying to be mindful of eating and kept noticing the mind spacing out. What I was doing initially was just come back to the eating, just pay attention to that eating, almost trying to double down and force myself to be with the eating because I thought, well, spacing out means not mindful. But at some point it happened enough, and in the moment of waking up there can be a sense of the quality of the mind in that spacing out. I got curious about that and got a little flavor of that mind. A sense of a floating mind. A mind that has stepped back from sense experience. And then at one point, I kind of saw the mind shift into that space, that floating space that was disconnected from sense experience. There wasn't a lot of sense experience, but the mind was completely aware of that state. Mindfulness of spacing out.

In that particular story, there's another kind of interesting learning I had with that experience. As I was exploring the mind losing awareness—noticing it get spaced out and coming back, spacing out, coming back, finally being able to watch it space out—wow, that was cool. Actually, it was really pleasant. It was so restful. The mind was completely relaxed and very mindful. And then the sense impressions came back and the mind was still very relaxed.

It was almost as if—the interpretation I gave to this, I can't really say this interpretation is true, but my sense was—that the mind was tired of having me drag it back to paying attention to the eating. It wanted to rest. And it was going to take its rest whether I let it or not. It took its rest. And after about thirty seconds of just hanging out there in that spacing out, it was like the mind said, "Oh, okay, yeah. Ready to be present again." And then there was the eating and knowing, the seeing and hearing, and it was effortless knowing.

This kind of exploration has been a real doorway for me towards less effortful practice.

Because I'm not trying to hold the mind still, but just being curious: Where does it go? Where does it slip out?

And again, in losing awareness in familiar states of mind—such as boredom or depression—you might begin to recognize that you tend to get lost in those states. Similar to noticing that you get lost in particular places or physical activities, you may recognize at certain points that boredom is here. And you may be able to recognize: "Oh, boredom. Yep, boredom. Mindful of boredom, aware of this, knowing it." The learning of "this is one I tend to get lost in" becomes significant. Something happens in boredom that the mind gets hooked in. So what is that? What happens there?

One exploration, if you start to begin to be present at the beginning of states of mind where you tend to get lost: you wake up into awareness of boredom as it begins to arise and you're knowing it, looking at other experience, and boredom is there. So you're not lost yet. In that early stage of boredom, before you get lost, there's a tool I find useful to help potentially expose some of the undercurrents where we might get caught. And that is to be curious about what kind of beliefs or views are happening. What's being believed right now? Just ask that question, drop that question in.

You don't have to try to figure out the answer. In fact, it's not helpful to try to figure out the answer. It's more just dropping that question in and seeing if it supports or evokes the recognition of some view or idea or opinion.

For myself around depression, for instance, I spent one long stretch of time in Burma looking at a low-grade depression that persisted over several weeks. It came and went, but I just noticed it and began at some point to recognize that the belief was that I thought it was a problem. Such a simple belief. But everything I had been doing—the investigation itself, the way I was paying attention to it—was all in the service of figuring out what was wrong, as opposed to simply: "Oh, this is depression. Not a problem. What's arising? Oh, it's passing. Okay. Oh, it's arising. It's passing. It's arising. It's passing."

When the mind began to recognize that view—"it's a problem"—the state itself became so fluid. Before I really noticed that I believed it was a problem, it was like that belief locked the depression into place, made it seem much more stable. As soon as I noticed that view, depression came and went and came and went and came and went. It was stunning how fast it happened.

So a way in which we can get hooked and lost in states of mind is because there's some view or belief operating that's not seen. That question can sometimes help us recognize a belief that's operating.

We also can lose awareness as our practice deepens. There are certain times in practice that this is part of what we have to learn to watch and be curious about. Sometimes we might notice that after a period when the mind seemed pretty stable, mindfulness pretty stable and continuous, suddenly it seems like—where did the mindfulness go? We sit down to meditate and the mind wanders. Or sometimes, after a period of stability, it seems like the hindrances just surge in.

One teacher, Michelle McDonald, described this pattern as a kind of practice cycle between purity and purification. Purity being where the mind is at ease, calm, seems like no problem, nothing wrong—just able to be with what's arising. The recognition of the absence of the hindrances, the recognition that reactivity isn't coming up around things we're used to reacting to. That place where the mind seems really stable, at ease and peace, wholesome qualities strengthening—and then suddenly we're flooded with hindrances.

This pattern happens to us over and over again. My understanding of it is that we see through certain kinds of clinging, and as we let go of certain habitual ways we've been reactive, it's like we've got layers and layers and layers of reactivity and clinging. We may let go of an outer layer—those really familiar ways we're reactive and hold on to things, those ways the hindrances come up. That layer may begin to weaken and drop away for stretches of time.

It can feel like we've really entered a new space, a new deepening of our practice. And as the mindfulness keeps going, it hits that next layer where there's yet more, deeper patterns of conditioning that can be revealed and seen. And so we cycle—purity, purification, purity, purification. This is not an uncommon thing to happen.

If you notice that after a period of a few days of real ease and peace, the mind has suddenly gotten very reactive, what I've seen in my own practice is instructive. In the early years of my practice, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what I'd done wrong, beating myself up about the fact that I was now reactive again. I must have done something wrong to have lost that.

But what we can instead do, perhaps knowing this cycle—as I began to understand this cycle, that reactivity to the shift from purity to purification began to get much less. It's just like, "Oh, it's a new level of clinging here. Okay, curiosity about that." It's not easy to let go of that peace. But this is what's arising now, and it's not a mistake.

Another thing that can happen as the practice deepens is that the mindfulness is noticing experience—it's noticing the breath, for example—and it gets really familiar with particular qualities and sensations of the breath. It's like the object and the mindfulness are right in sync. Every breath, all of those sensations are right there, and you can just hang with that breath.

And then, because the mindfulness is strengthening and getting more continuous, my sense actually is that as the mindfulness gets more continuous, there's something—it's like it gets interested or drawn down to a subtler level of experience. There's some kind of orientation of the attention to subtler experience as the mindfulness gets more continuous. Only our agenda is to pay attention to this, because this is what we're familiar with—to pay attention to that familiar experience. And when there's a mismatch between what we think we should pay attention to and what the attention is naturally drawn to, the mind can get lost.

For myself in one sitting at IMS, there were a couple of days where the mindfulness just got right into the breath. I could sit down and the mind was with the breath for the whole sitting. It was effortless, it was easy. And then the next day—three days into this—next day I sit down, first sitting of the day, one breath and the mind's wandering. Another breath, the mind's wandering. It was like I had no control, no capacity to stay with the breath.

I had enough experience there not to beat myself up, but to begin to recognize—again, if you notice the mind starts to wander a lot after a period where there's been stability of mindfulness, it usually means there's a shift in the practice. Something new is being revealed. Something new is happening. And so I got curious: what's happening here? What new is happening?

What I began to recognize is that as I watched the breath, what I was familiar with—it was like as soon as I touched the breath, all the sensations disappeared. They were just vanishing, those sensations, and I didn't quite know how to meet that. At one point with one of my Burmese teachers, I described this and he said, "You just have to recognize there's no sensation." I was trying to find the sensations. He says, "Just know they're not there." Okay, I can do that.

Again, I was looking for something that I was familiar with to pay attention to, and he pointed me to the reduction of sensation, the disappearance of sensation.

Another experience that can happen as the practice deepens, that's useful to explore, is noticing when the mindfulness lets go of some experience. Maybe you're paying attention to hearing or there's something that the attention is connected with. This is noticing that the attention shifts to something else—really picking up on that shift of mindfulness moving to some other experience. Only this is not seeing that it's landing on something else. This is seeing the release from something that we're familiar with.

As an example, at one point, again doing breath meditation, I was paying attention to the breath and I began noticing that I could see the mindfulness weakening around the breath. It was like I could feel the mindfulness let go of the breath. At first, what I did with that was, "Oh, mindfulness is letting go. Just connect with the breath again." And then it would let go. It would just feel like this

Kind of a releasing feeling, a release. The mindfulness would let go, and I'd come back to the breath. It would let go, I'd come back to the breath. Let go, come back to the breath.

And at some point, there was this wisdom that arose: "Well, it let go. I'm aware that it let go. Let's see where it's going."

That was an opening into a new kind of state I'd never consciously experienced before—a vast kind of space I had no name for. It felt like a new landscape.

Again, there's that kind of respect, especially as the practice deepens, for being with what the mind is doing. In this case, I had the agenda to hold attention to the breath. But there was something deeper acting, some deeper wisdom that was releasing from the breath and moving in the direction of that spacious, open awareness.

It takes trust to let go and not know where the attention will go. It almost feels like stepping off a cliff, to not know. There's a place for that trust at times. And we ultimately do have to trust that, because we don't know what freedom looks like. We have to allow freedom to be revealed—stepping into that unknown.

This exploration around the edges of the wandering mind, especially as the practice deepens and starts to shift into unfamiliar terrain—I look at that as practice for opening to freedom.

Let's sit for a minute.

One of the things about this kind of practice of watching where the attention goes: sometimes we can't quite do it. We can maybe set the intention for it, but the activity of trying to do it will get in the way. So just as you sit here, open to the possibility that you might notice these shifts of attention. But let go of any doing around it.

CHAPTER 132

The Cycle of Suffering: Paṭicca Samuppāda (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this comprehensive retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers an accessible exploration of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), the Buddha's profound teaching on how suffering comes to be. Rather than starting with the traditional first link of ignorance, she begins with the more immediately observable aspects of our experience—the six sense bases, contact, and vedanā (feeling tone)—before circling back to illuminate how ignorance and mental formations (saṅkhāra) shape our consciousness and perpetuate the cycle.*
>
> *Fella draws on the exchange between Ānanda and the Buddha, where despite Ānanda's claim that dependent origination appeared "as clear as clear," the Buddha cautioned that intellectual understanding differs from penetrative wisdom. She emphasizes that while conceptual knowledge of this teaching supports practice, it is the direct seeing of these processes at work that liberates the mind. The talk explores how feeling tone conditions craving (taṇhā), how craving leads to clinging (upādāna), and how the entire chain reinforces itself unless interrupted by mindfulness and wisdom.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is Fella's discussion of how mental formations include not only personal conditioning but collective cultural views—using the social construct of race as an example of how shared ignorance perpetuates suffering. Drawing from the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta (MN 9), she offers the liberating insight that freedom is possible at every single link in the chain. Whether we notice craving, clinging, or the arising of self-identity, meeting any experience with mindful awareness opens a doorway to release.*

As I was walking up the hill this evening, I was hearing the frogs and the crickets and seeing the clouds in the sky. There was a lot of happiness and contentment in that. Greg said the other day it seems like it would be better to just let the frogs give the Dharma talk. I feel that way this evening.

And yet the topic this evening is dependent origination. So buckle your seat belts.

This teaching is a very fundamental teaching in which the Buddha describes essentially how suffering comes to be—a very detailed description of the processes at work in our mind which lead to suffering. It's a really useful teaching. To me it's been so supportive to have this process just laid out, helping the mind to see things it might not no-

tice or recognize. I'm in awe of the Buddha's mind that he could articulate these things so clearly. We are the recipients of his understanding and his ability to communicate that understanding.

In the time of the Buddha, Ānanda really appreciated this teaching. It is said he went to the Buddha and said, "It's wonderful, it's marvelous how profound this dependent origination is and how profound it appears. And yet to me it appears as clear as clear."

The Buddha, understanding and knowing that Ānanda was not fully awakened, responded, "Do not say that, Ānanda, do not say that." I think he was responding to the "clear as clear" part of what Ānanda said. "This dependent origination is profound and appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this teaching, that this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, unable to pass beyond states of woe, continuing to suffer."

To me, what the Buddha is pointing to here is that there may be an understanding at some level of the content of dependent origination, of the teaching itself. For me this is supportive—to have a sense of the framework that it lays out to help us understand how suffering comes to be. And yet intellectual understanding is different than penetrative understanding, which is essentially seeing this process at work in direct experience. The intellectual understanding may support us in being curious about experience, but it's the seeing of it happening that frees the mind.

It's a teaching that's simple at heart in that it basically points to the conditioned nature of experience. The simple version of this teaching is: When this is, that is. When this comes to be, that comes to be. When this isn't, that isn't. When this ceases, that ceases. And yet this explanation of how suffering arises dives in and points to how that process of conditioning creates the conditions for suffering to arise.

The teaching describes a pretty complex process in our minds that's often deeply under the surface, where it's not easy to see it at work. And yet hearing this teaching has been so helpful in my own practice, so I offer this evening in the hopes that some of it might be useful for your practice. I don't think of the teaching of dependent origination itself as a practice. Dependent origination describes the process by which suffering comes to be, and yet because it describes that, it may help us understand how we can practice to see this process unfolding.

The overarching understanding is basically this teaching describing the conditions that create suffering—a description of how suffering comes to be as a human pattern. The Buddha is describing something that applies to all of us. That to me is inspiring and helpful to recognize. The specifics of our suffering may seem very individual, but the

pattern behind it we share. It's describing the human condition. It's not personal. For me it helps point to the impersonal nature of the arising of suffering—that it's just something that humans do when this being doesn't understand suffering, doesn't understand the cause of suffering, doesn't understand there's a possibility for suffering to release, doesn't understand that there's a way suffering can release.

This teaching can help us loosen the way we take our suffering personally, because we can see it's just following conditions, following habits and patterns that are common to all of us as human beings.

The other piece is that it points to the conditioned nature of suffering. There are twelve links in this teaching, this chain of dependent origination—twelve steps in this process by which suffering comes to be. This chain describes the conditioning for suffering to arise. It's important that we recognize it's describing conditions for suffering. And because it's describing conditions, it means that conditions can be changed. We are not locked into this process. The chain describes conditions that create the arising of suffering. Different conditions will lead us in a different direction.

And the main conditions that lead us in a different direction are hearing the Dharma and practicing in accordance with the Dharma—practicing with right view, right understanding, practicing the Eightfold Path, practicing mindfulness and wisdom. This changes the conditions and can take our experience in an entirely different direction, breaking into that cycle which habitually leads us to suffering and leading us to freedom instead.

So the links, just to start: ignorance conditions mental formations. Mental formations condition consciousness. Consciousness conditions our mind and body processes. Our mind and body processes condition the six sense bases. The six sense bases condition contact—contact with a sense door. Contact conditions feeling. Feeling tends to condition craving. Craving conditions clinging. Clinging conditions becoming. Becoming conditions birth. And birth conditions old age and death. As the Buddha often says at the end of this chain, "And thus the entire mass of suffering is created."

I'll go through each of these links of necessity fairly briefly, but there are a couple of pieces about the bigger picture here. Often this chain of the creation of suffering—beginning with ignorance, leading through our mind and body, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, old age, and death—is understood as a cycle where suffering at the end basically conditions further ignorance. We tend to stay caught in this cycle unless something new happens.

Greg pointed the other night to something new that can happen at the point of contact with suffering. If we hear the Dharma and engage with it, if faith arises in contact with that suffering, the condition of faith arises in dependence on suffering. When we hear the Dharma, when we connect with that understanding and have the inspiration to engage with it, it takes us in a completely different direction. And yet, much of the time we forget that. We have suffering and we feel like, "Oh, I'm struggling with this. What am I doing wrong? How can I fix this?" The whole process in which we engage when we meet suffering often takes us right back to ignorance, and the process just reinforces itself.

For this teaching this evening, I'm not going to start in the traditional place. The teaching starts with ignorance—ignorance leads to mental formations, leads to consciousness, leads to mind and body. All of those, in my own experience, were the last ones to really fall into place in terms of being able to understand them. So I'm going to start where it's a little easier to understand this cycle: with the fact that we have a body and a mind. We're conscious, and there's a body and mind here. Because of this body and mind, within it, we have these six sense bases: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, contact with the skin, and our minds.

Because we have these six sense bases and we're conscious, we experience contact with them. We experience seeing. There are sights. Sights contact the eye. Sounds contact the ear. Smells contact the nose. Thoughts, moods, and mind states contact the mind door—the sixth sense being the mind door. So the arising of sense experience includes the entire range of our experience, not just our physical senses.

We have these six sense bases, and because of that we experience contact with the world. Each of those contacts—every single contact, every sight, every sound, every smell, every taste, every touch, every arising in the mind—has a feeling tone associated with it. This aspect of our experience is vedanā, which Amana talked about the other night. Every sense contact has a feeling tone. It's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

These feeling tones arise based on conditions. They're not inherent in the experience. They are conditioned based on many things: our own bodies, our own experience from the past, our ideas—a whole host of things will condition the feeling tone. A simple example of this: perhaps some of you like the taste of milk, especially following a cookie. The condition of drinking milk after having eaten a cookie—there's a pleasant feeling tone there. But now imagine having eaten a pickle and then having a drink of milk.

Even the idea of it, to me, is unpleasant. So the contact, the feeling, is not in the milk. There are conditions—in this body, choices that have been made—and the experience of that contact, of the taste on the tongue, will be different depending on the conditions.

And feeling tone, too, is simply feeling tone. It's not skillful or unskillful; it's just feeling. In fact, it is said that a fully enlightened being, an arahant, will experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. There's one teaching where it says an ordinary person experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—and so does an arahant. What's the difference between them? I'll get to that later.

Based on feeling tone, there arises a habitual tendency, a habit of mind that's very human—again, not personal to any one of us individually, but almost built into being a human. We tend, when something is pleasant, to like it, want it, want to move towards it. When something's unpleasant, we don't like it; we want to push it away. We don't want that.

This may be built somewhat into our biology. Even single-celled creatures have this tendency to move towards things that will nourish their life and away from noxious chemicals—moving towards what could be called pleasant, away from unpleasant, for that single-celled creature. And yet in our system, this movement towards pleasant and away from unpleasant is not hardwired in us as human beings as it may be in some other beings. We have this capacity to look at our experience and notice, to make choices. There's an agency in our being; there can be choices made about how we engage with the world. So while there's a tendency to move immediately towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant, different choices can be made at times.

But generally, when we're not consciously aware of things being pleasant, we kind of automatically move towards them. This is the aspect of craving, this next link in the chain. It's like we're this simple machine that wants to maximize pleasant and minimize unpleasant. And habitually, we act out of that wanting.

What I'd say too is that our minds are a little bit short-sighted in that we act out of wanting to move towards pleasant and away from unpleasant at a range, at a sense of what's going to give me the next quick hit of something pleasant or get rid of something unpleasant. We might try to construct our lives to have these threads of getting pleasant and getting rid of unpleasant, and we might think that's as good as it gets. If I can construct my life to get what I want and get rid of what I don't want, that's as good as it would get.

And yet, as we begin to explore our minds and begin to recognize that that process actually just keeps us hooked to doing that—believing, thinking that that's what's going to do it for me, that if I get what I want I'll be happy—this whole process is based in that kind of belief that's embedded in wanting. Wanting itself has this view, this idea, this delusion embedded in it: that if I get that thing, I'll be happy. Aversion likewise has embedded in it this delusion: that if I get rid of that thing, I'll be happy.

And yet what we see as we drop more deeply is that the wanting itself has a kind of suffering in it already. It already has a tension and a tightness. The movement towards a different relationship with pleasant and unpleasant can create an understanding that there's a different kind of happiness that's possible.

This can be very interesting to explore in your experience when you notice wanting happening. Maybe explore a simple wanting—a wanting around wanting to get seconds, or go back for a second bit of dessert, or some special fruit that's offered. Maybe just notice that. Notice the wanting. Feel into the wanting.

Wanting, when we're caught by it, doesn't reveal to us, doesn't point out to us, how painful wanting itself is. Wanting itself actually is pretty unpleasant. It's already got this feeling that something's off or something's wrong in it. It's a feeling of lack. As soon as there's wanting that springs up, there's a feeling of lack.

And wanting, having this view that getting that thing is what's going to make me happy—caught by that view, that's its only option towards happiness, to get that thing. Wanting, when we're caught by wanting, is not going to tell us that if you hang out, wanting will go away and there will be no problem.

And so this release from wanting—this is one of the ways we can explore dependent origination: looking at these links, watching them, exploring them. Look at this experience of wanting. If you watch it, see it go away at some point.

I had an experience at one retreat where I was watching a repeated pattern of wanting. It was coming up regularly, a similar kind of pattern around wanting to look at people. And I watched it over and over again, and at some point I saw the wanting let go—just by watching it over and over again.

Actually, it let go the first time when, seeing through dependent origination essentially, I recognized that when the conditions leading to the wanting disappeared, the wanting disappeared. The condition was seeing somebody—somebody was in my field of vision, and that was a condition for wanting to look at them. When the person disap-

peared into the building, the condition for wanting to look at them disappeared. And the wanting disappeared. I never looked at them, but just saw that condition vanish. And the wanting vanished.

The release from that wanting felt like being released from a vice grip. The release, the ease that came with that, were way more in line with well-being than looking at a person to see who they were. Way more deeply satisfying—deep happiness, deep ease and peace from watching the wanting let go than from following through on the wanting.

Wanting tends to habitually lead to following through on that wanting—to look, to grasp, to fix, to change. We try to hold on to or cling to something that we want. We try to do something to get rid of something. The wanting, I'd say, is more the movement towards something pleasant, the movement away from something unpleasant. And the clinging is where we land on it. We either hold on to it to try to keep it, or in the case of aversion—as in my own experience—I notice many times being stuck to it, trying to push it away. Essentially clinging to it, trying to get rid of it. The mind clinging to it.

Once something is clung to, once there is that clinging, then essentially our system rallies. Once there's this sense of, "Oh, I've got this thing, and this thing is what's going to make me happy," it's like our system kind of mobilizes: What are the things I can do to make sure I keep this thing? Or what are the things I can do to make sure I can keep controlling the situation so that I don't have the unpleasant happening?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu points to this link as *bhava*, becoming. He says becoming is the intentions and actions that rally in the service of clinging. We've clung to something, and then whole views and ideas and intentions come into play: "Oh, I've got this thing. Okay, better make sure I keep it. How do I do that? How do I make sure I keep this thing? How do I make sure I'm not in contact with that unpleasant thing?"

This is becoming—this movement towards a goal. We know where we're headed. We know what we want to do. We like this feeling, actually. It's a pleasant feeling, this becoming. It's the sense that we know where we're going, we know it's going to make us happy, we've got our plan in mind, and we're headed there. That's becoming.

And from becoming follows birth into some kind of identity. Things may feel like they become mine; ownership happens. Or I feel somehow like I am the one who does things right. And suffering inevitably follows, because this sense of self, this sense of ownership—because of the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience—there's no way to maintain that. Things will fall apart.

In that falling apart, there's sometimes a sense of failure, sometimes a sense of loss. There can be grief, fear, confusion, anxiety—a whole host of relationships to the recognition that things fall apart. This is suffering.

And it will lead back to ignorance. We may believe, "I did something wrong that things fell apart," as opposed to recognizing that this is the nature of things—to fall apart. This is the way it is. That recognition might lead in the direction of truth. It leads in the direction of potentially faith and engagement, to recognize, "Oh, things fall apart. This is truth. It's not my fault that things fall apart. This is the way it is." And yet we don't often recognize that.

So an example of this part of the process from my own practice, from one of my first long retreats: I am hearing in the Dharma Hall about certain states of experiences that can happen in meditation. There's the contact, the hearing, and then from that there's this idea that's born in the mind of what that state might be. The description of these states, some of them, sounded pretty pleasant. And so the idea led to this notion that, oh, that would be really nice to have that, and this led to craving, wanting to experience the experiences that the teachers were talking about. There was clinging in there in that I felt like I needed to have these experiences. My happiness depended on having these experiences. And the becoming was the intentions that served that purpose of trying to have that experience—a lot of effort put towards having those experiences. That was the becoming.

And as I wasn't having those experiences, the birth, multiple times, was a feeling of not succeeding. The birth of being the one who can't do this. A feeling of being a failure. I'm not doing the practice right. Something must be wrong. I've not got the right teaching. I've not got the right teacher. If I had the right teacher, I'd get this right. All of this suffering. The birth itself was suffering. The birth itself was painful—the sense that I was doing something wrong.

So this happened a lot, this sense of not doing it right. I'm not getting these experiences. What am I doing wrong? How can I work harder? At some point I began looking at the suffering of that. I began being curious about it. And what I noticed actually was that I saw at some point that this pattern of suffering was born based on contact with an idea. And it wasn't the idea that I thought it was. Actually, I hadn't really clearly seen that there was this contact with this idea of a state. I knew that I was trying to get to these states, but I hadn't really clearly seen that contact and that feeling and that pull towards doing that.

But at some point I saw a thought arise in my mind, and that thought was: in an interview, telling my teacher that I'd had one of those experiences. And we were laughing and just so happy, and it was so great that this teacher saw that I was such a great yogi. This was a really pleasant thought. And I also saw it was really ludicrous—that what I really wanted was not the state, but to tell somebody I'd had the state. I had no idea what the state was because I hadn't experienced it. But that didn't mean I didn't want to be able to tell somebody I'd had it.

When I saw that, when that contact was seen, and just how silly it was, that pattern of suffering fell apart.

So that's a flavor of dependent origination, and yet there's a set of the links that we've not touched on yet, and those are the first ones. We've come from body and mind, from the six sense bases through to suffering, how that suffering is basically created based on feeling leading to craving. Basically, when feeling is not really clearly seen, the tendency will be to lead to craving, and that leads us on to suffering. And then the suffering reconditions or conditions ignorance.

As I mentioned earlier, that not understanding suffering, not seeing or not understanding that suffering is created by conditions and what those conditions are, will just tend to perpetuate the cycle. So the basic condition for suffering to lead to ignorance is that suffering is not understood. The First Noble Truth: there is suffering, and suffering should be understood. That actually is enough for a whole lifetime of practice. Suffering should be understood. You should understand how it's created. Suffering arises in dependence on craving.

So ignorance basically thinks that having what we want, getting rid of what we don't want, will lead to happiness. This ignorance is the ignorance that's embedded in wanting and aversion. When wanting arises, when aversion arises, ignorance is arising with it. So this first link of the chain really is the linchpin of the whole chain. Because when ignorance is arising, there is the belief in wanting. When ignorance is arising, wanting believes that getting what I want will bring me happiness. Having the pleasant will bring me happiness.

And so when there is ignorance in the mind and a feeling of pleasant arises, craving will follow. The work really is to understand this ignorance—these beliefs that I need certain things to make me happy, that I need to get rid of certain things to make me happy.

So with ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. Again, not understanding suffering, that lack of understanding is not simply a passive kind of experience. It's a very active process in our minds, this ignorance. When there is ignorance in our minds, it shapes us, it points us towards choosing certain ways to act, engaging in things based on our conditioned habits and patterns. We choose things, we decide things based on this misunderstanding about where happiness might come from—not understanding that wanting itself, aversion itself, is suffering. Not understanding the release, a deeper kind of happiness that's possible.

So with ignorance we're probably going to take the most obvious move to get the pleasant, get rid of the unpleasant. And we are reinforcing our habits and patterns. Mental formations essentially are these habits and patterns that keep this cycle going. Ignorance is this lack of understanding, and that creates or leads to choices based on that lack of understanding—choices to engage in the world in a certain way. We think we're trying to act to alleviate our suffering because we don't understand that we're actually reinforcing the very patterns, the very habits that keep us locked into this cycle.

Views, ideas, and opinions are also mental formations. And these mental formations that come about based on ignorance, they're not just coming about based on our own minds. We are embedded in a collective. We are embedded in relationships with people. We learn things from our families. We learn things from friends on the playground. We are embedded in our culture. A lot of what comes in as mental formations, a lot of what feeds our views comes from our own personal conditioning, but also from our culture.

Our culture also has this collective ignorance that creates collective mental formations. By collective mental formations, I mean mental formations that we teach each other—beliefs, ideas, views that we teach each other. And because so many people around us might share those views, beliefs, and ideas, we don't see them as beliefs or views. We just take them to be truth. This is ignorance. Taking a view to be truth is a fundamental kind of ignorance—not seeing a view as a perspective. And yet, because of the way our cultures work, because we tend to be surrounded by people who view things the same way we do, it's reinforced. These views get reinforced and it's hard to see them sometimes. It's hard to see them as views. The ignorance of the culture, of what we're taught, the mental formations—those reinforce themselves.

An example of this are mental formations related to the concept of race. Views, ideas, beliefs around something that is not—the concept of race, from what I understand with looking at our DNA, there is nothing in our genetics that has anything to do with what we call race, basically meaning color of skin. There's nothing. It's a concept.

It's purely a construct, a construct of our culture. And yet there are many, many mental formations—views, ideas, beliefs—around this concept. A concept, an idea in the mind glommed on with all these views and ideas and opinions—this creates suffering in the world. These things are no more than arisings in the mind, and yet they have a deep impact on the world. So much suffering in our world comes from this kind of ignorance and this kind of collective mental formation.

Not seeing it is a huge way that the suffering of racism, the suffering of so many kinds of discrimination, oppression, and privilege come from this kind of collective formation. We have the possibility through our practice to recognize and see through these deeply conditioned—not only internally, personally conditioned, but culturally conditioned—patterns that lead to suffering. Not only suffering in our being, but in our society.

come from the broader culture. With mental formations as condition, this shapes our consciousness. This is the next link.

Views, habits, patterns, choices, ideas condition what consciousness receives. What we end up experiencing, what we know, what we recognize, is filtered through these views and ideas. There's a quote, I think from Anaïs Nin: "We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are." And that is very true—those views, ideas, and beliefs shape what we actually meet.

For example, if we have a habitual pattern of responding with anger, then that habitual pattern might predispose us to look for things, to have things come into consciousness, to take things in that will make us angry. As an aversive person, as one with an aversive tendency, my mind has that kind of inclination. I began to notice at one point—my teacher said, "Just let your attention roam through your body. Just see what it lands on. What's the first thing? What comes into your consciousness? Don't choose. Just see. What does it land on?"

And I did that for a few minutes. He used the word "choiceless," I think. "Just don't choose. Let it be choiceless." When I had done it for a few minutes, I said, "Well, I wasn't choosing, but it surely couldn't have been completely choiceless, because every single thing my attention landed on was unpleasant."

What I began to understand over the course of my practice is that this tendency towards aversion predisposed me—it's like the mind was a search beacon for unpleasant. If I find the unpleasant things and get rid of them, that'll be okay. So it's like searching for the unpleasant in order to get rid of it. This is the conditioning power: mental formations condition what we take in, what we experience in consciousness.

And then consciousness conditions and shapes our mental and physical experience. How our consciousness is—perhaps predisposed towards anger—if consciousness is predisposed towards anger and anger is arising, that shapes our being. Our body, our face may become contracted or distorted with anger, an expression of anger. We may feel pressure and heat in our body. It has an effect on our body when consciousness is colored with one of these mental formations. This is mental formation coloring consciousness, and then that mental formation coloring consciousness affecting other mind and body processes.

It affects our body. It affects how we feel things. It tends to make things unpleasant. It affects how we perceive things, how we recognize things. And it tends to encourage more anger.

So now in this chain of dependent origination, we're back to where we started: we have a body and mind, there are things arising in body and mind, and there's contact. But we see now that this isn't like our eyes are cameras and our ears are microphones or receivers picking up sound. Our sense doors are already filtered, conditioned by ignorance, views, opinions. We don't simply receive things like a blank slate. We are receiving what we have been conditioned to receive. Our filters, our perspectives tend to reinforce our perspectives. And so the cycle reinforces itself.

What's the possibility of not being caught by this process? If we look at this as a chain of conditions describing how suffering is created, then perhaps if the conditions are changed, something else can happen. As I said earlier, the main condition that supports a different thing happening with this process is mindfulness and wisdom.

The teachings point to the link between feeling and craving as a very central place for mindfulness to support allowing this chain to fall apart. If we can bring curiosity and interest to feeling tone—because that's the link where feeling leads to craving. Craving in the second noble truth is understood to be the cause for suffering, but the Pali term actually makes it more translatable as something like "with the arising of craving is the arising of suffering"—the arising of craving is already suffering.

If the understanding of feeling can bring in some wisdom that helps to break through the ignorance around wanting and aversion, which is our habitual response to craving, then we can simply recognize, as the Satipatthana Sutta says: "When feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a pleasant feeling.'"

When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel an unpleasant feeling." When feeling a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling." Simple contact with feeling and understanding—this is what's arising. This kind of meeting of that experience is essentially, again, recognizing: oh, this is a human experience.

We talked about this really early in the retreat, in the beginning of the March retreat. We talked about recognizing experience as human experience and not necessarily as something to do something about, but just: oh, this is what's arising. When that can happen with feeling, it tends not to lead to craving. When feeling is felt as feeling and craving does not arise, clinging does not arise, becoming does not arise, birth into identity does not arise, and suffering does not arise.

This place of feeling is one of the places where the difference between the enlightened person, the arahant, and the ordinary person is described. That text I mentioned earlier asks: what is the difference? Someone who's awakened experiences pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Someone who is ordinary experiences pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. What's the difference between them?

The Buddha responded that when an ordinary person experiences a painful bodily feeling, they worry and grieve, lament, beat their breast, weep, and become distraught. They thus experience two kinds of feeling—a bodily one and a mental one. But the noble disciple, when touched by a painful feeling, will not worry nor grieve nor lament, will not beat their breast and weep, nor will they be distraught. It is one kind of feeling they experience—a bodily one, not a mental one.

We could say that a noble one, when touched by a painful bodily feeling, knows they're experiencing a painful bodily feeling. This kind of contact, this recognition, this meeting of feeling, can short-circuit that movement to craving, leading to release—a sense of the recognition of the non-arising of suffering.

Even seeing feeling at times, at least in my experience, sometimes I would notice: yep, that's unpleasant. Oh, I still don't want it. Still want to get rid of it. Sometimes we can know that things are unpleasant but still want to push it away. The momentum of the ignorance behind aversion and wanting can be stronger than our ability to meet that pleasant or unpleasant feeling.

And yet there's not hopeless for us. Because there's another—one of my most heart-connected teachings in the suttas—where the Buddha, or actually Shariputra in this case, points to something profound. For every single link in this chain of dependent origination, it says one can see that, one can understand. For instance, it says one can un-

derstand: if, in seeing the arising of clinging, one knows that clinging is there, one recognizes its arising, one sees the possibility of its ceasing, one understands how one practices to see its ceasing—right there, there can be freedom.

Every single link in this chain, no matter where you are in this process, whatever is arising, this teaching points to each as being a doorway to freedom. It's in the Majjhima Nikaya, called the Teaching on Right View, Majjhima 9. Every single link of the chain is pointed to as being a doorway to freedom.

It doesn't matter if we're experiencing hatred or self-hatred or rage or confusion or irritation—as we've been saying, it doesn't matter. With mindfulness and wisdom meeting anything, meeting whatever is arising, right there is the possibility for freedom. We don't have to somehow back up and find where the contact and unpleasant feeling was, or where the contact and pleasant feeling was that made me want this. Right here, if there's already wanting, we can see through the wanting. As in my description of seeing the wanting just release, the feeling of release there—that was a kind of freedom.

So seeing, understanding this process at work is helpful. Understanding how the process works, and anywhere we notice, anything we are noticing, wherever we're noticing in that cycle—freedom is possible. Our work is recognizing it as an arising. Clinging is arising. Sense of self is arising. Self-hatred is arising. Fear, confusion is arising. Freedom is possible in a moment.

And patience. Patience is necessary.

So let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 133

Perception and Papañca (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 1h00

In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a detailed examination of perception (saññā) as a mental process and its relationship to papañca, the proliferating and objectifying tendency of the untrained mind. Drawing from the Buddha's teachings, she explains how perception functions as a useful shortcut for navigating the world—recognizing sounds, sights, and experiences based on memory and pattern-matching—yet becomes a source of delusion when we mistake these mental constructions for reality itself.

Fella explores the Buddha's analogy of perception as a mirage: like a desert mirage that reflects something real (the sky) but is mistaken for water, our perceptions reflect experience but are not the thing itself. She traces the progression from sense contact through feeling, perception, thinking, and finally papañca—variously translated as mental proliferation, objectification, or reification. This process, when unexamined, creates the division of experience into subject and object, self and other, leading not only to personal suffering but to the ideological conflicts and divisions that plague human society.

The talk includes the teaching story of the blind people and the elephant, illustrating how attachment to partial perceptions as complete truth leads to conflict. Fella emphasizes that the remedy lies not in eliminating perception—which is natural and necessary—but in recognizing it as a construction of mind. Through mindfulness practice, particularly in meditation with sounds, we can begin to witness the gap between bare sense contact and the mind's identification, loosening the grip of papañca and opening to direct experience free from reification.

It really is a privilege to have this opportunity to share the Dharma with you, to share in your unfolding of your practice.

Looking out at you, we're all here together. This is such a rare thing—that you would choose to do this, that eighty-some people come for this long to watch your minds. And I can share that happiness with you. There's not so many people that would understand why watching your mind is so good. So, thank you.

Last time I sat here in the evening, I offered a sharing on dependent origination. That teaching talks about conditioning—the conditioning of how our minds habitually are caught in the process that leads to suffering. The Buddha pointed to this process in different ways, offering different framings of how understanding conditioning can be useful for us in understanding our minds.

I'd like to explore one of those tonight too. It's also a process that talks about how we get caught by delusion. In the middle of this chain is a quality, a process of mind: the process of perception.

Perception is a natural functioning of mind. It's the process by which we recognize our experience. And yet when we don't understand it as a functioning of mind, when we don't understand it as something that's happening in our minds, it's very easy for delusion to come in and create a lot of misunderstanding. So I'll talk first a little bit about perception—how it works and how we might begin to explore it—and then about how it gets misunderstood and how confused this world becomes through that misunderstanding.

This process of perception is very simple in our minds. It's a natural process that helps us to navigate the world. I sit here and I look out and I see people, walls, tankas, lights, chairs, zafus, zabutons, candles, statues. All of that is the mind recognizing experience. This process of recognizing our experience is incredibly useful to us.

When we were first born, we didn't have much of this capacity to distinguish all of these things and have names for them. It's something we've learned. We've learned to give names to things, and this is a piece of the process of perception. Perception is actually broader than just naming things, broader than recognizing things through our language capacity, but this is one of the main ways I'll speak about it tonight.

It's very useful for us. If every time I came into a room like this I had to figure out, "Oh, those are people. Oh, those are lights. Oh, that's a wall—okay, don't walk into that"—if every time I walked into a new space all of that had to be figured out, it would be exhausting. We can think of perception, in some ways, as a shortcut that really helps us to navigate our lives.

In the Buddhist teaching, this process of perception is understood to be connected with memory. We begin to recognize experience because we've been taught: this is a person, this is a chair, this is a light. When we enter a space, our mind does a kind of search. It asks, "What is this?" and searches for the closest pattern match: "Oh, it must be that." Our minds do a really good job of this—a really, really good job.

As we go through the world, we contact the world through our senses, through our physical senses and the mind. Our eye sees sight, and there's that contact, and then from that contact there is this process of recognition that starts to happen. Shape and form. The eye sees color and form, and then the mind puts together what that color and form is.

Likewise with sound, smell, taste, touch—there's a kind of bare sense contact. When we bite into an orange, there's tartness and sweetness and the texture on the tongue of liquidity, and all of that together is understood as "orange" pretty quickly. And also because we've seen the orange. The senses play together to support perception.

But what's actually happening at the level of the sense door is different: bitterness, sweet, salty, sour at the tongue level; form and color at the eye.

And it's the mind that puts together what we recognize. We recognize it based on memory. Perception is a process that's very useful, and yet it is easily misinterpreted.

The Buddha offers a teaching by way of analogy that helps us recognize part of the way that perception can be misunderstood. He uses the analogy that perception is like a mirage.

Our usual understanding of a mirage is seeing something that's not there. But what a mirage actually is—and I'm pretty sure at the time of the Buddha they understood this—is something a bit different. The classic mirage is seeing water in a desert. What's happening there, apparently, is that with the heat rising from the sand, it creates a kind of reflective surface. And that reflection is basically reflecting the sky, so it looks like water. It's reflecting the sky, and it's also reflecting other things. I saw a picture—you can take pictures of mirages, which is very cool. There was a picture of a desert with mountains in the distance, and it looked like a body of water in front of those mountains, where the mountains were reflected in what looked like water, much as they would be if it were actual water.

So the reflection is happening because of the heat rising from the sand, and it's reflecting something that's there—it's reflecting the sky, reflecting the mountains. Because of our association with seeing that kind of reflection, that it means water, our minds perceive it to be water. It's reflecting something that's there, but it's not the thing.

This begins to point to the confusion that can happen around perception. When we perceive experience, all that we experience is our mind's reflection of it. Perception is like a reflection in the mind of the world. Our experience doesn't actually meet the

world—it meets the perception. Perception is one of the bare bones of our experience. And because that perception is created by the mind, it's really easy for it to be distorted by views, beliefs, and interpretations, to be misunderstood for something that it's not.

This analogy points to the way our delusion takes that representation of reality to be reality. And we believe it is reality. It's really hard not to look out and see you and think I'm really seeing you. I know that all I know is constructed in the mind, but it's very difficult to recognize that. It's not just like a camera recording things here. It's not just like a microphone picking up sounds. We talked about this some the other night—how our views and ideas create a filter through which we see things. This also creates filters through which we perceive. We're not simply perceiving reality, and yet we think we are. This is a key place where delusion can enter into our mental processes.

It can be very helpful to explore perception, to begin to get familiar with this process. And we can. We can get familiar with perception at work as mindfulness gets stronger. We can begin to see that this is happening, that there's a difference between the contact with the sense door and how our mind recognizes something about it.

For me, in my own practice, the easiest place to do this has been in the terrain of sound, of hearing. As we listen, as we hear, there's that sound coming from outside that by now we all recognize as froggies. That's Greg's perception: froggies. But we can begin to notice, as mindfulness gets strengthened, that there's the sound, which is pitch and tone, and then there's something that goes on in the mind. It might be the word "frog" that comes up. Or it might be an image—if you've seen the frogs, it might be an image of a frog. I actually have not seen images of these frogs; I have no idea what they look like. But I've created something, a frog-like thing in my mind, and that's how it was perceived. Rather than my mind saying the word "frog," it created an image of a frog.

And so perception involves the hearing and then the identification of what is heard. That identification can happen as a form of thought—it's like a really rudimentary form of thought. And because it's a form of thought, it can happen like any other thought. It might come in as a visual image, it might come in as a word. I've even sometimes seen a perception as if I was reading the word: "Frog." So that's another way that perception can happen, or thoughts can happen—as if we're reading the sentences.

Sometimes thoughts can happen as a kind of kinesthetic sense. I used to be a dancer, and at times if I thought about my dance, I could feel it as if I was doing the dance. I didn't think about it in terms of words. I didn't think about it in terms of "this step and then that step." It was the feeling of doing it that was the thought. Thoughts can occur in many different ways.

For some people, maybe the perception of "frog" is connected to touching a frog. They touched a frog at one point and maybe that's what comes in. So this perceptual process, this rudimentary form of thought, can come in many different ways.

Sometimes, if it comes as a word, there's hearing something and then the mind labels: "golf cart" or "sneeze" or "rustling" or "chair squeaking." Your mind might recognize, perceive the sounds and name them. It can almost seem like labeling—if you've done any of the noting, the mental noting. Sometimes it can seem like this perceptual process, when we start to see it, is almost like labeling run amok.

But one thing I often say when I talk to people, if they say, "I just feel like I'm labeling everything"—I ask, "Well, is it something you're doing? Are you consciously trying to label 'frog' and 'chair'? Or is it just happening?" And many times people will say, "No, it's just happening. I'm not doing it."

Perception is not self. Perception is something that happens. It's a process that unfolds in our minds. And as I said before, it's a really useful process. It helps us navigate, helps us walk down the hill, helps us navigate our lives, helps us go through the lunch line, sit down and eat our food—this process of perception at work.

So we can begin to get curious about this process. And for me, as I said, hearing is one of the easiest ways to do it. When you're sitting in meditation, you may notice the sounds and then notice the mind identify them. That's perception at work. Noticing that identification, you can recognize, "Oh, perception. Perception's happening."

I would say that not recognizing perception happening is one of the leading causes of wandering mind. Because we're sitting here and we hear the turkey. And if we don't clearly notice that the mind has perceived "turkey," we may start thinking about turkey. And then start wondering how many of them there are out there. And then start thinking about that one we saw all by itself, running so fast—we've never seen a turkey run that fast. Oh, sitting.

So not noticing perception, very often, because it's so close to thinking—it's very easy if we don't notice that, or when we don't notice that, for it to slip into thinking.

Perception also affects other aspects of our experience. It's not the perception itself that has the impact, really, but it's all the associations that come with that perception that can affect us.

One day in meditation I was hearing this sound, and the mind flipped back and forth in terms of perception. This can be an interesting thing to notice. Sometimes if we don't quite know what something is, we can see our mind trying on different perceptions.

Oh, maybe it's that. Oh, maybe it's that. Well, in this case, what I was flipping between was thinking it was a bird or thinking it was a machine that was beeping. For a little while it would be, "Oh, it's a bird." Then, "No, it's too regular. Oh, it must be a machine." Then, "No, it sounds like a bird." This kind of flipping back and forth—I was never able to find out whether it was a bird or a machine. But one of the interesting things was that I could see there was a different impact it had on me when I thought it was a bird. "Oh, bird"—pleasant. "Oh, beeping machine"—unpleasant. The feeling tone of the experience was affected by the perception.

This happens a lot. The classic example of how perception affects us can really be highlighted when we do have a misperception—like that situation where I don't even know if it was a bird or a machine. Maybe it was something else entirely. But the classic example is walking into a room in dim light and seeing a coiled form in the corner and perceiving it to be a snake. That, of course, would create some emotional responses based on associations with snakes. And if somebody comes in and flips the light switch on and we see it's actually a rope, there's a very different response.

Another aspect of perception that I'll just mention, because at this point in the retreat this could be happening: our minds try to perceive whatever is going on. Whatever experience is happening—whatever sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or whatever's arising in the mind—the process of perception tries to recognize it, tries to identify it in some way. And as we enter into unfamiliar states of meditation, our mind will still try to recognize them.

Sometimes our mind will attempt to recognize the experience—at least in my sense of what's happening. I don't really know what's going on, but I do have times when I'm experiencing something that maybe feels broad, vast, expansive, and an image comes into the mind like seeing the night sky or seeing an expanse of grass. Just the vastness of the mind—it's like the mind creates a perception of it through analogy. And so you might notice this at times. You might notice that sometimes while you're meditating, coming into or touching unfamiliar states of mind, the mind trying to make sense of that experience may perceive it, recognize it through an image that's kind of like an analogy.

At one point I was experiencing quite a bit of low energy, and the mind recognized the mind state with the thought, "The batteries are low." This was evocative of what the state was. So I just wanted to put that out there.

The texts—the Buddha, the teachings in the Pali Canon—offer teachings around perception that point to how it is tied up with deluding influences when we're not aware of what's happening. The analogy that I mentioned around the mirage is one of those teachings pointing to the deluding influence of perception.

There's a particular quality in the mind, a function of the mind, that has a very delusive capacity: the process of papañca. Some of the teachings on perception tie this teaching to papañca, pointing to a connection between perception and papañca when the mind is not clear. The texts don't really give a clear definition of papañca, but they do describe how it arises and a little bit about what happens to the mind when it arises. They also tie it to conflict in our world—they point to papañca being very intimately connected with conflict. This process of papañca.

So I'm going to read you a passage, or part of a passage, about papañca and perception. This is one little piece of it. In this passage it goes through each of the six sense bases and points to how perception works in the sense base and then how papañca leads forward. I'll just read this with respect to the eye and forms, but it is also repeated six times: with the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile objects, and the mind and mind objects.

So this is just one way through this process: "Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises." This has a flavor very much like dependent origination, because it is conditions coming together that lead on to the next thing. Dependent on the eye and forms—forms being light striking the eye, bouncing off of objects in the world—eye consciousness arises. So basically that's seeing. "The meeting of the three—the meeting of the eye, forms, and eye consciousness—is contact." Something becomes seen. "With contact as condition, there is feeling"—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. "What one feels, that one perceives."

And so this adds in another piece that wasn't clearly called out in dependent origination. The understanding in the commentaries is that feeling and perception arise together. Feeling arises, perception arises right with it. We both feel it and perceive it at the same time.

What one perceives, that one thinks about. So we hear something—there is a feeling associated with that and a perception of turkey. And then there's a little bit of thinking about it. It's not just the bare perception. Maybe the perception was an image of turkey, and then we start: "Oh, that's a turkey. I wonder how many there are." There's just a thought about it.

What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. This is the word for *papañca* that's translated here as "mental proliferation." In some ways, this mental proliferation has been talked about, and is still often talked about, in terms of proliferation of thought—that kind of description I gave before of, "Oh, I wonder how many turkeys there are. Maybe... hmm, I wonder about that one that got separated before." The mind just kind of goes off into thought. This is one understanding of what *papañca* is: the mind that's kind of run amok in thought, basically loss of mindfulness through lots of thinking. This is a very common way for perception to function in a mind that is not very mindful—we perceive something, we look at it, we recognize it, we think about it, and then we start thinking about how it relates to other things we've thought about and other views that we have, and we're off.

The rest of the section goes a little bit further into what happens to a mind that has *papañca*-ed: "With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye."

This is, to me, a description of how when we think about something a lot, views are created, opinions are created, and then those views and opinions—which are born of this kind of mental proliferation—influence us, affect us. This is very much the same cycle that we saw in dependent origination, with ignorance conditioning mental formations and conditioning what we take in to consciousness. Here it's perception leading to views and opinions and ideas, and those views and opinions and ideas then affect how we take in information.

So that perception of... the sound, the beeping sound. If it's just beeping, maybe it's neutral. Maybe the first thing that hits the ear is just neutral—just the sound, beeping. And then the mind has another layer of perception. The first level of perception is kind of "beeping," and then there's another level of perception that happens, which is "bird" or "machine." That extra level of perception then influences the feeling.

This kind of influence happens a lot in our lives. For instance, seeing somebody that you don't know walking on the street—just seeing a person walking by—maybe that would be a relatively neutral perception, much of the time. And yet, what can happen is if that person has, perhaps, a body shape that's similar to someone who has abused you, that connection of perceiving somebody with that body type leads to associations with being abused. That kind of connection may lead you to, in that moment, experience fear when seeing this person that you don't know.

In this way, the past comes into our present. Our conditioning—not only our views and ideas, but what has happened to us, how we've engaged in the world, what the conditions of our life have been—those conditions will affect how we take in information, how we perceive something.

I got interested in this word *papañca* partly because other translators translated it differently than Bhikkhu Bodhi. The translation I read here was from Bhikkhu Bodhi. I think Thanissaro Bhikkhu uses a translation where *papañca* means "objectification." Other teachers also point to the fact that this word means something more than just a lot of thinking.

Because there are other places in the texts where this word appears—where it says freedom is for one without papañca. It's tied very closely to a mind that is free from papañca, a mind that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion. It's liberated.

Reading that text, I thought, this has got to be much deeper, much more profound than simply a lot of thought. Because you can have a mind free from thought, just very concentrated, and not be terribly free. And so I got a little curious about this and began to explore what it might mean if it does mean something more like objectification.

There's a teaching story that might help us understand something about this getting tied up around perception. It's actually in the Pali Canon, this teaching story—the story of the blind people and the elephant. Many of you have probably heard this story, so I'll just briefly recap it.

In a long-ago kingdom, the king asked his elephant trainer to bring an elephant and to gather the blind people who were in the village and show them the elephant. The elephant trainer did this, brought the elephant and the blind people together, and the king said, "Show the people the elephant." Some of the people were shown the leg—they touched the leg. Some touched the tail. Some touched the ear. Some touched the side of the elephant.

When the king then asked each one, "Tell me, what is an elephant? What is an elephant like?" each one had a different answer. Those who touched the legs said, "An elephant is like a post." Those who touched the tail said, "An elephant is like a broom." The ear—"It's like a winnowing basket." The side of the elephant—"It's like the wall of a storeroom." They each had different perceptions, naturally, very naturally had different perceptions of the elephant.

Where the story gets tied into our exploration of papañca is this: in the story, hearing each other describe, "Oh, an elephant's like this," they got into fights about it. They said, "No, you're wrong! I know from my direct experience—an elephant is like a post. It's not like a winnowing basket. You're wrong! An elephant is like this. An elephant is not like that." And they came to blows over this.

This happens in our world, basically. What's happening here is that the people are taking their perception to be the elephant. It's not just that they're saying, "Well, this is what I experienced. Huh, you experienced something else? That's interesting. Wow." There's a kind of reification—"This is what I experienced, and this is truth. This is the elephant." Coming back to our analogy, it's taking something to be real that's just based on experience, that's just the experience.

There are places in the teachings where the teachings point to this process of papañca leading to ideology, quarrels, war. This, he says, is the root of conflict.

So this process of perception—if we look at it a little more closely—this process of papañca, when we perceive something, one of the first things that happens, perhaps, is that the mind takes it to be reality. At a very basic level, we believe our perceptions to be what's out there, rather than understanding that the perception is a construction of the mind. Possibly this process of papañca has to do with this process of mind that creates the concept associated with the perception and takes that concept to be real, believes that conceptualization to be real.

We can't live without perception and concepts.

They have to happen. But what part of the process is problematic is not recognizing that it's a process, that it's a construction of our minds. We believe it's reality. We believe it's truth. And from that, divisions happen in our culture. Divisions happen in ideologies.

So if we look at this paragraph, I'm going to read it again using "objectifies." See if it has a slightly different flavor for you.

Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one objectifies. With what one has objectified as the source, perceptions and notions born of objectification beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye.

So this process—"with what one has objectified as the source"—this is a thing. Views, opinions, ideas about that thing come into the mind. And based on those views, opinions, and ideas, we take in the rest of our world.

One thing I find interesting about objectification, this word objectification, is that you don't have an object without having a subject. This is another piece of the equation here with papañca. If the mind is objectifying something, creating it as a thing, it's simultaneously creating an "I" separate from that thing. The root of papañca in one text is said to be the thought "I am."

So this creation of subject and object happening in this moment—when we're not noticing perception as perception, not noticing the creation of concept as the creation of concept—this is the medicine for us: that we can recognize it, and in recognizing it, not be caught by this objectification.

One scholar, a Pali scholar, Professor Pali Hawadana, says this process of distorted perception—because that's what happens, papañca distorts perception—this process of placing every bare perception into a framework of emotions and beliefs that have come out of our past, our history, our conditioning, robs the freshness out of our experience. But we're not aware of this constant interference of the past. Because of this unawareness, which is our ignorance or our delusion, we see humanity fragmented as me and others. Us and them. And in various other stereotypes—skin color, ethnicity, language, ideology included.

And so this misunderstanding around perception leads to a great deal of suffering externally.

I think I have time for this. At the time of the Buddha, there were two Brahmins arguing with each other about what makes a true Brahmin. One said, "What makes a true Brahmin is the lineage of pure birth." The other said, "I think what makes a true Brahmin is how they are in the world, how they respond to the world." And tellingly, in this particular story it says that the one Brahmin could not convince the other Brahmin of his view, and the other Brahmin could not convince the first of his view. Sound familiar? This kind of cementing of our opinions, our views, based on our beliefs.

So they decided to go ask the Buddha, "What do you think about this? About what makes a Brahmin?"

And the Buddha starts by saying, "Well, let me tell you. I'll teach you, as they really are, the divisions of beings in the world. For there are many kinds of birth. Know first the grass and trees; though they lack self-awareness, their birth is their distinctive mark, for there are many kinds of birth. Next come the moths and the butterflies, and

so on through the ants and the termites. Then know the kinds of quadrupeds of varied sorts, both large and small. Their birth is their distinctive mark, for there are many kinds of birth. Know those whose bellies are their feet, too, with the long-backed classes of snakes. Know, too, the water-dwelling fish that pasture in the liquid world. Next, know the birds that wing their way as they range in open skies. Their birth is their distinctive mark, for there are many kinds of birth.

"While in these births the differences of birth make their distinctive mark, with humans no differences of birth make a distinctive mark in them. Nor in the hairs, nor in the head, nor in the ears, nor the eyes, nor in the mouth, nor the nose, nor in the lips, nor the brows, nor in the shoulders or the neck, nor in the belly or the back, nor in the buttocks or the breast, nor in the genitals or in the ways of mating, nor in the hands nor the feet, the fingers or the nails, the knees nor the thighs, nor in their color or their voice."

Birth makes no distinctive mark as with other kinds of birth. In human bodies in themselves, nothing distinctive can be found. Distinctions among human beings are purely verbal designation.

Verbal designation is based on perception. We see differences in human beings. We perceive differences—tall, short, different hair color, different skin color, different genders. We see differences. What the Buddha is pointing to here is that there are no fundamental differences. It's verbal designation that creates these differences. And the reason he's pointing to this is around this question of Brahmins, because there was this belief by the one Brahmin that it's the lineage of birth that makes a difference—having pure lineage of having been Brahmin seven generations back, this makes one a Brahmin. The Buddha says it's action that makes one a Brahmin. What kind of birth you have has no bearing on that. One can become free, one can become liberated, no matter what.

And he goes on:

For name and clan are assigned as mere designations in the world, originating in convention. They are assigned here and there. For those who do not know this fact, wrong views have long underlain their hearts. Not knowing this, they declare to us one is a Brahmin by birth.

For those who do not know this fact, wrong views have long underlain their hearts. The belief that these distinctions are somehow important—in this case, in terms of being a Brahmin. When we create ideologies around these distinctions, strong views around these distinctions, this creates so much suffering externally in our world.

Now, the process of perception not only creates suffering externally. Perception and papañca. Perception itself doesn't create suffering. Perception is just perception. But it is this misunderstanding, this reification. Reification is another good word that could be used to translate papañca, I think. Reification meaning taking something to be concrete that is not.

All of our physical and mental experience is created by our minds. I do happen to think there is a world out there. I think you're out there. I believe that. I don't think I'm just sitting like a brain in a vat. So I think there is a reflection—this is a reflection of reality, what's being experienced. And I think it does a pretty good job; our brains do a pretty good job, our minds do a pretty good job of perceiving the world. And yet this mistake of believing it to be reality—delusion basically convinces perception to believe in the reality of perception. That we're experiencing something out there rather than what's actually happening, rather than it being constructed by our minds.

Everything that we experience without exception is constructed in our minds. And these constructions are so often influenced by views, ideas, opinions. This brings me back to what John said last night from Thich Nhat Hanh: for things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them. In other places the Buddha pointed to just meeting the bare experience. In the seen is only the seen. We take in this—no, this is what is seen, this is what's perceived.

Everything that we experience is created by our minds. The suffering comes partly because we believe. There's this reification, this picking it up as something. Oh, this is a something. Oh, this is a something. Oh, this is a something. And we have these somethings that we like, that we want more of. We have these somethings that we don't like, that we want to get rid of.

So suffering. We're back to suffering. Craving and clinging, this wanting things to be a certain way. Craving and clinging—I think we all are really familiar with now. This is something that happens in our mind.

Craving and clinging are constructs of the mind. Embedded within them is delusion—the belief that there is something to cling to, something to crave. But what we want, what that craving reaches for, what that clinging wants to hold onto, is actually nothing more than a construction of our own minds.

And so craving—these processes in our mind that contribute to suffering—what they want, what they crave, is nothing more than a blip in our minds as well. It's another construct of the mind.

When our mind starts to witness these processes at work, when it sees its own role in the creation of suffering, it begins to recognize: craving—that's the mind. What craving wants—that's the mind too.

When the mind begins to witness its own role in the creation of suffering, wisdom grows around that understanding. This wisdom helps the mind let go of those misunderstandings, helps the mind release these processes of delusion.

Now let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 134

Not Self and Selfing (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 1h02

In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a profound exploration of the Buddha's teaching on anattā (not-self), one of the most central and often misunderstood aspects of the Dhamma. She begins by examining how the untrained mind habitually orients to experience through the lens of self, citing the Buddha's teaching on wise and unwise attention and the endless questions about self that lead to suffering.

Fella clarifies that anattā does not mean "there is no self"—which the Buddha explicitly called wrong view—but rather that what we take to be self is not what we think it is. Using the beautiful analogy of a rainbow appearing and disappearing based on conditions, she illustrates how the sense of self arises dependently, like a process rather than a fixed entity. Drawing from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), the Buddha's second discourse, she examines how the five aggregates (khandhas)—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—cannot be self because they cannot be controlled and are impermanent and unreliable.

The talk offers practical guidance for investigating selfing in meditation, including the Buddha's twenty forms of identity view (sakkāya diṭṭhi) and common ways we construct self through thoughts of "I," "me," "mine," and even "they" and "them." Fella shares a powerful personal story of working with self-hatred, demonstrating how sustained mindful investigation can transform deeply rooted identity patterns. She emphasizes honoring our identities as survival strategies while seeing through their constructed nature to discover the love, compassion, and wisdom that underlie them.

In the Buddha's teachings, the texts we have inherited down through the generations, there are many stories of the Buddha speaking to people about how suffering happens, how we get caught, how we struggle.

I'm going to start with one of those teachings. Here he begins with how an ordinary person meets the world. How does an ordinary person navigate life? He says, "An ordinary person does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, they attend to those things unfit for attention and do not attend to those things fit for attention."

This is how they attend unwisely: "Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?" Or else they are inwardly perplexed about the present: "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where did this being come from? Where will it go?"

And so he points to the way that we orient to experience as an ordinary person without training, without hearing the teachings. We orient to the world through the perspective of self. Any of these sound familiar?

With that perspective, he says, we get caught in views of self. These views of self include "self exists in me" or "I am a self." Also included is "no self exists in me." So both attachment or belief in the view of self and the belief in no self—"there is no self"—the Buddha said that is wrong view. That is a view of self, to believe there is no self.

Another view he describes: "It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the results of good and bad actions. But this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, and will endure as long as eternity."

He calls these views of self, pointing to the sense of self being a view—an idea, a belief. And he says, "This is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. Fettered by the fetter of views, the ordinary person is not freed from suffering."

So he points to looking at experience through this perspective of self as being a key reason why suffering happens.

In another teaching, again pointing to how easy it is for us to get caught by this view, there's a questioner talking to the Buddha. The Buddha is explaining about experience to this questioner, whose name is Pāguna. At a certain point in this conversation, the Buddha is talking about the experience of feeling—of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. The questioner says, "Venerable sir, who feels?"

The Buddha responds, "Not a valid question. I do not say one feels. If I said one feels, in that case this would be a valid question. But I do not speak thus. If one should ask me, 'Venerable sir, with what as condition does feeling come to be?' this would be a valid question. To this the valid answer is: with contact as condition, feeling comes to be. With feeling as condition, craving comes to be."

This questioner doesn't quite get it, because his next question is, "Venerable sir, who craves?"

And so again, pointing to how easy it is for us to get caught in this belief—that there is one who feels, one who knows, one who craves, one who gets angry, one who gets confused. Instead, the Buddha points to this being as a process. This being is a process.

This teaching also points to how, when we have not understood the teaching of not-self, we misapprehend our experience. I appreciate the way Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates the term *anattā*. Often rendered as "no-self" or "not-self," I prefer "not-self" because the Buddha clearly stated that "there is no self" is wrong view—it is simply another view of self. To me, "not-self" evokes the understanding that what we think of as self is not what we think it is. It's not what we think it is. So it's not self.

What we often take to be self is this conditioned process. We attribute an enduring quality, a lasting nature, a sense of stability to something that is seeing, feeling, hearing, knowing, craving, being mindful. We attribute something to this process. We misunderstand this conditioned process as a stable, enduring reality.

This is one way we can begin to enter into this teaching of not-self—to understand what is meant by it. It's not that the Buddha is saying there's nothing there. He clearly points to this process nature of experience. There's this process unfolding, and conditions, lawful conditions, shaping that process. But there's nothing stable or enduring there. Nothing that we can pin down and say, "This, this is me. This is who I am."

When we try to do that, when we actually try to look—and we'll explore this a little more later in the talk—looking at what we actually think of as self, what is the experience we call "me"? What is the experience we say "I am"? What is that? When we start to look at it, we see it's really hard to actually point to. And it's hard to point to because there's nothing to point to. The process nature of experience doesn't lend itself to landing on something and saying, "Oh, that—that's what the self is."

I'd like to use an analogy to help us enter into understanding this process nature, this conditioned nature, the flux of experience that we sometimes mistake or misunderstand as a self.

If we think about a rainbow: I had the great fortune in January and early February to be on self-retreat. A friend let me use their cabin on the coast of Oregon, and the weather there is pretty wild in January. There were some days when the waves were enormous. I would take walks along the cliff there—the place I was staying was right on the ocean—and every day I would walk along the cliff. One day the waves were so high. The cliff I was on was about fifty to seventy feet above sea level, but the waves were so enormous they were crashing against the cliffs and shooting up into the air.

It happened to be a sunny day, and as I was walking along, in one place on that cliff I was looking out at the burst of the crash of the waves, and a rainbow appeared right in front of me. And then it vanished, of course. And then another wave came and it appeared again. There was a mist floating by, and the rainbow kind of appeared and disappeared as that mist floated past.

It looked very stable when it was there, and in fact it looked like it was being revealed—almost as if it was hanging in the air, just waiting to be revealed, like a curtain being drawn back. And yet, there isn't a rainbow hanging in the air there. If I had walked ten feet in one direction, I couldn't see the rainbow, because the orientation of the sun and the water wasn't right. That's a condition for the rainbow to appear.

Now, is the rainbow there if I'm not looking at it? I don't know. Same question as: is there sound if a tree falls in the forest and nobody's listening? In terms of my experience, the rainbow did not exist when I walked ten yards down the cliff. When the waves fell, there was no rainbow. If the sun had gone behind a cloud, there would be no rainbow. These conditions came together to produce this experience of rainbow—a conditioned process.

And yet, it's not that the rainbow doesn't exist. We can't say there's no rainbow. I mean, we can take a picture of a rainbow.

We can't say it's a thing either. It's dependent on conditions. So the sense of self is very like that. It comes into being in dependence on conditions. The sense of self comes into being in dependence on conditions.

The Buddha taught quite a bit about this understanding around anattā, not-self. The very second discourse the Buddha is said to have given is a teaching to the five friends. Susie talked about the five friends that he practiced with before he found his own way. After he understood his freedom and realized he could articulate it to people who had some depth of understanding, some depth of practice, he thought of his five friends. He went to find them and to give them some of his understanding.

The first teaching was the teaching on the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. The second one was said to be a teaching on not-self. In this text, he launches right in, framing an understanding of not-self around a way of understanding human experience through a teaching called the five aggregates.

We haven't explicitly done a five aggregate talk in this half of the retreat, so I'll just briefly overview it here. We've talked about various parts of this teaching. The five aggregates is a way of understanding human experience, much as the way the six sense bases are a way of understanding human experience that John talked about the other

night. This is a way to divide up our human experience. We can understand our human experience as coming in through these six sense bases. Another way of dividing up human experience is to think about it in terms of these five processes.

The five processes are: a process of physical form, a process of physicality, and then four mental processes at work. The process of feeling, which Amana talked so beautifully about. The process of perception, which I spoke about. The process of mental formations, which is basically all of the stuff that goes on in our minds—thoughts and emotions and moods and mind states. All of those are mental formations. Sometimes this aggregate is called intentional or volitional formations, and so it is those mental activities that have intention associated with them. Somebody did talk about intention, and Susie brought it in last night in talking about karma. So we have touched on these. The fourth mental process is the process of knowing, of the simple recognition of experience.

So we have physical experience and mental experience, physical and mental experience interplaying, interweaving. Form, feeling, perceptions, intentional or volitional formations, and consciousness.

Many of the teachings the Buddha offered around not-self use this framework to help us basically understand that we've misperceived or misunderstood a sense of self. We've misattributed, created a view where there's nothing really to hang that view on.

In this teaching, the Buddha points to each of these five aggregates from different perspectives. The first perspective he points to is the perspective essentially of control. He says, can you control form? Do you have mastery over form? Can you say, "May my body be thus, may my body not be thus"? This is the language of the sutta. It goes through all of the five aggregates in this way:

"Form is not self. If form were self, the body would not lend itself to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of the body, 'Let my body be thus, let my body not be thus.' But because form is not self, body leads to affliction. It is not possible to say, 'Let my body be thus, let my body not be thus.'"

This points to one way that we tend to think of a sense of self—that a sense of self is something that has mastery or control over some parts of our experience. Here the Buddha is pointing out that the experience of body in effect can't be what we would call self because we cannot control it. We cannot ultimately control it. We cannot fully control it.

I'm going to read another one of these because it lends a different flavor to the teaching:

"Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were self, consciousness would not lend itself to affliction. And it would be possible to determine of consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.'"

But because consciousness is not self, consciousness leads to affliction. And it is not possible to say, "Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus."

The Buddha is actually pointing to what we know. We know we can't say, "Let my consciousness be thus." Wouldn't it be so wonderful if we could? That would be so great—we could just sit down and say, "May mindfulness arise and be steadily arising." But we don't have that kind of control. And he points to this very evident thing.

One way to look at this teaching is through the experience of the wandering mind. We know the mind wanders. We sit down, we try to pay attention to our breath, we try to stabilize our attention in the present moment, and what happens? The mind wanders. Who did that? You didn't decide, "I'm going to make my mind wander now." Mostly. Sometimes we do try to do that—"I'm going to let go of being mindful right now." But much of the time when the mind wanders, it simply wanders. Conditions arise such that the mind loses mindfulness. And then mindfulness returns. Who did that? You didn't do that. It just happened—that effortless mindfulness returning that we talked about early in March. It's just arising. No one in control of it arising. Just a process unfolding. And the Buddha points to this as evidence for not-self.

These are experiences we have all the time. It's interesting—we think there's a lot of evidence for self. But when we try to start looking at what the evidence for self actually is, it ends up being pretty vague and not easy to pin down. And we don't think that there's much evidence for not-self, but it's staring us in the face all the time. This lack of control is one of those pieces of evidence.

There is more evidence for not-self that the Buddha points to. This teaching, to some extent, refers to a definition of self that was common in his day. At that time, the aim of spiritual practice in certain circles was to merge with Atman—merge with the great Self. Atman, Atta, coming from the same root. And that Atman was thought to be permanent and blissful, unchangeable.

So the Buddha points to what we experience, direct experience, and says: look in your experience. Is any part of your experience permanent? Anything you experience? Anything you can say is lasting? And if you look at it—form, feeling, mental formations, perception, consciousness—all changing. None of it stable.

This becomes more and more clear the more continuous our mindfulness gets. This is one of those understandings that begins to point itself out to us. Yes, things are not permanent. Experience. There's nothing that can be found in experience that is permanent.

And because it's impermanent, the Buddha points out, because it's impermanent, there is the trying to find something on which to land, for there to be some place of reliable happiness. Nothing in our experience qualifies as a place where we could say, "Yes, that's where I can find reliable, unchangeable happiness." Because everything is impermanent. And so by corollary, it's also unreliable. Impermanent, unreliable experience.

This the Buddha points to as not worthy. He asks: is this worthy of being called self? And so this teaching also points a little bit to what do we call self?

How do we define a sense of self? And does it make sense to call it a self? Does it make sense in the way that we are interpreting it as self? This is a kind of looking at what is it, how do we feel into what a sense of self is. And how does our practice—how does the practice of mindfulness joined with wise intention, wise view—how does this practice help us to not just take this in as a concept? Sometimes even the concept is hard enough to take in. But how does it begin to let us actually understand this non-conceptually, through direct experience? How can this practice help us to understand the teaching of not-self?

One of the most direct doorways to this is through the exploration of what feels like a sense of self. What am I calling self? Study what you're calling self. There's a famous quote by the Zen master Dogen: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things." This points to the exploration of what we are calling a sense of self. When a sense of self arises, what is that actually? What is that experience? Through that exploration, we begin to understand that what we are calling a sense of self is simply a process—that there isn't anything stable in there, isn't anything that we can call what we think of as a sense of self. So we're getting familiar with what we think of as self, experientially.

In brief, as we do that, as we explore a sense of self, there might be times—and some of you have described noticing this—when you're noticing some sense of self and it falls apart. You recognize, "Wow, that was not who I am. That was just an arising. It wasn't who I am." Sometimes as we explore in our experience the senses of self, we see one disintegrating, and we recognize, "Wow, nope. If that were me, it would still be here." This is one of the senses of self—a kind of sense of something that's stable and enduring. Looking at experience, anything we think is stable and enduring, we look at it long enough and we see it changes.

There are times too, as we're exploring our experience, when we see a sense of self arising, and again we see, "Wow, that came into being." There was a witnessing of seeing this experience coming into being, through causes and conditions. And we see, "Wow, that was a conditioned process that arose."

The Buddha was famous for his lists, as you know. He had a teaching of the twenty ways that we have identity view. Basically, for each of the five aggregates, there are four ways of attributing a sense of self—so that's five times four, twenty. I'm not going to try to go through these exhaustively, but I want to give you a flavor of these different ways the Buddha pointed to that we misattribute or create a view. He calls this identity view, *sakkāya diṭṭhi* in the Pali. Identity view, personality view. And it's seen as a view. The sense of self is understood to be basically a belief that is misunderstood as a thing.

This connects to that teaching I offered around perception and *papañca*—that with a concept, with perceiving or recognizing something, a concept comes into play, and then we believe that concept to have some kind of inherent existence. We do this with a sense of self. This is a process that happens in our minds, and it seems to be pretty human. It's a pretty deep process, potentially pretty useful.

The Buddha points to this view as having different flavors. One of the flavors is "I am something." I am body. I am the body. I am my emotions. I am angry, I am miserable, I am happy.

Or we may have an identity around roles—concepts, essentially. I'm a mother, I'm a parent, I'm a sibling, I'm a student. Basically an identification around a concept. Or we may have an identification around being the one that things happen to: I'm the one who feels, I'm the one who knows.

This is the first kind of view, and we can hear it almost in our minds at times. "I am so angry"—identity view in that form, attributing, equating our self with the feeling.

The second form of identity view is possessiveness. Something is mine. Things belong to me. I have a body. I have feelings. I have emotions. As opposed to being those things, it's like there's something bigger that has them. It's another way. And again, we use this language: "I have emotions. I have anger."

The third kind of identity view, the Buddha says, is "I am inside of something." This one is less familiar to me. The main way I feel this one is at times feeling like I'm inside the body—that somehow there's a me sitting somewhere behind my eyes or something. Potentially at times in certain states of meditation, there's been a sense of an expansive state and feeling like I'm in the state. Being inside of awareness. Something like that.

And the fourth way of holding, of creating this view of self, is that something is inside of me. Emotions are in me. This again, in language we might say—we might feel like we're holding in emotions. The emotions are inside. Holding it in. Consciousness is in me.

So those are ways the Buddha pointed to, and I think we can reflect on the language, or when our thoughts start doing their process, they often reveal how we are identifying. "I am so angry." "These feelings—I have to hold them in." Pointing to where it is, how it is that we're attributing a sense of self in each of those ways.

I have not experienced all twenty of those ways, and yet I find these useful reflections at times to again use those thoughts as pointers to how I might be holding a sense of self. The language in the mind can often point to when we do have a sense of self. The words "me," "I," "mine"—those are good clues that there's a sense of self going on.

The Buddha did use those words familiarly, colloquially. It's like, we don't have to say—if I'm going to walk across the room, I can say, "Oh, I'm going to go out the door." I don't have to say, "This process of mind and body is going to stand and intend to walk across the door." We can say, "I'm going to walk out the door." But often when our thoughts come up, it's a pointer. And when we see our thoughts—I don't know, some really large number of them are self-referential. At least ninety-nine percent seem to have something to do with me. Or they have something to do with me indirectly because they have something to do with others.

This, in my experience, is another way that we have a sense of self. It's a kind of indirect way, but if we are orienting toward "that person there, doing that thing"—them, they, their—there is a sense of self happening in being separated from. The "they-them-there" is creating an other, something external, and there will be a sense of self. It may not be as obvious. What we may be seeing or recognizing in those thoughts is the words "they," "them." "They shouldn't do that." "They're thinking this thing about me." All of those different thoughts about other. So that's another way that we have a sense of self.

So we can notice those kinds of thoughts as well.

There's a sense, I think, often with the sense of self, that there's a kind of solidity somehow. A sense of stability. Something continuous that has traveled through life. This is reinforced by memories, by conversations with family about what we did when we were kids. So there's this imputing of a stability of a being that has traveled through time. It's another way that we feel the sense of self. This is just more, in my experience, ways that I've seen it.

And then a big way that I find in my own experience around selfing is around being the one who chooses. I'm the one who decides things. That's a main kind of congealing of self.

This particular exploration—as we start to look at the sense of self here, when mindfulness gets stronger, when mindfulness gets more continuous—we start to see how decisions come to be. We can watch this process. You're sitting in the hall and feel a slight pressure in the bladder. Pressure gets stronger, stronger, stronger. Unpleasantness arises. There's the recognition of needing to relieve the bladder. With that, there's an intention to do that. Followed by a whole host of intentions to stand, get up, walk out the door, go to the restroom. We can see this unfolding and recognize it's almost like it's just a machine at work. It feels a little spooky sometimes. Like, who made that decision? It was just a process unfolding. And so the witnessing of how choice happens—we can begin to really, that can begin to undermine this identification around being the one who chooses, who decides.

At some point I really began to see this particularly around consciousness. I could see I'm not the one who decides what comes into consciousness. I thought I was. I thought I chose what to pay attention to. But then I began to see, no, some process does that. So I could see, wow, I'm not the one doing that. But it sure feels like it's happening to me—another form of selfing. I'm the one things happen to. So again, just watching this, seeing what is this sense of self arising, watching the processes around it.

As we watch these processes at work, we can see a lot of really interesting things. One of the things that I found so fascinating was that there's not a single thing that I call self. There's a lot of selves. A lot of different senses of selves. Many of these senses of selves have nothing to do with each other. Thinking a particular thought about a dear friend—the friend arises, the feelings associated with that friendship arise. It feels like me. A few minutes later, the thought of a parent, my parent, arises and a whole different set of feelings and experiences comes to be there, having nothing to do with this other one.

At some point I thought, wow, a sense of self is just simply a familiar set of contractions and thoughts and moods. That's what a sense of self feels like. Just familiar stuff happening. It has happened before, and I'm calling it a sense of self.

A lot of these identities—another word for selves, identities—a lot of these identities are conditioned. They are all conditioned, in fact, not a lot of them. They are all conditioned by experience, and so my friend-self, for instance, that's conditioned by that particular individual experience. They're also conditioned by culture. And so my experience of being a cisgendered female—a female that feels like a female in her own body

and feels like a female—that experience is conditioned. Any identity around that female experience is conditioned a lot by culture. And I butted up against a lot of that—what I was told by culture that females could and couldn't do, were and weren't good at.

A lot of suffering there. A lot of fighting. "No, that's not me."

So these identities come into being not only in dependence on our own personal experience, but also in dependence on culture. And a lot of these senses of self are strategies for navigating our lives—strategies for navigating, in particular, the challenges of an impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable world. Strategies for safety.

When you reflect on familiar patterns and habits, ones that come up a lot—and I've heard this frequently in our meetings—when something keeps arising on retreat, I often ask, "Is this something you experience in your life?" And often it is, because these patterns repeat themselves. They are conditioned, and they're strategies for navigating the world. When we butt up against challenge in the retreat, we carry our habitual strategies from life to try to deal with them, and so we get to see our senses of self coming into how we engage in the practice. This isn't a mistake. It's actually helpful. It's not like we bring a different set of conditions in here than we have out there. We really get to see our conditioning in here.

Sometimes the sense of self is vague, hard to really point to and identify. Sometimes it's really, really clear. That may be the best time to begin looking at what it is I'm calling self. Certain kinds of experiences, certain kinds of habitual patterns, tend to evoke a strong identity. Self-righteousness is one of them—"I'm right. I'm right." There can be strong identities around certain emotions, strong identities around particular habitual patterns. Many of these are the ones we suffer over.

And this points to something I mentioned the other day: the teaching of dependent origination, which describes how suffering comes to be, also describes how these senses of self come to be. It's the same process. So when there is this churning of identity, there's also this clinging to something, holding on to something. Sometimes when the sense of self feels really clear, it's a good time to look at it.

I'm going to tell a story from my own practice around this—a particularly strong identity I had around being unworthy. Self-hatred was one of its main manifestations.

Actually, it took a while before I really saw it. I did not grow up feeling like I hated myself. I grew up feeling very competent, very in control and in charge, knowing what I wanted to do. When I started meditating, I began hearing and recognizing these voices in my head: "You're a failure. You're no good. You don't do that right. You're a terrible yogi." And there were also ones like, "You're the best yogi in the room. You're really

good at this." Ryan talked the other night about these contrasting identities that we have, and I saw that in spades. I began to recognize that so much of my patterns of striving to succeed had been rooted in that sense of being a failure.

When I began to see that, it was really hard to feel it. Self-hatred is a very painful feeling. It feels like you're being annihilated. So it was a long process to explore this, to watch it, to have the courage to open to it as an arising, to know when I couldn't know it as an arising—when my mindfulness wasn't strong enough to really meet it and I was going to get sucked into it. There was a lot of work around this, a lot of practice.

During one particular three-month course, I look back on it and it was like my self-hatred retreat. I really got to see this pattern over and over and over again. I would have a few days in the middle where it wasn't there so much. And this points to one of the really useful tools around a pervasive sense of self: notice when it's not there.

This was something I did notice. There were days when self-hatred was not here. That begins to poke holes in the belief in the identity, in the solidification around this. "I am unworthy."

I am a failure. It pokes holes in that solidity, because we see it's not always there. This is a really powerful tool for working with those pervasive identities.

Sometimes I could be with the pattern as it arose, and sometimes I would get pulled under. I just kept practicing, kept practicing with it.

One evening, after a dharma talk, Joseph had given a teaching in the hall around pervasive patterns. He offered something which I will share with you because it was very helpful for me that evening. He said that if there's something that keeps coming up over and over again, it's really helpful to recognize when it arises, the very moment it arises. Know that as contact. The arising of that is contact. And then notice the feeling tone of that arising.

As I left the hall that evening—I was going out through the upper walking room at IMS, walking up the stairs—and the feeling of self-hatred just descended. There was this recognition: oh. And a feeling of heaviness. Then I caught this and thought, I'm just going to practice with this.

I went back to my room and used that teaching he had offered. As I was sitting there, I was noticing this fluctuation around the sense of self-hatred. It would not be there, and then it would come into being. I would say, "Contact. Unpleasant." I would note it. Just contact, unpleasant. Then it might weaken, then get stronger. Contact, unpleasant. I kept just doing that for a long time that evening.

I had a lot of real dedication to being with it. I wasn't afraid of it. That was itself a lot of work, you know—a lot of working through the fear of the feeling, a lot of dealing with some of the history of how it came to be. A lot of work preceded this evening. It was probably a couple of years of working with this pattern.

But this particular evening I just had a lot of confidence in the path and in the power of mindfulness. At some point, in seeing that contact, the mind understood: this is just a thought. "You're no good"—it is simply a thought. The sense of self was picking that thought up and doing a believing process with it. "Oh, I'm no good. Oh yeah, I believe that. Oh yeah, I believe that. Oh yeah. Oh, I really believe that." I could see it in that moment of its arising. It's just a thought.

And in that moment, the whole thing just fell apart.

I had a moment where I thought, "Oh, never again will I experience that self-hatred." And in the next moment there was wisdom. I thought, "No, these are the conditions right now. There are the conditions right now to see this." Then there was a kind of shift—what was so interesting in that moment was that there was a movement from self-hatred to bliss in just a split second. And then in seeing that—oh no, this is just the conditions now—that bliss shifted to just equanimity. In a moment, in a moment, in a moment.

That moment was extremely powerful. The pattern, I would say, still exists. But what seems to be gone is the belief in the thoughts. The thoughts come, but there's not the belief. So it's like, "Oh yeah, there's that thought. You're a failure. Yeah, there's that thought."

Very occasionally I find, in particular it seems to be in deeper states of meditation, sometimes the mind picks it up a little bit. Oh, there it is again. So I have a lot of respect for this pattern. It's like a big tree got uprooted that night, but the filaments are still there. So I really respect that pattern. See those thoughts. See them.

We can study our senses of self. We can get curious about them. This is very powerful understanding. What I described was a powerful insight into an identity that not only shifted that identity—it changed my life in that moment. It's one of perhaps a dozen or so moments of really clear insight in my practice that I can say, yes, that split second changed my life. A few of those in my practice. That moment really shifted my life. But it also gave me a deeper level of understanding about how the sense of self works. It was an understanding into that teaching of not-self.

I find it really important in exploring senses of self—much as we've been saying around suffering, opening to the entirety of our human experience, honoring experience, respecting our experience, respecting the suffering that arises, opening to it, witnessing it, being with it, holding it with allowing and love—the same thing goes with honoring our identities, honoring our senses of self.

They have their function, and often they have a very strong one. Sometimes we can just bow to those identities. Yeah, thank you for doing this, like keeping me alive until this point. Because some of our habits and patterns were strategies for how to get through our upbringing. And so it's like, yes, I see you and thank you for getting me here—and let's see, can we relate to things in a different way?

Honoring our identities, being aware of them, opening to them, is a form of honoring. It's a form of respect. That very word, *respect*, means to look again and again, to look again at what's there.

The honoring of these identities begins to help us understand. The other day I spoke to those threads that come into both suffering and into identities—the threads of the deep wish to be happy, healthy, safe, at ease, and those threads of truth: impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. Not only is our suffering a kind of knotting up of those threads, but so can our identities be. And so the mindfulness and the wisdom begin to help us understand. Seeing our identities points back to love, compassion, and truth. When we see through the tangle, the tangle of views, there's love and wisdom to be seen, to be experienced.

Let's sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 135

Recognizing Awareness

Andrea Fella · 56 min

> *In this talk, Andrea Fella offers a contemplative exploration of mindfulness as an object of investigation itself, rather than focusing solely on what mindfulness observes. She encourages practitioners to become curious about the edges of awareness—those moments when mindfulness returns after the mind has wandered, and the conditions under which it slips away. This investigation reveals profound teachings about anattā (not-self), as we recognize that neither the losing nor the returning of mindfulness is something we consciously choose; both arise through conditions.*
>
> *Fella distinguishes between sammā sati (right mindfulness) and ordinary awareness, explaining that right mindfulness involves curiosity about experience as experience, rather than engaging with our usual agendas of getting or avoiding. She references the Abhidhamma concept of unprompted mindfulness—awareness that arises spontaneously without conscious intention—and suggests that becoming familiar with these moments can transform our relationship to practice. Rather than judging ourselves for losing mindfulness, we can celebrate each return as an opportunity to notice the effortless quality of awareness.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing patterns in how mindfulness gets lost—whether in certain activities, habitual mind states, or during shifts of attention. Fella shares from her own experience how sustained curiosity about anger eventually allowed her to see it arising before it fully took hold. She also challenges common beliefs that certain states like sleepiness or low energy preclude mindfulness, suggesting that if we can notice the thought "I'm too tired to be mindful," we already have enough awareness to be present with whatever is happening.*

Tonight I'd like to explore the topic of mindfulness itself—becoming familiar with the experience of mindfulness, the experience of awareness.

One way I've found interesting to explore this quality of mindfulness in my own practice is through seeing or noticing how mindfulness comes and goes. We often talk about this from the other side: we talk about the wandering mind, about mindfulness getting lost. But I like to explore the edges of that phenomenon. What does it mean to be curious about mindfulness itself through looking at the edges of this familiar, really familiar process of mindfulness getting lost? Noticing when it comes back, and also beginning to see something about how it gets lost.

So really we're investigating mindfulness itself, noticing it as a quality itself—not so interested in what mindfulness takes in, what mindfulness is aware of, although that matters too. In this talk, I'd like to emphasize the awareness side itself so that we can begin to get familiar with this experience of mindfulness. There's a lot we can learn looking at how mindfulness comes and goes.

We can see how our minds get caught. We can recognize the uncontrollability of the mind. When we sit down to practice, intending to be present, intending to be mindful, what happens? Mindfulness goes away. Not because we decided to have it go away, but because of conditions. We didn't choose to have that happen; it happened because of conditions.

And likewise—sometimes even more amazing, really, reflecting about it—mindfulness comes back. And who did that? We were off wandering around, thinking about something or other, and suddenly we become aware again. We didn't choose to do that either. This seeing of this simple phenomenon that we're so familiar with is a pointer to the teaching of not-self.

I've also found this kind of exploration around the edges of mindfulness getting lost helps to bring curiosity rather than judgment around the getting lost itself. When I turned the mind towards this curiosity of noticing the return of mindfulness, rather than emphasizing the fact that mindfulness had been lost—"Oh, mindfulness is back!"—no matter how many times the mind wandered in a sitting, it gave me an opportunity to notice that moment of mindfulness returning, to see the effortless quality of that mindfulness returning.

That is a great moment. We didn't have to do a thing to have that mindfulness return. It happened. We can begin to connect with that curiosity about mindfulness itself and the effortless quality of that mindfulness returning. It's a pointer to how effortless mindfulness can be, because we didn't have to do that moment of mindfulness.

We think we know what mindfulness is, perhaps. We have some words for it: being with experience, being present, being aware, knowing what's happening while it's happening. And yet in some ways it is a mysterious thing. Some of the things we think about what mindfulness is—like what I pointed to the other day, that I thought if I wasn't deciding what to be mindful of, it meant I wasn't mindful. This recognition that attention and mindfulness are separate things, that we don't have to consciously choose. There's just this knowing, this awareness of what's happening in the present moment while it's happening.

I think of mindfulness as related to this very simple, ordinary capacity of our human minds to know what's happening in the present moment while it's happening. And yet the mindfulness that the Buddha pointed us to was not just that simple knowing. He pointed us to right mindfulness, sammā sati. A simple way to understand it is that we know experience happening in the present moment and are interested in it as experience happening in the present moment.

Maybe that just sounds like repeating myself, but it's different than what our minds typically do. Typically, in becoming aware of something, in being present—especially before we've met the practice of mindfulness—when we become aware of what's happening in the present moment, we engage with our agendas around it. We engage with our thoughts about how it can be useful for me to do this or not do this, to get this thing or not get this thing, to act, to engage.

The mindfulness that is onward leading, right mindfulness, is a very simple kind of awareness that is curious about what's happening as a human experience. Frustration is arising in the present moment—what is the experience of a human being feeling frustration in the present moment? What is that like? That's very different than frustration arising in the present moment and trying to figure out what to do about that frustration.

The texts actually speak about wrong mindfulness as opposed to right mindfulness. Wrong mindfulness is defined as being part of the wrong eightfold path. Wrong mindfulness comes out of wrong view, wrong intention. When there's wrong view and wrong intention, the kind of mindfulness that would arise would not be the kind of mindfulness that is onward leading.

A classic example of wrong mindfulness is the possible mindfulness of a thief moving through a house to steal something. The thief might be very present, very aware of every step, every movement—particularly if someone is in the house while they're stealing. They're acutely aware, making themselves very quiet while moving through the house. And yet the motivation for that mindfulness is greed. It's not the curiosity of "What is it like to take a step? What is it like to touch? What is it like to be here in this moment?" There's an agenda behind it with a quality of unwholesome motivation.

This framing of wise mindfulness or right mindfulness—being curious about what this present moment experience is, being curious about what is leading to suffering and what is leading away from suffering—that points us in the direction of right mindfulness.

In terms of getting familiar with mindfulness itself, getting familiar with this experience of mindfulness (and in this talk I'll use the terms mindfulness and awareness synonymously), one of the places where it can begin to be clear what the experience of mindfulness actually is, is in the moment when mindfulness returns after it has been lost. After the mind has been off thinking about something, not mindful, and mindfulness returns—that moment. That moment of mindfulness returning.

This is sometimes called in the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, "unprompted mindfulness." It is a mindfulness that is not arising based on our own intention. It is simply arising based on conditions—some of those conditions being the cultivation of mindfulness in the past. It is not our conscious doing. This is my understanding of unprompted mindfulness.

That moment of mindfulness returning—if we can be curious about it, as I said this morning, "aware again, aware again," and be really interested in that experience, the awareness side of that experience. In the moment when mindfulness returns, it's like the moment before. Sometimes there's a little lag in actually noticing that mindfulness has returned. But we can be curious about this moment, interested in seeing it. And yet it's not something we can decide to do. By its very nature, we cannot say, "I'm going to know when mindfulness returns." It's more of an intention, a setting of curiosity. This is something I'm curious about.

So this curiosity about that moment may allow us to begin to see it more clearly, to begin to understand it as, "Oh, mindfulness is back. Aware again." And in that moment, as we see mindfulness returning, there is a little bit of difference. There's a quality in that moment as mindfulness comes back—a difference between what it feels like now that the mind is aware and what the experience was a moment before, when the mind was caught in something and mindfulness wasn't so available.

So there's a moment in that arising of mindfulness where we can see the difference between what it means for mindfulness to be here and for mindfulness not to be here. We can begin to notice that difference between being mindful and not being mindful in that moment as mindfulness returns. It's not exactly that we know what it's like in the moment to not be mindful, but there's a lingering flavor, a lingering understanding as mindfulness returns of what that moment before was like. Its flavor lingers a little bit, and we can have a sense of, "Oh, this is what it's like to be mindful. This is the experience of mindfulness. This is awareness. Awareness is here."

As we begin to be curious about that experience of the moment of mindfulness returning—a great moment because it's not something we have to do, it's completely effortless—and as we get familiar with it, the very familiarity with that experience cre-

ates the conditions for us to become more attuned to it. It creates the conditions for us to see that moment of mindfulness returning more easily. And it happens a lot, way more than you think.

This moment of mindfulness, this awareness of what's happening in the present moment—it happens. And often, very quickly, as mindfulness arises in our daily activities, when we're lost in something not particularly mindful and suddenly become aware of something, it may be that we've become aware and then immediately think, "What do I have to do to take care of that thing? What do I need to do about that?" Sometimes those moments of mindfulness arise, and if we're not attuned to recognizing them, they get submerged again really quickly. Yet as we get interested in that moment, as we explore curiosity about recognizing it, we become attuned to that experience and see it more and more.

This simple practice of attuning to that moment has the benefit of creating more moments—or rather, having us recognize more of those moments—which in turn creates the conditions for more of those moments to be noticed. So it's not the arising of it that requires effort; the arising is effortless. There's a subtle sense of recognizing, of landing with it, that requires perhaps a little bit of personal effort. Noticing it has arisen: "Oh yes, aware again."

That's the effort, that's the recognition. Aware again, awareness is back. What's that? What's that experience? And in that moment, we notice that experience of awareness, notice the awareness itself, and then our practice becomes: What's obvious? What's obvious in that moment?

And potentially, as I was speaking about this morning, if the mind has been caught in something—whether caught in thought or caught in an emotion or a mood or a mind state—when the mindfulness returns, it's likely that there will be some experience in the present moment. That's the landscape of experience we're waking up into, and it has been conditioned by the previous moments of thinking or being pulled into a particular mind state.

So when mindfulness returns, there's going to be some flavor connected to what had been happening. I often speak about it as waking up in—what is the landscape now, now that mindfulness has returned? What is the landscape you're waking up into? Depending on how long the mindfulness was lost, the landscape may be very different than it was before the mindfulness got lost. And so there's a curiosity about that: What's here now? What's obvious? What is here now?

Sometimes checking the attitude can also be useful, because an attitude can sometimes be constructed while mindfulness is lost. For instance, if mindfulness was lost and we were thinking about something that frustrated us, if we come back and notice, "Well, I'm aware," but we don't really take in that there had been this ripple of frustration informing the mind in the previous moments—if we don't notice that, then in just turning to what's here right now, we might observe, "Okay, there's body sensation, there's this, there's that," without really noticing that an attitude may have been created, an attitude of frustration. That attitude doesn't necessarily have anything to do with body sensation or what's happening in our current experience. It was constructed based on thinking about perhaps a memory. But if we don't notice in that moment when mindfulness returns that this flavor is there, it may become the attitude, and we may have frustration about whatever's happening because it wasn't clearly seen.

And so that moment—noticing, aware again—and what's the landscape you're waking up into? As I also mentioned this morning, the landscape might well be far more than I could have possibly thought it would be. It might be more calm or more ease than there was before mindfulness got lost. Sometimes the mind kind of finds its way in the getting lost. Sometimes it finds its way to a letting go. And so when mindfulness returns, what is the landscape? Not particularly looking for hindrances or greed, aversion, delusion there, but just what's there—because sometimes it can be beautiful qualities of mind that are present when mindfulness returns.

And so in that moment, the recognizing—aware again—and beginning to get a little bit familiar with the difference between the awareness and the not being aware in the moments before. Just getting familiar with that.

We can also begin to be curious. One thing I'll say as an overarching theme for this talk and many of the talks that at least I will give: it may sound at times like this is a suggestion of something to do, but as Sayadaw often mentions—and many times I've gone off trying to do something he's talked about and come back and reported something, and he said, "Well, were you trying to do that?" And I said, "Yes. Didn't you tell me to do that?" He said, "Nothing I say is anything for you to do. It's just information that may help orient the mind in a particular way while you're just noticing your experience."

And so sometimes we can think of these Dharma talks almost as Dharma rain—just gently falling information that can land on the earth and seep into the ground, and maybe the plants will grow based on that water, but not so much something to pick up as an activity. Sometimes it's hard not to speak that way. I try, and I almost always get

caught in the language of, "Oh, you can pay attention to..." So what I'm talking about is things that can be noticed. These are more descriptions of things that might be able to be noticed than instructions about something to do.

Along these lines, something we can notice—or there can be a curiosity about—is what it feels like when mindfulness is already present. So that experience of the continuity of mindfulness: we can begin to get a flavor of that momentum of mindfulness also as the experience of mindfulness. And that is a place where we can prompt the mindfulness a little bit. I talked about unprompted and prompted mindfulness before. We can prompt the mindfulness a little bit, just reminding ourselves gently. When we are aware, we can remind ourselves to be aware. And yet I've already heard in some of the group meetings that sometimes there's a little bit—it sounds like a little bit of overdoing of that prompting.

Some of you have been describing the mind getting tired with this aspect of the practice. So this is a place where getting familiar with that prompting experience of mindfulness as it becomes more continuous becomes important—the feeling of just being present. That's a way to frame it potentially: it's simply the experience of being present.

As we get a flavor of that experience, we may start to recognize where the mindfulness gets a little bit loose. We may notice it becoming less stable. And that would be when to bring the reminders back in. The reminders are very simple. It might be as simple as "aware." Or maybe it's just recognizing "already aware"—noticing that, oh yes, already aware.

So there's the other side of this exploration of the comings and goings of mindfulness. We've talked about mindfulness returning. We can also get curious about that place where mindfulness begins to weaken, where it begins to get lost. Where does mindfulness get lost? Where does awareness get lost?

Initially this exploration happens in retrospect—when mindfulness returns, we notice that it has been lost, and we may know something about the conditions around which it got lost. Not that we have to do a lot there, but again, it's very simple: when we wake up, we may recognize that mindfulness got lost because we went into our room. We closed the door, and it's like, "Oh, don't have to be mindful, nobody's looking." So being curious about this—where does mindfulness get lost?

This begins to support continuity as we recognize what conditions mindfulness gets lost with. It's not about judging ourselves. And it's also not about doubling down when we notice certain areas or mind states in which we tend to lose mindfulness. Instead, being curious: when that happens, we've noticed a pattern. And the noticing of the pat-

tern seems to happen naturally. Our minds are natural pattern recognizers. So if we're curious about what patterns surround the loss of mindfulness, we'll begin to notice them. It doesn't have to be a big project.

When we begin to notice that mindfulness gets lost in certain experiences or activities, rather than having the idea of something like, "Okay, I know that when I go into my room mindfulness gets lost, so I'm going to force myself to stay mindful—I'm going to know every single moment when I walk in that door and really make myself be mindful"—that's not what I'd like to propose here. Instead, I'd rather that you be curious about what happens when you go in your room. Get curious about what catches the mind. What does the mind get hooked to? What does it do?

There are many different places and areas we can explore like this. We can be curious in a broad sense about various times of day, various activities, where we recognize: "Yeah, not very mindful while I'm doing my dishes, while I'm doing my yogi job, while I'm walking around the loop, while I'm in the bathroom." We may notice these areas, these places where mindfulness kind of... it's like these little sinkholes of mindfulness.

As you notice a pattern like that—"Oh yeah, I tend to lose my mindfulness in my yogi job"—then when you're headed to your yogi job, you might be mindful. And again, not to say "I'm going to force myself to be mindful with all of that chopping," but just be curious what happens. It's an interesting thing. Carol talked the other day about letting the mindfulness just come along for the ride with what's happening. That's what I'm proposing here. Come along for the ride where you know mindfulness tends to get lost, and be curious about where it slips. What happens there?

We can begin to see that not by trying to see it, not by trying to force ourselves to stay present. If we're trying to force ourselves to stay present through the whole thing, we won't see where the mind gets caught, because we'll be preempting it by forcing mindfulness to stay. So it's really this almost willingness to let mindfulness slip in order to see what happens in that moment. When you notice areas like that, just see if you can bring some curiosity to it.

What goes on there? What goes on?

So we might lose awareness in specific activities. I talked the other day of another way that we can lose awareness—or may tend to lose awareness—when attention shifts and we don't notice that attention has shifted. That's another common way for mindfulness to get lost.

I mentioned the seeing, looking, hearing, listening—the attention shifts to something else. Again, if there's curiosity about that shift of attention... and I'm not saying you shouldn't let the attention shift, but just what is it that draws the attention? And knowing that, knowing that shift of attention, developing familiarity with that shift—again, not as something to do, not as a project. I'm just mentioning this as something that can be seen, which may help you be curious about it, and may help there to be some seeing of it.

The seeing, looking, hearing, listening is an easy place to begin that exploration. But it happens everywhere. Our attention is very frequently shifting from experience to experience, particularly in this receptive kind of practice. We're receiving what is happening, and the attention is picking up on new experience moment after moment.

At one point I described this experience of the attention picking up on all these different experiences, the shifting of attention, the feeling of the shift—but it's really just the arising of a new experience. And I mentioned that to Sayadaw, and he kind of got into that. He said, "Yeah, it's kind of like you're taking a dog for a walk. And that dog is into everything. It's sniffing this and looking at that and barking at that—it's all over the place. But our job is just to hold on to the leash. We just stay connected." And then wherever the attention goes, we can know that.

But very frequently when the attention shifts to something, if we're not aware that it has shifted, we'll start thinking about it. And then mindfulness will get lost.

We also tend to lose awareness in habitual states of mind, ones that we tend to be identified with—our kind of favorite flavors. You've all practiced so much; you probably know your favorite flavors of identification, the things that our mind tends to get stuck to and caught by. And those tend to be things that mindfulness gets lost with.

Often we tend to notice in retrospect that we have been caught by something—a mind state, a depression or frustration or anger, an aversion, a desire, a fear, a doubt, a confusion. We may not see the getting lost in it initially. And yet, with these very habitual states of mind, we probably will wake up into them. So when mindfulness returns, we will notice that the mind has returned.

At some points—not always, of course, as I mentioned earlier—sometimes when mindfulness returns it actually is more settled. But some chunk of the time when mindfulness returns, it will return and what will be happening is one of those habitual mind states. And so in that moment of mindfulness returning in that habitual mind state, really—oh, this is what's happening. Oh, here's that familiar mind state. Okay, what's this like?

Again, what's this landscape of this familiar habitual state of mind? And check the attitude. Can it be okay that this is happening? This is just an opportunity to learn about this habitual mind state. It's something that has probably been practiced for years. And here it is—an opportunity, while you're mindful, to get to know it, to get familiar with it, to learn something about it.

And so in that moment, as we really begin to get familiar with the quality of that state, what I've seen in my own practice is that as I've gotten curious about these habitual states—similar to what I described about the seeing of mindfulness returning, how as we get familiar with that it begins to kind of point itself out to us and we notice it more—as we get more attuned to the qualities of those habitual mind states, what it's like in the body, what the mind is like, the felt sense of that state, it begins to attune us to that state.

In my experience, as I've gotten curious about just waking up with some of these habitual states, noticing them, being curious, being present for them, what has happened is that over time the mindfulness seems to have gotten attuned to that state. It's almost like the state itself becomes a mindfulness bell. It begins to wake us up when it happens.

In my experience, that habitual pattern—in my case the first one I really explored was anger—began to point itself out. I noticed that I was waking up into anger, but it was not as deeply wound as it had been early on. So the practice of noticing it helped the mind to recognize it and wake up into it earlier. This created the conditions for seeing it before it got quite so sticky.

And then also, to my amazement, it began to create the conditions so that I could almost see it coming before it came. The mind began to get so familiar with that pattern that it began to recognize the scent of it approaching. And at that point, the mind could really be present with the arising of that habitual state and learn something very deep about it—and also potentially see the pull into wanting to go into it.

That was shocking to me, actually, when I saw this, especially around anger.

I saw this kind of inclining towards anger. Not angry in the moment, but just seeing the thought—it's like a freight train of "yeah, I really want to get angry here." Just feeling that movement towards it. It was remarkable: this is the momentum of that pattern. If I hadn't been mindful for that, the mindfulness would have gotten lost. But being present for it had a power to help me stay present in that moment and not get pulled into the pattern of the anger.

So again, we can be curious about what are the states of mind in which mindfulness gets lost, where mindfulness tends to not be available. And then aside from our kind of identified states, there are some familiar habits or familiar states of mind that many of us tend to almost equate with non-mindfulness: sleepiness, spaciness, zoning out, low energy.

At one point I had a long stretch, a couple of years, where the energy was so low. I had many, many moments where what the mind was saying and believing was, "I don't have enough energy to be mindful." I remember so clearly—I was actually doing walking meditation on the driveway in front of IMS—and I had that thought: "I'm just too low energy, I'm too exhausted to be mindful." And I noticed that thought, was aware of that thought. And then I noticed: but seeing is happening, I'm aware of seeing. Hearing is happening, aware of hearing. So there's mindfulness already happening.

In retrospect, what in that particular state of low energy I didn't have the capacity to do was to choose what to be mindful of. I couldn't direct the attention. The mind was pretty exhausted. But there was already mindfulness happening.

This can point us to the recognition that some of these states that we think are inherently non-mindful—maybe, just maybe, you can be mindful of the state itself. Dull mind. Sleepy mind. Maybe we can't be mindful in the way that we'd like to be mindful. We can't be mindful while potentially choosing what we'd like to be attending to. Not that we're trying to do that here anyway, but still there's the habit of believing "too sleepy to be mindful." If you have that thought—"I'm too sleepy to be mindful"—and you notice or can be aware of that thought, I'd like to propose that you have enough awareness to be mindful of the sleepiness.

We sometimes have the belief that mindfulness feels a certain way. And that's where this comes from, I think—that low energy, "there's not enough energy to be mindful"—it comes from a belief that when I'm mindful, it feels like there's energy. It feels like there's clarity in the mind.

We may have a kind of a sense, when we're noticing what it's like when we're mindful—and often when we first notice that, when we first really get a sense of familiarity with what it's like to be mindful—there's a particular quality of mindfulness that's happening in that moment. Often it has to do with clarity. We know that there's a lot of clarity of contact. We know exactly what the objects are. There's a brightness in the mind that often feels pleasant. And so we have this experience and we're interested in what it's like to be mindful. It's like, "Oh, this is mindfulness." And yes, there is the continuity

of mindfulness there. That is the experience of mindfulness. But there's a lot of extra things there that we're also attributing to mindfulness—like that particular kind of clarity, like the pleasantness. The mindfulness is simply the being aware.

At one point I was practicing at Shwe Oo Min monastery with Sayadaw, and as I was shifting from walking meditation to sitting meditation, I noticed the mind trying to shift its state in order to put itself into a more "meditative" state. And noticing that, there was a kind of wisdom question: "Well, what's wrong with this state? Why does the mind think it has to change the state in order to meditate?"

If I ever notice at this point that I'm trying to change the state of my mind or think I can't be mindful while something is happening—that's just a thought. It's just a belief. It's just the mind believing something, believing that it can't be mindful. If it has enough energy or enough recognition that it's noticing the thing it thinks it can't be mindful of, it can be mindful of it.

So if you're seeing that, if you're seeing the mind trying to change the state because of some belief or view that it can't be mindful, try the mindfulness first, before doing something. Now, it may well be—and some of you have described in our meetings—that sometimes there's something strong that happens and there's a kind of feeling of being pulled into the sinkhole or the rabbit hole of a particular mind state.

There are times when a mind state is stronger than our capacity to be mindful of it. We need to be honest with ourselves about that and honor that the mindfulness isn't quite strong enough to meet some of those powerful states. And yet, give yourself the chance to see if there is mindfulness that can meet it. So often we have the belief that we can't be mindful of something because in the past it was hard to be mindful of it. Give yourself the opportunity to check: Can I be mindful of this? What's the attitude?

In the noticing of mindfulness itself—that sense of being present, that familiar quality we often go for of clarity, of knowing every single experience—there are different ways that mindfulness can feel. So trusting, or being curious about: Am I aware? That question—am I aware?—we may not know what we're aware of. There may not be any clarity around contact at all. You may have no clue what the object is, but we may know that we're aware. Trust that you know that you're aware.

Explore the discomfort. Usually that can come with some discomfort—often it can come with some discomfort when we're not clear about the object. So notice that. Discomfort's happening. Don't know the object, and discomfort's happening. Okay, that's what's going on.

There are different ways I've noticed the experience feeling. Sometimes the attention is very focused and the mindfulness can be very present and clear. Sometimes there can be a very broad experience of awareness, knowing many different experiences. Sometimes it feels like one experience is known after another and there's a lot of clarity—this thing, and then this thing, and then this thing. Other times it feels more vague, like a shifting landscape, without real clarity about where the attention is at any given moment.

Sometimes it feels like the mind knows many things all at once. Sometimes it feels more like popcorn—individual things being known, popping in and out of existence. Sometimes it can feel like there's a separation between the knowing and the known. It feels like there's a distance, or it's clearly apparent that there's a difference between what is known and the knowing. Sometimes it feels like there's an actual separation.

It can feel like there's a lot of space around the object. Often there's that quality of feeling like there's space around the experience. Sometimes people point to that kind of feeling of having space around the experience as being what it's like to be mindful—that's what I'm going for, that's the experience I'm looking for, that spacious feeling around what's happening. But sometimes it doesn't have that feeling of spaciousness or separation. It feels like the mindfulness is right in the middle of what's happening.

And so again, being curious: Is there awareness? That question, that simple question—aware—seems almost like a throwaway question. Because if we can ask the question, almost by definition... I have known people to just kind of repeat "aware, aware, aware, aware," not aware, having it become almost like a mantra they've gotten lost in. But if there's any recognition of that "aware," there is awareness.

And yet it seems like it might be just a throwaway question—if I can ask the question, why bother? If I think of even asking the question, why bother? But what it begins to do is point the mind to be curious about the awareness itself. Aware? And using that question when there's any sense of uncertainty—am I aware? Am I aware?—often that doubt is about a different experience of awareness that we're not familiar with. So trusting that: okay, aware, yeah, no idea what I'm aware of, but knowing that I'm aware.

CHAPTER 136

Attitude

Andrea Fella · 37 min

> *In this talk from the Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella offers a nuanced exploration of attitude as a gateway to understanding our relationship with experience. She distinguishes between direct attitudes arising in response to pleasant or unpleasant sensations, habitual patterns that color even neutral experiences, and the often-unexamined beliefs and agendas we bring to meditation itself—thoughts like "I need more clarity" or "this is the wrong experience."*
>
> *Fella emphasizes that attitude isn't something to figure out intellectually, but rather something to invite into awareness through gentle inquiry: "How am I with this?" She notes that balanced states—okayness, ease, loving attention—often go unrecognized because we assume "that's how it's supposed to be." Equally important is recognizing when delusion operates, often not as an emotional flavor but as unexamined belief. The question "What is being believed right now?" can illuminate these hidden assumptions.*
>
> *Practically, she suggests checking attitude during moments of struggle, when mindfulness returns after being lost, and notably when practice seems to be going well—as this may reveal subtle grasping or delusion. This exploration connects directly to the Buddha's definition of Nibbāna as the absence of greed (lobha), aversion (dosa), and delusion (moha). By becoming curious about these three unwholesome roots without trying to change them, we create conditions for their release and for wholesome states to arise more naturally.*

This morning I'd like to offer some reflections about attitude—a little more exploration of that side of the practice.

Exploring attitude is a way of beginning to look at what our relationship is to experience. That's another word that could be used for attitude: relationship. What's the relationship to experience? Or maybe simply: How am I with this? There's what's happening, and there's how we are with it.

In terms of that relationship, there may be a very direct kind of connection. Something's happening in the present moment—a body sensation that's unpleasant, and a relationship of not liking. A sound or a sight that's pleasant, and a relationship of appreciation or enjoyment. That's probably the most direct kind of attitude: What's the experience, what's the object, and what's the relationship to that object?

And then there are attitudes that are more like habitual patterns. They may not be directly related to the experience but may in fact flavor the experience because of a kind of coloring that's already in the mind. In my own case, I had a very habitual, aversive mind, and when it was in that state, even very neutral experience—such as seeing somebody's sneakers at the end of my walking path—could have a very aversive relationship to that experience. So sometimes the attitude is much more of a habitual flavor. Some of those we carry around with us for quite a while.

Another way that attitude can show up is not so much directly about the experience or our habitual relationship to things, but more about our relationship to the meditation itself. This can be connected to our habitual relationships to other things, because we tend to carry our habits of mind into our meditation. Our relationship to the meditation might include agendas, beliefs: I need to pay attention in this way. Some other experience should be happening. This is the wrong experience. This is the right experience. I'm doing well. I'm failing. These thoughts, beliefs, and relationships to the meditation itself are also forms of attitude, forms of this relationship. If the unpleasant experience isn't going away, I must be doing it wrong. I need more clarity. So many of these kinds of thoughts and beliefs—because they are about the meditation—can sometimes be seen not as something to know. Oh, believing it needs to be more clear—that's what's happening right now.

And then of course there is the balanced relationship to experience: the okayness, the ease that whatever is happening is not a problem, that there's ease with whatever is happening. A flavor of allowing, a loving attention, a kind attention—all of those relationships to experience are also really useful to notice when they are happening. Again, that might go right by us, because "that's the way it's supposed to be in meditation." Almost that belief—that this is the way it's supposed to be—might prevent us from really seeing: Oh, this is what kind attention is like. This is the experience of kindness. This is the experience of allowing and okayness. No problem. That's what this is like.

And so we check the attitude from time to time. Sometimes when we check the attitude, ask that question—What's going on? What's the relationship?—something is very clear. And again, this isn't something to think about. It's not something to try to figure out, but much more to just invite an attitude to show itself, to come into conscious awareness. Sometimes it's very clear. When we ask, "How am I with this?" sometimes it's just right there. Most surprisingly, we haven't really clearly seen it. Oh yeah, that's what's happening. I don't like this. Okay, not liking—that's also happening.

And sometimes it's not so clear. We orient to exploring, opening to the attitude, and nothing particularly shows up. We've rung the doorbell and nobody seems to be answering the door. If that happens, don't go digging. Don't try to figure it out. Just continue.

What am I aware of? Am I aware? What's here?

Sometimes an attitude might not be so obvious because, while there's always some relationship present, it will either be some flavor of greed, aversion, or delusion, or some flavor of balance of mind. One of those will always be there. But sometimes they may not be so clear, perhaps because they're subtle. The attitudes can have a wide range. Sometimes it might be the subtlest form of leaning in—"Oh, what's that?" Or sometimes the attitude is more in the flavor of wise attitude, where some of those wise attitudes are a little subtle too. Calm. Okayness. We don't tend to recognize those kinds of experiences.

Sometimes an attitude might not be so clear because it's in the realm of delusion. Delusion is harder to know, harder to see by its very nature. Delusion can be expressed as disconnection from experience. It might be expressed or felt or known or experienced as confusion. But quite often, I would say, delusion expresses itself not in terms of an emotional flavor but more as a belief.

This can be a way in sometimes—a kind of deepening question around attitude: What is being believed right now? What is being believed? And if a belief is revealed, again, with all the experience of opening to attitude and recognizing something's here, that's what's happening. Believing is happening right now. We don't need to try to change a belief, and it's useful to recognize it as a belief.

Another question that can be supportive if it's not so clear what the attitude is—and again, it's not a problem if it's not clear, just continue—I've also found another broader question. It's even really more broad than checking the attitude: a broader question of "What else is happening right now?" Sometimes that can shake the mind from its habits of what it's inclined to look at, what it's used to looking at, what it's familiar with looking at. To kind of step back is almost like, "Oh, maybe something else. What else is here? What else is happening right now?"

There are some particularly useful times to check the attitude that I've found in my own practice. In general, as I've said, not to do this a lot—not to check the attitude every time we check our experience, "What's obvious? What's the attitude? And what's the attitude to that? And what's the attitude to that?" That gets really exhausting. So just from time to time.

And yet there are some good times to check the attitude. If it feels like there's any struggle in the meditation, check the attitude. If it feels like there's any kind of sense of a problem, or something's wrong, or this isn't right—that itself is revealing an attitude. So check the attitude there. And as I mentioned yesterday, when mindfulness returns after having been lost—mindfulness has disappeared and reappears—that can also be a good time to check the attitude, because an attitude could have shifted while we were lost.

And then, if it feels like it's going really well, check the attitude. That may reveal, when it's going really well, subtle beliefs of "This is right. This is the way it's supposed to be. I'm doing well. I want more of this." So it might reveal a subtle greed or some delusion around "supposed to be like this." But it also can help us to check in and see wise attitude when it's going well—help us to recognize what balanced mind is like, what that loving attention is like.

This aspect of exploring the attitude is how this practice leads to freedom. Because so much of the undercurrents of our mind are motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion. And unless we are curious about what's the motivation, what's underlying this, it may never be seen. We're so habitually oriented in ways that we don't tend to see what's habitual. And also, these relationships can be very subtle and very deep, very deeply conditioned.

And so this is very direct. We are opening to what's the relationship, curious about: Is greed, aversion, delusion here? Is there balance of mind here? The curiosity, the willingness to understand and explore what's here around the greed, aversion, delusion—this curiosity and willingness to understand the greed, aversion, delusion creates the conditions for its release.

When we see and recognize loving attention, balanced attention, that creates the conditions for those wholesome states to arise more frequently.

And so this exploration is particularly connected, very directly, to the Buddha's description of freedom. What is Nibbana? he said. The absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. This indeed is Nibbana.

And the freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion happens as we explore and are curious about greed, aversion, and delusion.

Freedom. That's the possibility of this practice.

CHAPTER 137

Trust

Andrea Fella · 45 min

> *In this contemplative talk from Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella addresses a common challenge practitioners face: doubting whether simple present-moment awareness is "enough." She points to how we often look for signs or guideposts to confirm we're practicing correctly, when in fact the capacity to be present and know experience as it unfolds is itself the path.*
>
> *Fella explores an unfamiliar kind of trust that the Buddha points toward—not the trust of holding on or clinging to something reliable, but rather a trust of release and letting go. This stands in contrast to our habitual tendency to trust our thoughts, beliefs, and ideas about where we should be. She reminds us that the content of any moment is impermanent and unreliable (anicca), yet our capacity to be present with whatever arises can be trusted.*
>
> *The practical instruction here is beautifully simple: relaxing supports the mind's natural capacity for presence and curiosity. Rather than searching for understanding and insight—which can itself become an obstacle—we can recognize that searching, sensation, sound, emotions, and thoughts are all simply experience happening right now, available to be known. As mindfulness (sati) becomes more established and stabilized, wisdom naturally grows through this trusting of the unfolding present moment.*

Remembering how simple the practice is. Relaxing supports this capacity of our mind to be present and curious. Just recognizing that we're aware, what is here, what is obvious, what's already available, what's already being received—that is sufficient when the mind has a balance, an interest, a curiosity to recognize it as experience happening in the present moment, as human experience.

Sometimes the practice is so simple we can have doubt or have a sense: Is this working? Am I doing it right? We're looking for some kind of sign or guidepost to point the way or point out that we're doing it right somehow. And so we need to trust, because sometimes these signs don't happen, or we don't recognize that the simplicity of being able to be present in this moment for whatever is here—knowing it as experience in the present moment—that is our guide. That is the direction. What else would be our guide than being present here now?

We open, allowing awareness to connect to now, here. And this is all there is, all that can be experienced. The past is gone, the future not here. All there is, is this moment. Can we learn to trust that being available and present for this moment is our work?

We so often trust something else, some idea about where we should be. We trust our thoughts, our beliefs. As we begin to trust this moment and this moment and this moment—trust not the content but our capacity to be here with it. The content of this moment is impermanent, unreliable. We typically trust holding on to something, clinging to something. And yet the trust the Buddha points to is such an unfamiliar kind of trust: a trust of release, the trust of letting go. That understanding comes as the mindfulness is more established, stabilized. Here. Now. Very naturally.

We are so busy trying to find understanding and insight that we may miss it. Searching—the mind searching—can that be known? Searching. Searching is happening right now. Sensation happening right now. Sound happening right now. Emotions, thoughts, happening right now, known.

And so, exploring this possibility of trusting the simplicity: when the mind has a sense of being present, can be here in this moment, trusting that. Trusting that whatever is being known in this moment, whether it seems simple and ordinary or extraordinary, that is the experience of this moment. And wisdom naturally grows as we trust this unfolding.

CHAPTER 138

Recognizing Delusion

Andrea Fella · 57 min

> *In this comprehensive talk, Andrea Fella examines delusion (moha), the third of the three root kilesas alongside greed and aversion. While greed and aversion become relatively familiar through practice, delusion is harder to see by its very nature—yet not impossible to recognize.*
>
> *Fella identifies three levels of delusion: the obvious disconnection from experience when lost in thought or spacing out; personal and cultural delusion arising from conditioning, including views, beliefs, and biases that filter our perception; and the most fundamental human delusion that comes with being born—our tendency to perceive what is impermanent as permanent, what is unreliable as reliable, and what is not-self as self. Drawing on the Vipallāsa Sutta's teaching on distortions, she explains how these misperceptions move from simple perception to thought to deeply entrenched views that resist correction even in the face of contradicting evidence.*
>
> *Through vivid personal stories, including mistaking bat calls for a pig being slaughtered, Fella illustrates how thoroughly we relate to experience through concepts rather than direct perception. She emphasizes that we cannot simply choose non-delusion, but through mindful awareness of our relationship to experience—noticing beliefs as beliefs, recognizing when the mind is filtered—we create conditions for wisdom to grow. When we occasionally see through delusion, even briefly, we gain the capacity to recognize it when it returns, knowing 'this mind is not trustable right now.'*

Tonight the topic is delusion, and this has come up a few times in the groups with questions about how to see it and how we can recognize it. We've talked about it some in the groups, but I thought I would explore it thoroughly this evening.

Delusion, as you all know, is one of the three root kilesas of which the Buddha said, if we can become free of greed, aversion, and delusion, that is freedom. Freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, freedom from delusion—this indeed is Nibbana.

While greed and aversion we get relatively familiar with in both their subtle and obvious forms, we start to recognize them especially as we check into the attitude in our mind. We may see subtle forms of greed, like just leaning into experience, or the obvi-

ous forms, like really wanting that second piece of chocolate. Likewise with aversion. We get pretty familiar with greed and aversion, and both Carol and I have spoken about that quite a bit.

Delusion is harder to see by its very nature, of course. Harder to see, but not impossible. Tonight I'd like to offer some information to hopefully lay the terrain around delusion so that you might begin to recognize it in your experience.

One of the main ways that delusion functions is as a filter on our experience—we're seeing through something that's not allowing us to see things as they are. Yatabhuta, as Carol was speaking about last week: things as they have come to be. When the mind is clear from greed, aversion, and delusion, we can see things clearly. But filters—I like to use that word—it's kind of like we have a lens on that colors our perception, how we take in experience. That is a form of delusion, when we don't recognize that there's a filter there of some sort.

Greed and aversion themselves can become filters on our experience. In one way, we can see that delusion can arise when greed and aversion are there. Some of you have reported this, described this in your experience—seeing how there's an aversive state, for instance, and then just recognizing, "Oh my gosh, there's this filter, this aversive filter. No matter where I turn and look, I look at the flowers and it's like, enough already." Just seeing that the filter is distorting how we take in experience. That distortion is a form of delusion.

Delusion can arise out of greed and aversion, but fundamentally delusion is more foundational. Greed and aversion themselves are really based on a misperception, a delusion, a misunderstanding, a kind of view or belief that underlies our mind.

For instance, wanting or desire—greed itself is that pull towards something, that sticky quality, that "ooh, yeah," that heading in that direction. Aversion itself is the quality of mind that wants to separate. But the delusion that underlies greed is the belief that getting that thing will make me happy. Greed wouldn't arise if that belief weren't there. Likewise with aversion: there's a belief in there that if I could somehow separate from that unpleasant thing, then I'd be happy. That's the delusion embedded in aversion.

Greed and aversion are founded on delusion, and we can begin to see in them the beliefs that are operating. We've been talking about looking at beliefs in the groups and some in the hall as well, almost as a way to check in—a different form of checking the attitude. Sometimes we can ask, "What's being believed right now?" That can begin to reveal some of these underlying delusions.

Now, beliefs are not always delusion. But when they are not seen as belief, there is some way that they're functioning as a filter. When we don't see a belief as a belief, we are taking it as truth, and there's a form of delusion in not recognizing it is a belief. This is a big way that delusion functions—through this aspect in our minds of views, beliefs, ideas, and opinions. That's some of what we'll explore this evening.

I'd like to explore different aspects of delusion. Many of them are based in these different kinds of views and beliefs, but the most obvious kind of delusion, the one that's maybe the easiest to see or the one we're most familiar with, is just basically a disconnection from experience. That's one aspect we'll talk about: this not being connected to experience.

The second form of delusion we'll look at is what I like to call personal or cultural delusion. It's based on our own conditioning—the conditioning of our families, the conditioning of our lives, the conditioning of our culture, the views, ideas, and beliefs that is what we're swimming in, in terms of what we take to be reality, what we take to be true. That level of beliefs and views is a big part of how we relate to the world. This is a kind of level of experience that we begin to see, and many of you have talked about seeing this: seeing patterns and habits of the mind wanting to do certain things, orienting towards familiarity, for instance, or orienting towards new experience. These are conditioned. These are patterns and habits conditioned in our own personal lives based on our families, our cultures, our conditioning.

Then a deeper level of delusion seems to be what I like to call human delusion.

These seem to come with being born as a human being. The Buddha describes some very fundamental forms of delusion that distort how we take in experience, that don't let us really see things as they have come to be, things as they are.

We'll try to cover all of these at some level. While I said I'm going to explore this topic in some depth, I spent one entire series at my center in Redwood City—eight weeks—covering delusion. So to some extent, this feels like just the tip of the iceberg. And yet, I think there will be enough here for you to begin to recognize it.

It's not so much—and again, I want to restate this—pointing to this topic and talking about delusion is not the instruction to go see if you can see delusion. This is a description of how delusion may be seen. The description may create the conditions for there to be a seeing of it. So you don't have to go do this. It's much more just information that may help you begin to recognize delusion when it's happening. Because it's happening all the time. Delusion happens a lot.

This first kind—this not connecting with experience, this being disconnected—basically, lack of awareness is a form of delusion. When we're not mindful, this can be a form of delusion. When we're not aware of what's going on, when we're lost in thought, when the mind has created its story and has taken up residence in its thought world. It's so amazing to see this happen.

Often we see it not so much when we are in it, because when we're in it, we're just in that world, believing it. But when we're curious about the moment of mindfulness returning, sometimes, as I've been pointing to, we get this contrast between what it's like to not be aware and what it's like to be aware. In the moment of mindfulness returning, we can get this sense of what the mind was doing—of being completely absorbed in the reality of a thought. It almost feels like a cartoon bubble that bursts.

When we are in that world, it's like we've fully taken up residence there, and we fully believe it in a way—fully believe its existence in that moment. We can see this as we come out of the world of thought. Sometimes we can get that flavor of how much we had invested, how much the mind had invested in those thoughts and in that experience. And then coming back, it's like, "Wow, that doesn't exist."

Sometimes, when mindfulness returns with a lot of clarity, there can be this sense of "Wow, that was so much delusion in that previous moment."

At one point I noticed my mind had woken up into a thought about being with an old partner—someone I hadn't been with in years, and had kind of worked through the reactivity around. In coming out of that thought world, there was this confusion. "What? I'm not in relationship with that person. What's going on?" The mind had so completely invested in it that for those moments, it believed that relationship was current. Coming out of it really startled the mind, to see how much it had believed that.

We can see this—see how much our minds believe things—through being lost in our thoughts. And so we can start to be curious about this kind of disconnection in the moment of returning, in the moment when mindfulness returns. We can become familiar with mindfulness, but also develop some familiarity with that quality of mind that is disconnected.

There are other flavors of this kind of disconnection: spacing out, dullness, sleepiness, even restlessness sometimes, where the mind can be disconnected from experience. We talked about this a little bit last week—that sometimes we can have a belief or view that we can't be mindful while spacing out is happening. A sense that certain states of mind are inherently non-mindful, spacing out being one of them perhaps. And yet, mindfulness can infuse spacing out as well.

I think I said last week, if there's the thought "I can't be mindful while X is happening"—"I can't be mindful while spacing out is happening"—when I have that kind of thought, I just don't believe it anymore. Let's see: how might it be possible to be mindful while that is happening? There's a curiosity about these states in which we are habitually not mindful.

This area of delusion where we're disconnected from experience is probably the most obvious way that we see delusion, or kind of recognize it after the fact. We don't so much often see it while it's happening, but we notice as we come out of it. We see how thoroughly the mind had been caught, and we may get a little flavor, in the waking up, of that quality of mind being stuck in that world, believing those thoughts.

So we may be able to see the mind heading in that direction. We talked about this last week with noticing where mindfulness gets lost. As we wake up into experience, it begins to familiarize the mind with those kinds of states. We can wake up into spacing out, and if instead of thinking, "Oh, spacing out, let me change the experience," we recognize, "Oh, spacing out—this is being aware of spacing out." This begins to help the mind connect with those states in which we're habitually not mindful. Curiosity is a real ally for us.

The second level of delusion—this personal delusion, cultural delusion, delusion based on societal conditioning, our own conditioning—this is really where these filters begin to come into play: the views, the ideas. As we're conditioned, as we go about our lives and live our lives, we are being conditioned in so many different ways.

A lot of our beliefs and views, part of the reason they're so deeply embedded and not even necessarily seen as beliefs, is because they don't tend to come in through language. We're not really taught these views—many of them. Some were taught explicitly, but many are just absorbed based on how we see interactions happening around us. They're kind of non-verbal beliefs in a way. What's right, what's wrong. Simple things, like culturally how close you stand to somebody you don't know, or how much eye contact you make. These are things we just absorb. There's a lot of this conditioning that happens that we just take to be, "Well, this is the way things are in human interactions."

It's not until we find ourselves in another culture that we're startled. I think this is one of the reasons I liked to travel so much—to be startled by these deeply embedded views and beliefs. "Oh, that's not the way it always works. That's the way it works in my life." When we can see discomfort in a situation, that may be a sign of some view being challenged.

When we're immersed in a view in that way, we don't see it as a view. We just take it to be truth—the way things are. Views are pretty active in our minds. They shape our minds. They shape how we take in experience. While we think we are these kind of neutral recorders of experience—almost like our eyes are cameras and our ears are microphones just picking up experience—there's much more active shaping of our experience that comes partly through our views, our beliefs, our agendas, how our culture has shaped us, how our families have shaped us. What we actually notice, some of that is shaped by our views.

There's been a lot of study about this in recent years. There's a term—confirmation bias—that when we have a view, our system tends to orient towards taking in information that confirms that view, and likewise not taking in information that disconfirms it. This is a form of delusion. It's not necessarily making us unaware of everything, but there are certain things we are not aware of. There is some lack of awareness because the view is like a filter with holes in it—it lets certain things in and not others.

Views really shape our lives. What are our views, our beliefs about who we are, what we're capable of? Our views and beliefs about others, who they are? These views and beliefs can prevent us from seeing other people as they really are. We box people in. We limit them based on our views about them. And we limit ourselves based on our views about ourselves, what we think we're capable of.

Then there are some pernicious cultural views that shape us too. Some of these cultural views are responsible for some of the biggest kinds of suffering in our world: racism, sexism, homophobia—the views and beliefs around skin color and gender and sexual orientation and gender identity. These views and beliefs shape how we relate to each other.

Certain cultural views just come in through osmosis in a way. One that seems so pervasive in the United States is the idea that this is the land of opportunity—anybody who works hard enough can achieve their dreams. This kind of comes in somehow. Believing this as truth, we may not be aware that there are limitations on opportunities.

Often, the color of our skin, our orientation, our gender identity can influence those opportunities. And so this kind of view can prevent—in particular, white people, white heterosexual people—from seeing the privilege that this carries, that the opportunities are available for certain people and not necessarily available equally. This can lead to the not seeing, the delusion around privilege. White privilege is basically a form of delusion, this not seeing.

These filters, what we take in and what we don't take in—it doesn't even have to be a view that we're holding deeply that has this filtering quality where we see certain things and not see other things. It can be as simple as an agenda, something that we pick up for a very short time: "I'm going to do this." That agenda orients us towards the task at hand. This is useful. It helps us filter out things that aren't relevant to the task at hand, kind of focuses us in. It's called selective attention—there's a psychological name for it. When we have an agenda to do something, our attention selects things that are relevant to that agenda, and we miss, we do not see things that are not relevant to that agenda.

Now again, this is a useful functioning of our minds. It actually can help us accomplish things. And yet there's the misunderstanding here—the belief that we're getting the full set of information. Even when we are engaged in a selective task, something we're told later might surprise us: "Did you see that happen?"

There was a study—many of you have probably heard about this—where people were given a task to watch on a video the number of times a basketball passed between players in white t-shirts. There were different colored t-shirts, and they had to count, so they had to do quite a bit of monitoring and tracking when the basketball was being passed from one person to another. That was the task. That was the agenda. So they watched. And most people could correctly say the right number of passes between the people in the white t-shirts. And a few people said, "Was there like a gorilla that walked through that video?" And some people were like, "No, there was no gorilla." But they actually played it back, and there was a gorilla—a person in a gorilla suit who had walked through the basketball court while this was going on. And a large number of people did not see the gorilla, just didn't see it at all.

That's selective attention at work. It's kind of stunning to see that video played back and say, "Wow, that's amazing how I could not have even seen that." It creates this awe at how the mind can actually not see something. It begins to help us recognize: my mind is not seeing what is there. It's seeing what it is expecting.

So the views, the shaping of our minds—this can be a learning from that. And yet I read in one review of this study that there were some number of people who, after the video was played back, said, "That cannot be the same video, because I would have seen the gorilla." Now that is really delusion—the inability to know that this is how our minds work. We need some respect for our minds. It's useful that it does this, but we also have to have some respect. This is one of the things that gives me great pause around single-witness identification. It's so easy for an agenda of even a moment to obscure information.

Knowing this is helpful. There are some other ways that views are formed personally, but I think I'm going to move on to the more human side of this, the deeper kinds of delusion. But again, just to orient, or to be curious about what are the views that are happening—when we can recognize the views, the beliefs that are happening, we don't have to tell ourselves not to believe that. We don't have to say, "It's a view, it's a belief, so I shouldn't believe it." But it's useful to know it is a view. It's useful to know that it's happening and maybe filtering our experience. Even recognizing, "Oh, this is what's being believed," is really helpful. We don't have to try to convert that belief into non-belief. It may be a useful belief, but still it's useful to notice it as belief.

So that can be a simple kind of version of checking the attitude, almost: What's being believed right now?

So the deeper kind of delusion—a more fundamental human form of delusion—is something we seem to share simply because we have our human minds and bodies and brains and the way things work in there. This is a more insidious form of delusion because not only do our family and friends share these delusions, but pretty much everybody on the planet shares them until we start having some teachings and some understanding around how our minds work.

One of the key aspects of the way human delusion works is that we tend to relate to experience through concept and believe that concept to be the reality. We have a perception of some kind and then we take that perception to be what's actually out there. There's a range of levels to this. It starts with simple perception—just seeing something and identifying it. That sound is the sound of a mourning dove. That sight, that lump on the road, is maybe a dead chipmunk. There's a perception there.

Then there's a deepening of the way delusion begins to work: we begin to think about that perception. The teaching I'm referring to here is the Vipallasa Sutta, which is basically about distortions. Vipallasa means distortion or inversion. It talks about three levels of this. There are distortions of perception, where we're taking our perceptions to be reality. There are distortions of thought, where we start thinking about the thing—like when I talked about taking birth into that world of thought. That's the distortion of thought. We take our thoughts to be reality. And then there are the views, the beliefs. That's the third level, the deepest level.

Some of you have heard this story a number of times. When I was in Burma practicing at Shwe Oo Min, my dorm was relatively close to the wall of the monastery, and the sounds of the village came over the wall—the loudspeakers, human noises, all kinds of

things. Each evening I would hear this repeated sound, a kind of squealing. I identified it or perceived it as a pig squealing. That was what I had heard squealing before, so that was the perception: the sound perceived as a pig.

I heard this regularly each night, and at some point the mind created this idea. Here's where it shifts into thought. I created this idea that this squealing sound sounded kind of distressed, and I got the notion that there was a butcher on the other side of that wall, that each evening at that time the butcher was slaughtering a pig for the next day to sell at the market. There was a lot of emotional response to this—compassion for the pig, for the pain of that. So there was the sound, the perception, and then the belief, the thought that this pig was being slaughtered. Now, I knew this was an idea. I knew I didn't really know what was happening on the other side of the wall. But still, there was the belief and the emotional response to it. Perception creating that response.

Then one evening I was out walking at that time of day instead of sitting in my room. It was dusk, and I was walking up and down the quarter-mile road in the middle of the monastery. There were these swooping creatures flying by really close. I thought, "Oh, those are bats." And they were squealing. That was the sound I had been hearing.

While I had some idea that the notion of a pig being slaughtered was a view, it had not entered my mind that the belief that it was a pig at all was also a view. There's no need for compassion when it's not only not being slaughtered—it's not even a pig.

So again, this pattern: the mind tends to relate to experience not through actual experience but through our concepts, through our ideas, through our beliefs, at a very basic level. Looking at the flowers, looking at the trees, looking at people, hearing sounds—what we perceive, we take to be reality. We relate to experience through our perceptions, create thoughts and views about that. And largely this goes unnoticed until perception makes a mistake, until our—

It gets pointed out to us that our perceptions and our thoughts are wrong.

The thing that the Buddha points to—or actually I think it's more in the commentaries that it's pointed to—this kind of deepening entrenchment of delusion, is that it's relatively easy for the correct perception to unmask the incorrect perception. So as soon as I saw the bats and heard the squealing, it was clear: "Oh, that wasn't a pig." It wasn't like I held on to the idea. "No, no, it was really a pig. There really is a pig on the other side of that wall." It was so clear. That perception was seen through pretty quickly because it was just a misperception.

When it gets into the thought realm, it gets a little harder sometimes to break that delusion or belief. And when we get to views, it gets even harder. We can see this in how confirmation bias works.

I read a study about people who have differing views on a topic. I don't know whether it was political, but they were doing some work on trying to understand how views, whether views can come closer together, whether people can see things as views, how they get hardened into views. They did this study about two people with very different views on a topic, and each one was encouraged to try to convince the other person of their own view, to try to point out why their view was appropriate or correct. What seemed to happen in that situation is that the views got more entrenched. We tend to, because of confirmation bias, orient to things that confirm those views. We don't orient to things that disconfirm them—we actively discount them. When we get to the level of belief, it gets harder to take in information that disconfirms the view. We just don't go there. Even if we hear it, we somehow figure that's wrong, it's bad information.

This is going on so much in our country, in the United States right now, this kind of entrenchment in views. The commentaries pointed to this: when it gets to the level of belief, it's very much clung to. People will cling to beliefs even in the face of evidence to the contrary. This is one of the ways that delusion works in our mind—this entrenchment from perception to thought to belief.

Another very foundational teaching in this same text, the text on the distortions, is that the Buddha points to how we tend to take what's impermanent to be permanent, we tend to take what is unreliable as reliable, and we tend to take what is not self as self. You probably recognize these three: anicca, dukkha, anatta. Anicca—impermanent. Dukkha—unreliable, suffering. Anatta—not self. The distortion, the inversion, is that we tend to orient in the world as if things were permanent, as if things were reliable, as if things were self—turning on its head things as they actually are. This is the most fundamental form of delusion in a way, this kind of distortion.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya says of this kind of delusion: "Delusion doesn't mask the object, it masks the nature of the object." It masks the true nature of the object. So we see something, but we take it to be permanent. It's not that we're not knowing, not that we're not aware of something—but we are seeing it in a distorted way. We are seeing it as reliable, permanent, or self.

We can begin to be curious about these tendencies, the tendency to land on something as solid, to take something as being lasting. If anything feels solid or stable in your experience, be curious about it. Notice that feeling of solid and stable and investigate it. What does the mind take to be permanent?

It's interesting—in my sense, we create this kind of permanent impermanent. We know that things are not really forever at some level of our mind. We know that things are not forever. We know at some level that we will die. I actually saw this today as I was walking up the hill. I was thinking about being in here and reflecting on what I was going to say, thinking about sitting up here in front of the room, and I thought: in this moment, I'm believing that's going to happen. I'm taking myself as permanent. In this moment, I'm going to get there. And yet—it was really windy and I had seen some pretty big branches down on the road—who knows? I might get clobbered by some tree falling down and not make it.

Even for little moments, we take up residence in the belief or the view of permanence.

And it's belief in permanence in ourselves. There's a sense, a way almost, that we believe in our immortality.

The Buddha encouraged us to actually reflect on this regularly. There's a teaching on the five subjects for frequent recollection, and four of those subjects have to do with reflecting on impermanence: I am of the nature to age—I have not gone beyond aging. I am of the nature to sicken—I have not gone beyond sickness. I am of the nature to die—I have not gone beyond dying. All that I have, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.

When we see, even in just little flashes or moments, how we project ourselves into the future—that kind of "oh, I will be there"—that's a moment of taking up residence in permanence and believing it. So we can just be curious about that. We can also be curious about what it is we're taking to be solid or stable. Is it really solid or stable? How long does it last?

And seeing what's unreliable as reliable—this is the perspective on which greed and aversion are based. We think there's something out there that's reliable as a source for happiness, something that brings pleasure. "That's going to make me happy." There's this form of taking what is unreliable as a source for lasting happiness, as being as good as it gets, being the place where we can land. This aspect of taking what is unreliable to be reliable is the ground out of which greed and aversion grow.

So again, beginning to be curious: Where are we looking for happiness? That searching. Several of you have talked about this, the searching, and some of you have pointed to a kind of pure sense of wanting—not even knowing what you want, but just wanting something. At certain points in our practice, the mind may just be like, "Yeah, there's got

to be somewhere, somewhere I can land and find happiness." This is a very deeply conditioned belief. It's not hardwired—it is possible to see through it—but it's really deeply conditioned.

There have been times in my practice when I was seeing the mind just craving some place to land where it could rest, and I was aware of that. Just like I mentioned in one of the groups today: "Yep, I see you. You're not going to find anything, but search away. Have at it." Because this deep way in which delusion manifests—we're not going to be able to just say, "Oh, I'll stop doing that." If we could do that, that would be fantastic. But it's so deeply conditioned that often what we can simply do is know that it's happening.

Just watching the mind searching, searching, searching for some place to land and find happiness. Okay, that's what's happening. I let the mind do that. It was like, "Have at it. You won't find anything, but I can't stop you, so I'll just hang out with you while you do this." It was kind of sweet in a way—this part of my mind that just thought, "No, I've got to exhaust every single possibility." Okay, we'll let you try.

These delusions are embedded really deep. Sometimes all we can do is watch them unfold, watch our mind believing them, and know: this is the mind believing something. This is delusion.

The time is short, so I'm not going to go into not-self—maybe one of us will talk about that another time. But one piece I want to point to is that one of the ways we begin to really see delusion—and part of the reason I could see that searching as just a delusional mind—was because there had been, at some point, the mind recognizing at a very deep level the letting go of that searching, and a different kind of happiness becoming available. The seeing through of delusion can happen.

We can see through delusions at many different levels. There are various ways of pointing to delusion, and there are different levels and depths of it. We may see through it at some point, and when we do, it's quite stunning. Some of you have mentioned this sense of "Wow, this is so obvious. How could I not see this?" It becomes so clear that it doesn't make any sense to want something. We see through the delusion there.

But then, minutes later, maybe an hour later, sometime later, that state of understanding shifts. The seeing from that perspective, the wisdom of that seeing, has a life of its own, and our delusion comes back. Yet in that coming back, when we've seen through it and it returns, rather than having the sense of "What am I doing wrong that now I can't see that anymore?"—perhaps we can have the sense of "Oh, now I can see this as delusion."

Because once we've seen it, once we've had that kind of breaking through to recognize what it's like without that delusion, then when that delusion is functioning, we can know: this is delusion at work. This mind is not trustable. This mind is filtered by these views, these ideas, this perspective. It's not seeing things clearly. We can know that.

So delusion can be seen in this way. We can't choose non-delusion, but we can practice in this simple way: what's here in this moment, noticing our relationship to experience. This creates the conditions for the understanding, the seeing, for the wisdom to grow. It creates the conditions for wisdom to grow, and it's wisdom that sees through delusion. We don't do that. We don't make it happen.

CHAPTER 139

Awareness of Awareness

Andrea Fella · 43 min

> *In this guided meditation, Andrea Fella invites practitioners to explore a subtle but profound shift in attention: from being aware of objects to recognizing awareness itself. While we typically orient our practice around knowing the specific qualities of experience—body sensations like vibration, pressure, or heat; sounds; and mind states such as calm or fear—we rarely turn our attention to the knowing faculty itself.*
>
> *Andrea offers a gentle approach to this exploration, suggesting it feels less like turning around to look at awareness directly and more like stepping back, broadening, or falling back. She notes that objects don't disappear in this process; rather, they simply cease to be the primary focus. The practice involves simply knowing that we are aware, without needing to understand precisely how we know. She guides practitioners to notice how awareness receives objects—whether attention feels like it's shifting and moving, or whether awareness feels still while objects appear within it. The experience might feel smooth and flowing, or jerky and popping; broad and diffuse, or focused and precise.*
>
> *Significantly, Andrea emphasizes that neither attending to objects nor attending to awareness itself is superior. The mind naturally moves between both orientations, and practice involves recognizing when the mind is curious about objects versus when it's interested in awareness itself. This balanced approach honors the mind's natural capacity to explore both dimensions of experience, offering practitioners a relaxed and receptive way to deepen their understanding of the nature of mind.*

Are you aware? And what are you aware of?

Awareness of the objects of experience is often our most familiar way to practice and be with experience, to know that we're aware. It's our most familiar way to pay attention—to know the objects of experience. We recognize some specific qualities to the experience: body sensations like vibration, hardness, pulsing, tingling, coolness, heat, pressure, lightness. We recognize sound. We recognize mind states—happiness, perhaps having an uplifting quality; fear, a feeling of pulling back; calm, a settledness, a non-agitation of mind. And so we recognize the objects of experience.

Unless it's pointed out to us, much less often would we notice or be aware of awareness itself.

Are you aware?

We begin to recognize awareness not by trying to turn around and look at it directly, but more through recognizing how it experiences objects. It's not like trying to turn around and look at awareness. To me it feels more like a stepping back, a broadening, or even a falling back. And the objects don't disappear. They may not be particularly drawing the attention.

Are you aware?

The mind has the capacity to recognize awareness, though it is not something that has probably been cultivated much.

Are you aware?

We may know that we are aware without really knowing how we know. That's kind of the simplest way of recognizing it—just knowing that we are aware. It's okay not to know how we know we are aware. Explore the possibility of resting, just knowing that you're aware. Resting and aware.

We can become aware of how awareness receives objects. Not so much interested in the objects or the qualities of the objects, but in how awareness is knowing them. There may be objects appearing in awareness in succession, one after another. This might feel like attention is shifting or moving. Or it might feel like awareness is very still and objects are just appearing in that awareness. It may feel like there's a kind of flow, one object to the next, very smooth. Or it may feel kind of jerky or popping—an object appears and then disappears, another one appears and then disappears. It may feel like awareness knows many things at the same time. It may feel like awareness is broad and diffuse, exploring some very vague or non-specific experience. Or it may feel very focused and precise.

There's not a better way for this to be experienced, for the experience of awareness to be happening. How is it for you in this moment?

Relax. Are you aware? What is the experience of awareness right now? Not trying to look for it, but more stepping back or falling back. The mind can know the awareness itself.

Over time, as we may begin to get familiar with touching into the experience of awareness itself, we may start to try to find it, or to put our minds in that space. And while it can be interesting to explore from time to time, even that experience of awareness itself is not somehow better than being aware of objects. Sometimes the mind will be curious about objects, taking in their qualities. Sometimes the mind will be interested in awareness itself, curious about how it knows experience.

And so we can be aware, know when the mind is interested in attending to objects and when it's interested in attending to awareness. There's this capacity to do both. And very naturally, the mind will explore both sides. So just beginning to recognize: Are you aware?

Relax and receive experience however it is for you in this moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 140

A Simple Mind

Andrea Fella · 44 min

> *Drawing from a teaching by Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Andrea Fella illuminates the essential quality of simplicity in meditation practice. She shares his insight that "only when the mind is simple can wisdom develop," pointing to how a complicated mind—one caught in thinking, planning, and expecting—blocks the arising of wisdom. The mind must be simple to be truly present and to see things as they actually are.*
>
> *Andrea offers a liberating reframe for practitioners: when complication arises, it need not be a problem. The meditating mind itself remains simple; if there's complication, it simply becomes an object of awareness. She particularly highlights expectations as a subtle form of complication that often goes unrecognized, masked by delusion. The phrase "should be" serves as a signpost—whether we think practice should be more concentrated, more continuous, more pleasant, or have fewer thoughts, these expectations obscure the simplicity that allows insight.*
>
> *This teaching invites practitioners to release ideas about how meditation is "supposed to be" and instead recognize that whatever is arising in this moment is simply how it is. Even ordinary experience can be known with wisdom. The talk encourages a profound relaxation around practice, suggesting that when we stop trying to make meditation into something special, we discover the simplicity that was always available.*

A quote from Sayadaw Uttasania: "Only when the mind is simple can wisdom develop. A complicated mind, one that thinks, plans, expects, blocks off wisdom. The mind must be simple in order to be present and in order to see things just as they are."

Sometimes there can be this simple mind—not so much that we can do it, for almost by its nature, doing might obscure that simplicity. There can be this simple mind.

And yet when it's not simple, can there be a sense of simplicity about that? Complication is happening. The meditating mind is simple. If it's complicated, it's an object. If there's complication, it's just an object. What a relief.

Expectations are one of those complications sometimes not seen. Delusion often has that quality, as we talked about last night, of masking itself. And expectations about the meditation can often be masked. If you find yourself thinking about the practice in this way—it should be some way—that phrase, "should be," is often a signpost of expecta-

tion. Should be something: more concentrated, more continuous, more interesting, more pleasant, more insight, fewer thoughts, more clarity. Whatever that is, if it's simply known as a thought or recognized as an expectation, simplicity can arise again.

Expectations are often related to some idea or view of how practice is supposed to be. And we have no idea, really, of how practice is supposed to be. Actually, what is arising, this moment's experience—this is how it is. This is what has come to be. This experience can be known, whatever it is.

Maybe experience feels ordinary. That can't be right. It's supposed to be somehow special when I'm meditating properly. But ordinary experience can be known.

Only when the mind is simple can wisdom develop. A complicated mind, one that thinks, expects, and plans, blocks off wisdom. The mind must be simple in order to be present and in order to see things just as they are.

CHAPTER 141

Mental Formations: Constructing Our Lives

Andrea Fella · 48 min

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella offers a deep exploration of the Buddha's teaching on the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā) with particular emphasis on mental formations (saṅkhāra) and their role in constructing our lived experience. She explains how the aggregates—body (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhāra), and consciousness (viññāṇa)—function both as processes and as the results of those processes, drawing on the Khandha-saṃyutta teachings.

Fella illuminates how mental formations are both constructed and constructive—they arise through conditions while simultaneously fabricating all aspects of our experience. Using anger as a detailed example, she demonstrates how a single mental state can fabricate bodily sensations, feelings, perceptions, further mental formations, and even what consciousness receives. She connects this to the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination (paṭicca-samuppāda), showing how ignorance, craving, and clinging drive the construction of dukkha, while acknowledging that these patterns are often absorbed from cultural and familial conditioning rather than being purely personal.

The practical heart of the teaching reveals how the receptive practice being cultivated naturally transforms this constructing process. When mindfulness and wisdom meet reactive states, the reinforcing power of those states is neutralized—the rut is no longer being dug. Simultaneously, wholesome mental formations like the seven factors of awakening (satta bojjhaṅgā) are strengthened simply through mindful awareness. This understanding offers practitioners a way to witness the constructed nature of experience while trusting that the very act of curious observation leads naturally toward freedom.

Seeing into our experience. And just this very simple practice. I think the other day I mentioned Sayadaw's pointing that the meditating mind is simple, not complicated. And if it feels like the meditating mind is complicated, then that's just an object. And yet this very simple mind reveals an amazing, mind-blowing mind. The complexity of what that simple mind can see is quite astounding.

Quite literally, our minds construct our lives. Everything that we experience, everything that we can experience, is a creation of our minds. I have the view or the belief that that creation of mind is related to something that's actually out there. So I do think that you're all sitting out there, and that I'm not just giving this Dharma talk to a

brain in a vat somewhere. I do think that there is something that the mind is working with, is processing, but what we experience—our experience—is constructed. And because it's constructed, there's a lot of room for mistake, a lot of room for confusion.

So tonight, this is the topic: this constructing nature of our minds. I'd like to explore it through the teaching on the five aggregates, a teaching the Buddha pointed to in terms of describing our experience. This phenomenological world of our experience can be understood through these processes of body and mind. The five aggregates can be understood as five processes of body and mind: body, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

The word aggregate is kind of a funny word. It's not a word in English that we use very much. And that contrasts apparently to the Pali word *khandha*, which is a more ordinary word that means something like group or bundle or heap—heap of stuff. But in reflecting on the word aggregate, actually it's an interesting word to use for this particular teaching from the Buddha, because this teaching around the five aggregates is both a teaching around the processes of body and mind and the results of those processes.

There's a way in which body, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness can be understood as the processes by which our world is put together, but also understood in each case as being the things that are experienced. So in the case of body, for example, the body is this physical form, the four elements. And yet it's also understood as being not only the experience of pressure, heat, coolness, tension, tightness, but the process that does that.

The word aggregate can be used in both noun and verb forms, much as with the *khandhas*. For instance, the feeling process is defined as feeling because it feels. So it's defined as a process, but it's also defined as the thing that feeling feels: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It's both a verb and a noun. It's both the process by which we experience and the things experienced.

The word aggregate also has that quality. It can be used as a verb—to aggregate—which means to pull together, to draw together, to collect, to group. And it can be used as a noun. The main way I've heard it used as a noun is aggregate rock—a rock that is basically made of other rocks. This is a great description of what these *khandhas* are. Sally Armstrong sometimes says maybe we could just translate *khandhas* as "stuff made of other stuff." Let's take the technical out of it.

Briefly, I want to overview the five aggregates, but where I really want to explore this evening is the constructing, the aggregate of construction: mental formations.

The first aggregate is body—this process of the four elements: earth, air, fire, water. The sensations that are felt: coolness, heat, lightness, heaviness, pressure, tension, tightness, vibration, pulsing, tingling—this whole range of physical sensations, plus also sight, sound, smell, taste. This is the realm of the body.

One thing that is particularly useful about this list of our human experience, this set of processes that make up our human experience, is that in this case one of the aggregates is physical and the other four are mental. It really lends itself well to this exploration of the mind because it teases apart the processes of mind.

Feeling, the process of feeling—feeling what? Feeling pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is a very simple mental process responsible for feeling and the simple feeling itself. We've talked about this in the groups and in some of the talks. You're all very familiar with this aspect of experience.

Then perception—the mental process responsible for recognizing experience, categorizing experience, naming experience. The recognition of concepts comes through this: recognizing what's out in the world as objects. This happens through the field of perception. So I look out into this room and see walls and windows and zabutans and people.

And it's a process of perception, of recognizing—it's connected to memory, this perceptual process. It's connected to having been exposed to zabutans and walls and windows and people, and the mind recognizes them. It's almost like a very simple pattern-matching mechanism in some ways, this part of perception. We hear a sound and recognize a mourning dove. That pattern matching—I talked in another talk about hearing a sound and identifying it, perceiving it as a pig, and then later discovering that it was a bat. This is the process of perception at work: a recognition based on prior experience, based on memory of what something is.

So perception includes this kind of naming of experience, but it also includes our recognition of space and time. That's also part of perception—that we have a sense of distance and location and time. It's perception at work creating that understanding.

At one point in Hawaii I was meditating, and there are lots of birds there, but the birds in Hawaii are kind of like—birds rule in Hawaii. It's amazing how many birds there are, and some of them are very loud. I was meditating in my room and it felt like this 360-degree bird zoo that I was in. I could sometimes experience this sense of the mind almost going out and locating the birds in space based on the sound. It was like a sense of floating in this space created by the mind through the perception of sound and through that perception, the location. This is perception at work.

And then volitional formations—the one I really want to hone in on tonight—but just briefly for now, it's more the volitional aspect of experience. The many kinds of volitional activities in the mind: emotions, thoughts, beliefs, agendas. This is a huge category of stuff.

And then the last mental aggregate is consciousness. This simple function of knowing. Every experience is known. Whether we are mindful or not, this knowing process is going on, knowing meeting experience. Sayadaw sometimes asks or says something like, "If you meet somebody that you've met in the past, maybe you weren't terribly mindful while you were meeting that person. But when you meet them again, you recognize them." And he says, "Why? Because perception and feeling and consciousness were doing their job." Whether we're mindful or not, we are perceiving, we are feeling, we are knowing. And mental formations kind of tumble along.

So these five aggregates function—they are the tumbling on of our experience. Every moment the five aggregates appearing in some variation.

The Buddha talked about this particular teaching a lot in relationship to the exploration of not-self. Carol talked about not-self last week, about exploring the self. Studying the self, we forget the self. Forgetting the self, we become awakened by the ten thousand things. And so in a way the five aggregates are a way that we can study this.

The Buddha described that clinging to these aggregates was responsible for the creation of the sense of self. And so the exploration around these five aggregates begins to be a kind of pointing to the not-self nature of experience. We begin to recognize, as we open to noticing what's arising in experience, that these five aggregates are just arising. That—thank goodness—a self doesn't have to figure out how to do these five aggregates, because the complexity there is amazing. What the mind can know, understand, meet, how it functions. And yet we cling to these aggregates and then attribute a sense of self to the experience.

We can cling to any of these five aggregates. There's a teaching where the Buddha enumerates twenty ways that identity views come to be—basically four different ways of clinging or identifying a sense of self around each of these five aggregates. He really sorted it apart. And I'm not going to go there—I'm not going to go through the twenty kinds of identity view. But what I have seen in my own experience is that this exploration of the aggregate of mental formations is a huge terrain of selfing. And the belief in the constructions that it makes as being I, me, mine—very sticky.

And so starting to explore the constructing nature of this volitional formation aggregate can begin. And this happens just through witnessing, being curious about volitional formations, which is what we're doing already, actually. We're already doing a lot of this, because volitional formations basically encompasses so many mental activities that we're already looking at.

Emotions, thoughts, states of mind, tranquility, mindfulness, anger, frustration, irritation, bliss, joy, peace, ease, calm, concentration—these are all mental formations. They have some aspect of intentionality in them, an aspect of the mind doing something, an intentional quality.

Other forms of mental formations include intention itself—this moment before we act, before an action of body, speech, or mind, there's this impulse that can be known as a mental phenomenon before the action happens. This too is a mental formation. Beliefs, agendas, views—these are also mental formations. It's a huge range of experience, which we have been opening to.

Yesterday morning I spoke about looking at the conditioned nature of our minds. Part of this exploration involves getting to know the job description of our experience, of our mind states—Carol also spoke about this—and exploring the states themselves.

The other piece around volitional formations is that there are two sides to this: they are constructed, and they construct.

They are constructed, and we see that they are constructed. We start to understand that our mind states are constructed by seeing them come to be. We witness, at times, a thought arise in the mind. Somebody described something like this in one of the groups—seeing a thought and then seeing how there's a tendency to believe that thought and then create a whole state of doubt or confusion or anger based on just the arising of the thought and the belief in it. We see how it's constructed, how the anger or the confusion arises based on this construction around a thought that has arisen. So we can start to see the constructed nature of our mental formations.

Some of you have also talked about the way those mental formations then construct, the way they influence our experience. Many of you have described seeing a kind of filter, or the arising of some reactive state of mind—anger, for instance, or frustration—and then seeing how that affects subsequent experience. The state itself is constructed, and then it tends to construct our experience.

This aspect of mental formations is really the engine of what our minds meet. It's the engine of the creation of our lives, this phenomenological world created through this engine of volitional formations.

Volitional formations are described as being these states of mind—frustration, anger, annoyance, love, joy, peace, ease, mindfulness—this whole range of beliefs, views, attitudes. But volitional formations are also described in one place as the verb, as the constructor.

I'll read this in Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation. It does a relatively good job of capturing the play of words that happen in the Pali around the word that is translated as mental formation or volitional formation—*saṅkhāra*. In the Pali, there's a noun and a verb, and they're all based on this word *saṅkhāra*. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates *saṅkhāra* as "fabrication." I kind of like what that evokes because it really captures this sense of the mind creating, constructing, fabricating—fabricating what we experience.

There's a point in the sutta where the Buddha goes through each of the five aggregates and asks, "So why do they call it feeling?" And he says, "Well, it feels. That's why we call it feeling. It feels pleasant. It feels unpleasant. It feels neutral." And perception: "Why is it called perception? Because it perceives." And he goes on to describe what it perceives.

For fabrications, he says: "Why are they called fabrications? They fabricate fabricated things. So they're called fabrications. What do they fabricate? They fabricate fabricated form as form. They fabricate fabricated feeling as feeling. They fabricate fabricated perception as perception. They fabricate fabricated fabrications as fabrications. They fabricate fabricated consciousness as consciousness."

This is why they're called fabrications.

In this particular passage from the suttas, you've probably noticed that basically the Buddha is pointing to this fabricating part of our mind—and showing how it fabricates all of experience. He points to it fabricating the other four aggregates. This is a pretty amazing pointing, offered in a very matter-of-fact way: these mental fabrications tumble along, creating form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness.

What these fabrications are has a huge effect on what is fabricated. If the fabrication is anger, what is it fabricating? It's fabricating a body through that fabrication. The experience in the body when anger is arising can be one of pressure and heat. The face itself can even become distorted. I touched on this yesterday—the mind state of anger affects the physical body. It fabricates experience in the physical body. This is my understanding of a way to approach this teaching. It may not be the only way, but it has been useful for me to explore it in this manner.

Anger constructs sensations in the body, fabricates sensations in the body. It fabricates feeling. When there's anger arising, there tends to be unpleasant feeling. Although to my surprise, on one retreat I was really getting to know anger quite well. There was an event that had happened during the retreat, and whenever the mind thought of that event, there would be the arising of anger. So I got to watch this process over and over again. One time, in watching, the mind saw the very beginnings of the growth of anger—the thought, and then this infusion of a sense of aliveness, a warmth and a kind of fullness that was really pleasant for about a split second before it turned to heat and pressure.

It was very interesting to see this, the constructing power of the mind. To me it was a revelation, because in that seeing of the fabrication—that initial, quick fabrication of pleasant in the anger—that understanding arose: there's the hook. That's why the mind likes this. That's why it goes there, that feeling. And very quickly it gets out of control. But there's a little hook there. So the fabrication of feeling.

The fabrication of perception. When we're angry, we tend to see things through a lens of anger. We perceive things—we may tend to perceive actions that other people are doing through that lens, believing that somebody is hostile to us because we have this perspective of anger. So perception is affected by this mental formation. This is true of all our mental formations. I'm walking through anger here just to give a flavor for what happens.

Anger tends to construct more anger. It's kind of its nature. The Buddha, in one of his very succinct teachings, said: whatever one frequently ponders becomes the inclination of the mind. If we're frequently engaging in anger, anger is what is reinforced. Anger is what is cultivated. Anger is strengthened. The mental formation of anger tends to create more anger—when we're not mindful of it. When we add mindfulness into the mix, something else can happen.

And consciousness is also affected by anger. I gave the example the other day of how consciousness can be affected by an agenda. Last week, in talking about delusion, I described how an agenda can actually have us be conscious of some things and not other things—that consciousness simply doesn't receive certain things when we have certain filters. We tend to take in experience that we are oriented towards. Consciousness of some things will arise and other things won't, given this filter, given this construct, given this fabrication.

And so, seeing this fabricated nature—

This is useful because we start to see that it's not personal. And we tend to take it so personally. We tend to identify with our volitional formations—it's a very strong place of identification. "I am this angry person. I am this miserable person." And when I'm not miserable, I know that really what I am is miserable. We create this identification and drag along the idea of an identity around a mental formation, constructing an idea of permanent miserableness.

But what we can see, if we start to get curious about our mental formations, is their impermanent nature. They come and they go. They're constructed based on conditions. We see that they're constructed based on conditions. And often we can start to see—it's almost like with the mindfulness taking in this constructing of experience—the mind begins to recognize something along the lines of, "Who did that? I didn't make that happen, it just happened." So we begin to understand the not-self nature of these constructions.

The mind constructs dukkha. It's quite amazing to see this. The Buddha spoke about this construction of dukkha in a teaching on dependent origination, which I'm not going to try to describe right now, but just to point to. In that teaching, he pointed to some key volitional formations that drive the creation of suffering: ignorance, craving, and clinging. When ignorance, craving, and clinging are in the mind, it leads to suffering. And again, these are conditioned, they're constructed based on what we've learned, our conditioning from our lives.

We talked about this some last week too—the way we are conditioned by our cultures, by our families. Many of our volitional formations are not just personal. Our volitional formations are absorbed through our cultural and familial experiences. This is very much a way our minds are influenced by the collective. Views, opinions, beliefs, ideas—most of those making up our fabrication are not arising just from our own experience. They're coming in from our training. We've accumulated views, beliefs, ideas, and agendas from our cultures. And many of the views that come in through our culture are reinforcing ignorance and craving and clinging.

I can't particularly remember the details of this ad, but there are many ads that send this message: craving is good, craving will make you happy. There was an ad of a man sitting on a Ford truck, surrounded by mounds of camping gear. He's sitting in a meditation posture, and the tagline says something like, "In order to be one with everything, you gotta have one of everything." And this is why this person likes their Ford Explorer. These are the messages we get from our culture. Craving and ignorance and clinging are reinforced. It's not personal.

When we can see it as impersonal, it gets much easier—much, much easier—to be curious about it and to watch it, witness it unfold. And again, when we bring mindfulness into the equation, when mindfulness is meeting experience, this is a wholesome mental construction, a wholesome mental formation. This is the way the mind can transcend and shift so that it's no longer in that cycle of creating dukkha out of ignorance and craving and clinging, cycling over and over again, creating suffering. With the insertion of mindfulness and wisdom, a whole different path can unfold.

We cultivate wholesome qualities—the seven factors of awakening: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture or interest, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. These are mental formations, and they construct more wholesome experience. So the five aggregates are the unfolding of our human experience, both the habitual and the reactive, and also the skillful and responsive. Love, compassion, wisdom, patience, generosity—these are mental formations that lead to the end of suffering. They create the conditions for the mind to understand, for wisdom to develop, and for wisdom to release the suffering.

There's another description of conditioned experience called transcendent dependent origination, which describes how when faith and wisdom come to bear on our experience, a whole different chain of experience unfolds—delight, joy, concentration, happiness, seeing things as they are. It's this different direction of the mind.

And so here, on this retreat, we are mostly exploring a very receptive kind of practice, not trying particularly to stop the reactive kilesa constructions, and also not trying particularly to construct the wholesome formations. So how does it work? What are we doing here?

This practice supports both the releasing of the unwholesome and the cultivation of the wholesome in some very natural ways. The perspective that we're bringing to our practice—wise view, this perspective of being curious about experience as human experience, being curious about what is suffering and what is lessening of suffering, what is creating the mind to be tense versus open, relaxed, receptive—with that perspective of mindfulness, we're bringing both mindfulness and wisdom together in how we are observing. And right there, we are encouraging those wholesome mental formations. Just the way in which we are paying attention to experience is encouraging wholesome mindfulness and wisdom. It's very simple, the way that grows.

As we explore any reactive states with mindfulness—a reactive state like frustration, for instance, or irritation—as we explore that with mindfulness and wisdom, something happens. Instead of that construction continuing, it seems to put the constructing power of that formation into neutral when we bring mindfulness and wisdom to it.

When there's strong mindfulness and wisdom, that reactive state is no longer digging its rut. It's no longer reinforcing the conditioning of that state. Something about the mindfulness and wisdom is stronger.

Some of you have mentioned the continuous mindfulness feeling like a great protection. It is a great protection. It protects you from unwholesome states. It's a refuge. As we open with mindfulness and wisdom to noticing those reactive states, it creates the conditions for those states not to strengthen. And actually sometimes we see them actually vanish. And in that vanishing, aversion may turn to non-aversion.

So this is weakening the reactive states and simultaneously strengthening the capacity, the qualities of mind—patience, kindness, that allowing attention we're exploring, mindfulness, wisdom, concentration as the stability of mindfulness is encouraged, tranquility of mind, not being so reactive. The practice that we're doing very naturally releases those unwholesome, unskillful states and increases the wholesome and skillful ones.

We also start to get curious, and some of you have talked about states in which there's not a lot of reactivity happening. What we can be aware of then is the calm, the equanimity, the joy, the delight. And in contrast to mindfulness being brought to unwholesome states, when we become mindful of delight and joy, it creates the conditions for them to strengthen, for them to arise more often.

It does take some trust to enter into this very receptive style of practice—to not be in charge of the doing of it and instead to be curious about what's being constructed right now and to witness it. While we're witnessing the constructions at play, we begin to understand something about impermanence. We begin to understand something about how this construction is just happening by itself. And so we see into these truths—not by trying to, not by saying, "I'm going to see not-self." That doesn't usually work out that well. But just through the curiosity, impermanent, unreliable, not-self are revealed. And that wisdom, that arising of wisdom, so powerfully releases and frees suffering.

CHAPTER 142

Impermanence

Andrea Fella · 43 min

> *In this contemplative talk from the Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella guides practitioners into a direct exploration of anicca (impermanence) as it manifests in meditation practice. Rather than treating impermanence as something to achieve or grasp, she invites a gentle curiosity about how change is already being experienced moment to moment.*
>
> *Fella illuminates the various ways impermanence can be noticed: through attention shifting from experience to experience, through changes within a single experience as sensations strengthen or weaken, or through interest in either the arising or passing away of phenomena. She references the Buddha's teaching on the arc of experience—how phenomena arise, persist, and vanish—noting that this can only be seen when there is continuity of mindfulness. The talk emphasizes that exploring impermanence isn't something to force; rather, it emerges naturally as mindfulness becomes established.*
>
> *This teaching offers practical wisdom for working with whatever arises in practice, whether pleasant or difficult. Fella reminds us that any experience—pressure, heat, emotion, confusion, or bliss—carries the nature of being impermanent and conditioned. There is no better experience than the one happening right now with which to understand the Dhamma. The talk invites practitioners to honor and receive their human experience as life living itself, recognizing the profound teaching available in each changing moment.*

Are you aware? Aware that you are aware? Aware of what is obvious?

Each moment aware, as mindfulness is established, we can connect to being aware without having to try or remind ourselves as frequently. We can begin to notice not only the experience that we're having—sound or sight or mood, emotion, thought, feeling, pressure, coolness—this dynamic range of experience. But we also begin to naturally tune into, at times, the changing flow itself.

Mindfulness, when established, can begin to recognize the impermanent, changing nature of experience. At times the mind may be more interested in the change than in what the objects actually are. And so that's okay. You don't need to try to grab onto the objects. Just noticing this changing quality of experience.

There are different ways we can notice change. Sometimes we might notice the attention shifting from experience to experience. That is noticing the change around the factor of attention. Sometimes we might be noticing the change within an experience—sound becoming stronger or weaker, arising suddenly and vanishing, body sensation coming and going.

Sometimes the attention might be curious or interested in the beginnings of experience, noticing things just arise and arise and arise, almost like magic. We don't necessarily see them end because the mind is interested in the next arising. Sometimes the mind might be interested in the ending of experience, noticing that things are passing away. Almost as soon as it's noticed, we might recognize it's ending, it's vanishing, it's releasing. Just noticing.

If the mind is interested in being aware of change, how is it noticing it? Sometimes the attention, the mindfulness, might be more interested in the whole flow of arising, persisting, and passing away. The Buddha speaks about this arc of experience—noticing experience as it arises, persists, and vanishes. This can only be seen when there is continuity of mindfulness.

The exploration of impermanence isn't something to do exactly. That is, it's not so helpful to try to hold on to see impermanence. There can be a kind of question or curiosity: how is impermanence being experienced right now? But then, if the mind isn't interested in exploring that, not trying to make it do it. Sometimes the mind is more interested in the experience of pressure or heat or coolness or an emotional response. Honoring our experience, what is most naturally known.

Sometimes in being aware of change, there might be the experience of a sudden sense of stopping—a stopping of that flow somehow. And if that happens, this curiosity about that: stopping is happening. What's that like?

Whatever arises, whatever experience is here—whether sound or body sensation or the experience of frustration or confusion or love or bliss—whatever experience is arising has the nature of being impermanent, conditioned, and constructed by the mind. Any experience can lead to this understanding. There's no better experience than the one that's happening right now with which to understand the Dharma.

Honoring, receiving our human experience—the experience that makes this life, receiving the experience of life living itself.

CHAPTER 143

Not Knowing

Andrea Fella · 44 min

In this contemplative talk from the Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella examines the profound truth that emerges as mindfulness becomes continuous: while we can know what is present in this moment, we cannot know what the next moment will bring. This recognition is more of an understanding than a direct experience, since each arising moment is indeed known as it occurs.

Fella explores how this truth of not knowing manifests both in obvious ways—such as our uncertainty about when our last breath will come—and in subtler ways, where genuine presence brings an almost continual surprise as we encounter actual arisings rather than our concepts and beliefs about experience. She references the Buddha's teaching on conceiving: "In whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that." Our sense that we know what will happen is itself a mental construction, a conceiving that obscures the ever-changing nature of reality.

The talk addresses the natural human tendency to gravitate toward the familiar and the sense of knowing, and how this very searching can prevent us from seeing what has never been seen before. Fella acknowledges that opening to not knowing can evoke feelings of confusion, fear, vulnerability, or insecurity. Rather than bypassing these responses, she encourages practitioners to recognize their relationship to these feelings as they arise. The practice ultimately requires deep trust—not something we can simply manufacture, but something that emerges as we notice what obstructs it. The invitation is to trust awareness itself, remaining available and receptive to each moment as it unfolds.

As mindfulness becomes established and there is more continuity moment to moment —each moment aware of what's here, aware of what's arising—we do at times become aware of a profound truth: while we can know what's here in this moment, we have no idea what the next moment will be. We can be available to receive each moment and know each moment.

This awareness of not knowing is, in a way, more of an understanding than an actual experience, because in each moment, each experience is known. The experience is known. Sometimes it's not so obvious what the object is, but there can be just this aware knowing that we're aware, even when we're not so clear about the object.

And yet the recognition or understanding that we have no idea what the next moment will bring—this is an understanding more than a direct experience. It can come in obvious ways, such as recognizing that we have no idea when our very last breath will be, our own mortality. We don't know when our life will end. And it can come in more subtle ways, in the recognition of just this very next arising.

When we are really present, there can be almost a continual surprise, partly through touching into actual arisings rather than our ideas, concepts, and beliefs about what's happening. This truth that we don't know the next thing that will happen can be obscured by our beliefs, our agendas, our delusions, our taking things to be permanent that are impermanent. And yet, when those beliefs, views, and ideas are seen as arisings, they too can simply be known as another surprising phenomenon.

We don't know what will happen in the very next moment. The sense that we think we do know is a concept, a conceiving. The Buddha pointed to this truth around conceiving. We conceive things we think we know. And he said, "In whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that." We do not know. In fact, it's the nature of insight that we can't know what we think we're looking for.

And yet many of us tend to be drawn to the familiar, to knowing that we know. In a way, we can orient toward that, searching for the familiar. Yet this very act of looking can obscure something that has never been seen before. Can we simply be available and receptive, willing to not know?

Sometimes this recognition, this understanding around not knowing, can lead us to feel confused or fearful. There may be a relationship to that understanding—a relationship of fear or confusion or unsettledness, insecurity, vulnerability. It's really important to recognize that relationship. At certain points in the practice, there can be senses of confusion or fear or vulnerability about this deep truth.

It does require trust—such a deep trust to let go. And yet we can't just pick up that trust. Often our practice is noticing what's in the way of that trust. That feeling of vulnerability has an arising in this moment.

Are you aware? Are you already aware?

Trust the awareness.

CHAPTER 144

Teachings to Bāhiya

Andrea Fella · 48 min

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella offers a detailed exploration of one of the most profound and succinct teachings in the Buddhist canon: the Buddha's instruction to Bāhiya from the Bāhiya Sutta (Ud 1.10). She recounts the dramatic story of Bāhiya, an ascetic who traveled 1,200 miles to receive the Dhamma, only to be given a brief teaching that led to his immediate awakening—and his death shortly thereafter.

The core teaching—'in the seen, only the seen; in the heard, only the heard; in the sensed, only the sensed; in the cognized, only the cognized'—is examined through multiple lenses. Andrea draws on the Kāḷakārāma Sutta (AN 4.24) to illuminate what the Buddha's awakened mind actually experiences: not conceiving of visible things apart from sight, not conceiving of a seer, not conceiving of things worth seeing. She contrasts this with the Mūlapariyāya Sutta (MN 1), which describes how ordinary minds conceive of self in relation to experience through patterns of 'I am this,' 'I am in this,' 'I am apart from this,' and 'this is mine.'

Andrea emphasizes that this teaching is a training, not an immediate attainment. Our practice involves noticing what complicates the simplicity of bare experience—craving, views, beliefs, and identity constructions. She addresses the challenging territory of disenchantment that arises as we see through our usual ways of relating to experience, acknowledging that the mind may resist with dread, confusion, or boredom when it finds 'nowhere to land.' Yet this very deconstruction of clinging leads naturally to freedom, grain by grain, like a rope worn away by wind and waves.

Our practice here of receptive awareness is really just exploring the simplicity of being with experience and noticing what complicates that simplicity.

There's a very famous teaching in the suttas. Most of you have probably heard it many times, but that is what I'd like to explore this evening: the Buddha's teachings to Bāhiya. To me, this simple teaching is one of those succinct teachings where Bāhiya asks the Buddha, "Please tell me the teachings in brief so that I can practice." This particular succinct teaching feels very resonant with the way we practice in this style.

The backstory before Bāhiya meets the Buddha is that he's not one of the Buddha's followers, but rather an ascetic living at the time of the Buddha. He's practicing on the coast, about twelve hundred miles or so from where the Buddha lives. He doesn't know

anything about the Buddha, but he's been practicing. Some of the stories say that he was living an ascetic life but not really doing that much practice. But I think, based on the story, he must have been doing some practice because the teachings of the Buddha landed really fast for Bāhiya. He must have been ready for it, at least.

So he was practicing, and the people in that area really admired him. He was such an ascetic, wearing bark for his clothes, doing some of the ascetic practices of the day. They were offering him alms and coming to him for advice. And he started wondering, "Gee, all these people think I'm so great. Maybe I am that great. Maybe I'm enlightened."

It's said that he was visited by a deva when he had that thought. This deva apparently was one of his relatives from either a previous life or from this life—it doesn't say. The deva had taken pity on Bāhiya for having this thought, "Maybe I'm enlightened," and said to him, "You know, you're not enlightened. And not only that, you're not even doing what might make you enlightened."

Bāhiya asked the deva, "Well, is there anybody that is doing this?"

The deva replied, "Yes, you should go see the Buddha. The Buddha lives about twelve hundred miles from here. Go find him. He's in Sāvatthī."

And so Bāhiya walked. I actually looked this up on Google today. I hit the walking icon and entered the place where Bāhiya was on the coast, which is near Mumbai, and then Sāvatthī, where the Buddha was. It said 303 hours of walking to get there. And it was a lot of elevation too—in one place it said there was something like 12,000 feet of elevation he'd have to go up and down to reach the Buddha by this route.

So he traveled, and he apparently traveled as quickly as he could. My guess is it probably took him some twenty to thirty days to get to the Buddha.

He arrived where the Buddha was practicing and found the monastery where the Buddha was staying. The monks in the monastery said, "The Buddha's not here right now. He's out on alms round."

So Bāhiya went to find the Buddha on alms round. He found the Buddha in the village and said to him, "Will you teach me the Dhamma so that it will be for my long-term welfare and benefit?"

The Buddha, with his alms bowl, walking into the village, said, "This isn't the time, Bāhiya. We're heading to the village for alms."

A second time Bāhiya asked the Buddha, this time adding a little plea: "Please teach me the Dhamma. We don't know how long you'll live or how long I will live. Please teach me the Dhamma."

And the Buddha again said, "This is not the time."

But then Bāhiya asked the magic third time, which in the suttas is—

pretty much almost every time—not every time, but most times—if you ask the Buddha something three times, he did it.

So Bahiya asked again, and the Buddha stopped and gave him some teachings. Bahiya had asked for teachings in brief, and so he received teachings in brief. I'm going to read you the first part of the teachings that the Buddha gave to Bahiya. The result of the Buddha giving Bahiya this complete instruction—not just the portion I'm about to share, but the whole thing, which I'll give you in pieces—was that Bahiya became fully enlightened.

So listen well.

"You should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself."

This is basically what we're doing here. We're exploring our experience—our sense experience, our mental experience. This teaching—you should train yourself thus, and the seen is only the seen, and the heard is only the heard, and the sensed is only the sensed, and the cognized is only the cognized—this is a short form for the six sense spaces. Seeing, hearing, and then sensing encompasses smelling, tasting, touching. And cognized is the mind.

Essentially, this is the injunction: recognize your sense experience as arising experience. That's one way to frame what the Buddha said.

But what do these words mean? What does this teaching mean—in the seen is only the seen? It can be understood as a training in what might be called bare attention: just receiving experience as it is, without judgment, without reactivity, without clinging.

And yet the text says it's a training. So what does that mean, to train ourselves to see thus? To train ourselves in "the seen is only the seen"?

To me this means partly that we're probably not going to be able to just pick up that instruction and have our experience be that pure, that unaffected by our thoughts or ideas or views or opinions. We're not going to be able to just flip a switch and have our experience be "in the seen is only the seen." We may think we're seeing things as they are, but as we've been exploring—especially around the conditioning, the constructing nature of the mind—the mental formations condition our perceptions, condition seeing, condition hearing. So when we're seeing, it's already not just "in the seen is only the seen."

What does this training mean, then? To me it's a pointing toward an important direction for us. We set our intention to explore experience with the understanding that it's valuable to see experience in this way. And the Buddha, in the subsequent part of the teachings, explains why it's valuable. I'll actually go ahead and read it now and then elaborate a little more on it later.

The training is what I said: in the seen is only the seen. We train in this way. And then the Buddha says:

"When for you this is the case—when for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized—then, Bahiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

He points to the purpose of this training. He doesn't just say, "Train this way, come back later." He says, "Train this way and this is the result." Freedom from suffering is the result—and that results from this understanding of not-self.

But this last part is the result of the training. It's not something to do. Rather, it sets our compass. It gives us inspiration to explore. What might it mean to see experience in this way?

There's a kind of setting of the intention to explore experience from the perspective of "in the seen is only the seen"—which to me basically points to a practice that explores what's in the way of the seen being only the seen.

What's in the way of in the heard is only the heard. And that's what we actually get to see. We start paying attention to our experience—this is so much of what we've been exploring. What's in the way of just knowing experience to be experience? Knowing seeing to be seeing, knowing hearing to be hearing, knowing cognizing to be cognizing?

And so we start by seeing what we add, looking at what we add to experience. This is what we've been observing. We see how craving is added to experience. We feel that it is added. Actually, as we explore experience in this way of receiving, just noticing what's happening, we're seeing the constructions. We're seeing the craving, the clinging, and we're feeling the suffering of that.

With this encouragement—that in this direction lies freedom from suffering—we may have some inspiration to observe. What else gets in the way? Views, beliefs, identity. We've talked about all of these areas. And guess what? All of this, everything that gets in the way, all of the stuff that gets in the way is in the realm of the cognized.

What's cognized? Craving is an arising in the mind. It's a cognition arising. And so the instruction "in the cognized is only the cognized"—can you notice craving is arising as a phenomenon? Can you notice clinging is arising as a phenomenon? When that's what's happening, that's the encouragement of this text.

So we explore "in the seen is only the seen" and we see craving. It's like, okay, craving. In craving is craving. Craving is arising. That can be known. In the cognized is only the cognized.

In another sutta, the Buddha describes in a way—at least this teaching to me—what it was like to be experiencing things. What's the state? He gives a description of his mind, what it's like to be experiencing things in the moment when in the seen is only the seen. He gives an elaboration of what that experience is. This is in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Kālakārāma Sutta, AN 4.24, for those of you who are interested in such things.

The Buddha thought it was valuable to describe this state to us. And when he refers to himself as a Tathāgata—meaning "one who's thus gone," "one who is such," something like that—he describes his experience:

A Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight, does not conceive of an unseen, does not conceive of a thing worth seeing, does not conceive of a seer. In the seen is only the seen.

A Tathāgata does not conceive of an audible thing apart from hearing, does not conceive of an unheard, does not conceive of a thing worth hearing, does not conceive of a hearer. In the heard is only the heard.

A Tathāgata does not conceive a thing to be sensed apart from sensation, does not conceive of an unsensed, does not conceive of a thing worth sensing, does not conceive of a sensor. In the sensed is only the sensed.

A Tathāgata does not conceive of a cognizable thing apart from cognition, does not conceive of an uncognized, does not conceive of a thing worth cognizing, does not conceive of a cognizer. In the cognized is only the cognized.

Let us start an exploration of what this might mean. I can only offer you some of my reflections on this. There are a few comments in some of the commentaries and suttas, but there's not a lot. A key word here is *conceiving*. Remember the other day I used that phrase, offered this phrase in one of the morning meditations: "In whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that."

Conceiving is understood in many places in the suttas to be a kind of distorted way of experiencing that attributes to the experience things that are not actually in the experience but are instead, as Bhikkhu Bodhi said, derived from one's own subjective imaginings. And conceiving does seem to relate to this birth of subject and object—the birth of a thing to be seen, an object existing, something like that. When an object exists, a subject is born. They're born together, is my sense. So the conceiving piece—one of the distortions that seems to be present in it—is a subject-object distinction and a belief in that distinction.

I'm giving you a bit of a tour of some of the suttas tonight. One of my particular joys is sutta study, so I'm offering you a little taste of that.

There's another place in the suttas that's relevant here. We'll come back to this description of the Buddha's mind in a moment, but first I want to flip to the other side, which describes what an ordinary person's mind does with experience—with seeing, with hearing. Here's the description in the suttas:

One perceives the seen as the seen. Having perceived the seen as the seen, one conceives oneself as the seen. One conceives oneself in the seen. One conceives oneself apart from the seen. One conceives the seen to be mine. One delights in the seen. Why is this? Because it has not been fully understood.

This is from Majjhima Nikaya 1, for those of you who like that reference.

So there are four different ways of conceiving elaborated here. First, "I am whatever experience it is"—I am the seeing, I am the body, I am the emotion. It's got that kind of flavor to it. Second, "I'm in the experience"—I'm in the body, I'm in the physical experience. Maybe not so much "I'm in the seeing," but "I'm in the physical experience." Third, "I'm separate from the experience." Now, that one resonates for me with seeing. It's like, yes, I'm separate from that tree. Again, pointing to this subject-object distinction. And fourth, this flavor of "This experience is mine"—this hearing is mine, this body sensation is mine. This knee pain, that's mine. It's my knee pain, my body sensations.

These are different ways of conceiving ourselves in relationship to experience. Again, it's bringing in this notion of a self, this subject-object kind of distinction.

One translator of this particular text—the precursor to Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli—had a slightly different understanding that I noticed today for the first time in one of the notes to the sutta. It struck me as adding something to the picture in terms of understanding conceiving. It does make sense to me that conceiving is about this sense of subject and object coming into being. But Ñāṇamoli had a subtler perspective that I think I've seen in my own experience. There's something interesting there.

His alternative understanding is something like this: having perceived the seen, one takes that perception to be the seen. That's a pretty profound kind of confusion—one that I think we engage in a lot. We don't notice that we're perceiving "tree." We don't notice perception at all. We take the perception to be the thing.

It's a very profound misunderstanding—a misunderstanding of perception itself. To me, this was a very interesting way to think about conceiving: potentially as simply being misperceiving perception to be reality. Something like that. Almost even before any sense of self comes in. Just that mistake in the perception. We take it to be what's actually there, not seeing it as perception. Not seeing perception as perception. That would be "in the cognized is only the cognized"—oh, perception is happening.

So back to the Buddha's description of his mind: "A Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight, does not conceive of an unseen, does not conceive of a thing worth seeing, does not conceive of a seer."

My reflections on this. "Does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight"—to me what this says is that the conceiving part is attributing or creating or conceiving of the idea of a thing that exists independently of the perception. This is kind of counterintuitive to the whole way we live our lives and walk around the world. To live in that space of so deeply understanding that we cannot know what is out there—even if there's anything out there. All we can know is the experience created by the mind. And so, not conceiving of anything that is out there. This is the Buddha's description of his experience: not conceiving of a visible thing apart from sight. That's kind of mind-blowing to me.

"Does not conceive of an unseen." This one I could find very little to support an interpretation or an understanding of. But just the way of hearing it, and also that it follows the previous one—does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight, does not conceive of an unseen—to me this might mean that we also don't conceive or create the idea or the notion, the imagining. And imagining is another translation for this word "conceiving." We don't imagine that there is nothing out there, that it is all mind, en-

tirely constructed by the mind. So the mind of the Buddha doesn't conceive any kind of substantive reality about the world itself. That's my sense of the understanding of these two. The Buddha simply understands the experience of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, cognizing. I hope this is making sense.

"And does not conceive of a thing worth seeing." To me this points to craving. A thing worth seeing is something that we want, something we want to have. So that may be the flavor there.

"And does not conceive of a seer." That points back to belief—or rather, the absence of a belief in one who sees. Does not conceive of a seer. Does not conceive of one who sees.

The absence of all of these things—this again is kind of interesting to me. The Buddha describes his experience, this very subtle experience, not in terms of what's there, but in terms of what is not experienced. "A Tathagata does not conceive of a cognizable thing apart from cognition, does not conceive of an uncognized, does not conceive of a thing worth cognizing, does not conceive of a cognizer."

In a way this feels like it kind of pulls apart, or just falls apart, our whole usual way of navigating experience. It all falls apart. It feels untethered.

And so there might be—the other day Carol spoke about disenchantment. This perspective of seeing this way, not seeing a thing worth seeing. Just "in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized." This creates the conditions for basically understanding there's nothing to cling to. There's no point in clinging.

And so this disenchantment—we have been enchanted by seeing. "Oh, it's a thing worth seeing! Oh, there's a seer!" Enchanted in that way, believing the constructs of our own mind. It's just a magic show in there—another beautiful analogy in the suttas. It's a magic show and we've been enchanted by that magic show, believing it's reality when it's just smoke and mirrors.

And yet, there's one description that Bhikkhu Bodhi uses for disenchantment—something like, "disenchantment is a serene withdrawal from the desire for clinging." And it's like, well, in my experience, it's not quite that serene.

You know, the mind goes kicking and screaming to disenchantment. We see there's not much to cling to. We begin to understand it's not worth clinging to. And yet the mind protests: "No, there's got to be something worth clinging to. This is not okay—to not have some place to land."

So there are mental arisings in response to this. As we begin to see in this way—as we begin to understand that in the seen there is only the seen, in the heard there is only the heard—the mind goes, "Well, really? There's nothing to cling to?" And that doesn't feel so good. It can feel like dread or confusion or terror. Sometimes boredom or depression: "Yeah, yeah, I get that it's not worth clinging to, so why do I keep being impinged on by seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching? Can it stop already?"

We have these relationships to these understandings. And those are arisings that need to be known. In the cognized there is only the cognized. That's just the next thing. Not liking nowhere to land—okay. It might be more than not liking. It might be dread or terror of nowhere to land. Okay, dread. That's what's arising. In the cognized there is only the cognized.

This deconstructs everything we could possibly cling to.

Our practice, at least one way to explore this—and the Buddha was quite concise in this teaching, he didn't offer much to Bāhiya—but to me it's a pointing to look at experience, particularly at the processes of mind that are constructing experience. The five aggregates I spoke about a couple weeks ago—body, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness—these are what's arising moment to moment. And they keep arising.

My understanding is that the Buddha was still perceiving and feeling. There are descriptions in the suttas of enlightened beings perceiving and feeling. Enlightenment doesn't turn off these processes. But my sense of what the Buddha is describing is that they are understood for what they are—understood as processes. Feeling arising and being known. Perception arising and being known. Craving arising and being known. Love arising and being known. Releasing of craving experienced.

We can at least start there, exploring in our experience what's arising, what's being added, recognizing these processes at work as processes. Feeling feels. Perceiving perceives. Cognizing cognizes.

So back to the Bāhiya Sutta again, the ending: "When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized—then, Bāhiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

There will be no you in terms of that. No you in terms of seeing. No you in terms of hearing. No conceiving of a seer apart from sight. No conceiving of a seer. No you there.

Feeling feels. Knowing knows. Cognizing cognizes. Perceiving perceives. Intending intends.

You are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

Freedom comes with this understanding.

To me this is inspiring—the pointing in this teaching of: here's the training, and it leads to freedom from suffering. But you don't have to believe that. When for you, in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized—when the mind opens to that way of meeting experience, there's no need to do any kind of insight or understanding. That is the natural result. When for you this is the experience, when for you this is the way the mind is meeting experience, the mind is free.

So our basic instructions come back again just to the simplicity of knowing experience as experience arising in the present moment. Just what we're doing. Just simple. And to me it's like these successive layers of seeing—oh yes, another way of attributing a sense of self here. Another way of recognizing that, oh, clinging to that too? As we practice with this, the layers and layers and layers of delusion begin to fall away.

It doesn't seem to happen in one big bang explosion. In fact, the Buddha often talked about the gradual nature of this path—that it happens moment by moment, grain by grain. The analogy of the rope: I think I used that in the hall the other day. The rope that's left on the shore, day by day being worn away by the sun, the sand, the wind, the waves. At a particular moment, if you look at it, you're not going to see in the next moment what's worn away. But over time, that natural action wears away at the rope and it falls apart.

And likewise, in that analogy, the Buddha compares the mindfulness and the effort and the practice to the wind and the sun and the sand, wearing away at the fetters, wearing away at the delusion. This is a picture of a gradual practice, one where we may not even see day to day what has been released, what has been understood even. We may not know. And yet every moment of mindfulness—Gil Fronsdal sometimes says no moment of mindfulness is wasted. It is contributing to this direction of freedom.

So at the end of the sutta, almost immediately after hearing this teaching, it says that Bāhiya became fully awakened. And then within moments, he apparently came between a cow, a mother cow and her calf, and was killed by the cow protecting against a perceived threat to her calf.

And so this brings me back to how Bāhiya had enjoined the Buddha: please, we don't know how long we're going to live, teach me the Dharma. That urgency of practice. While it is a gradual practice, there's no time to waste. We don't know what the next moment will bring.

You should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

CHAPTER 145

Spontaneous Vajra Song

Andrea Fella · 5 min

> *In this contemplative talk, Andrea Fella shares the "Spontaneous Vajra Song" by Tibetan master Lama Gendun Rinpoche, a poem that has become a touchstone in many meditation communities. She recounts how, after hearing it countless times, phrases from the poem began arising spontaneously during retreat as natural practice instructions, leading her to memorize it as a form of guidance.*
>
> *The poem itself serves as a kind of guided meditation, pointing to the futility of striving for happiness through effort and willpower. Instead, it invites practitioners to recognize that peace is already present in open relaxation and letting go. With vivid imagery—rainbows that cannot be caught, a dog chasing its tail, an elephant already resting at home—the teaching illuminates how our very searching for awakening obscures what is already here. Whatever arises in body and mind has little ultimate reality; why identify with it or pass judgment?*
>
> *This offering resonates deeply with the Theravāda understanding of non-clinging and the recognition that phenomena arise and pass of their own accord. The instruction to "let the entire game happen on its own, springing up and falling back like waves" echoes the practice of bare awareness found in satipaṭṭhāna. For practitioners at any stage, this poem offers a profound reminder: nothing to do or undo, nothing to force, nothing missing—everything happens by itself.*

This morning I'd like to share a poem by a Tibetan teacher, Lama Gendun Rinpoche. Many of you may be familiar with this poem. It's pretty well used in our tradition here. And yet the repetition can be helpful, at least for me. I had heard it so many times that during one particular retreat a few years ago, phrases from the poem started arising in the mind like instructions. And so I got a copy and memorized it. I don't still have it memorized, but for that retreat it became my practice instructions in a way.

I thought I'd read it and share it with you this morning. You can just let the words wash over you. You don't have to really think about them. It almost can be like a guided meditation.

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower, but is already present in open relaxation and letting go.

Don't strain yourself. There's nothing to do or undo. Whatever momentarily arises in the body-mind has no real importance at all, has little reality whatsoever. Why identify with and become attached to it, passing judgment upon it and ourselves?

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

Only our searching for happiness prevents us from seeing it. It's like a vivid rainbow which you pursue without ever catching, or a dog chasing its own tail.

Although peace and happiness do not exist as an actual thing or place, it is always available and accompanies you in every instant.

Don't believe in the reality of good and bad appearances. They are like today's ephemeral weather, like rainbows in the sky.

Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain. As soon as you open and relax this tight fist of grasping, infinite space is there—open, inviting, comfortable.

Make use of this spaciousness, this freedom and natural ease. Don't search any further looking for the great awakened elephant who is already resting quietly at home in front of your own hearth.

Nothing to do or undo. Nothing to force. Nothing to want, and nothing missing.

How amazing. Everything happens by itself.

CHAPTER 146

From Why to What (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 55 min

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a profound reframing of how we approach difficulty in meditation practice. Drawing from the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), she contrasts the 'unwise attention' of an untaught person—constantly asking 'Why am I this way? What was I in the past?'—with the 'wise attention' of understanding experience through the lens of the Four Noble Truths: 'This is dukkha. This is the arising of dukkha.'*
>
> *Fella illuminates how suffering is constructed fresh in each present moment rather than being carried forward from the past. Through vivid personal examples—from discovering that nightly loneliness was triggered by setting an alarm clock, to recognizing depression as suppressed mettā, to mistaking rapture for anxiety—she demonstrates how simply being with 'what is happening' reveals the mind's hidden processes.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with complex, multi-layered emotional patterns. Rather than trying to analyze or dig into conditioning, Fella encourages a receptive approach: holding difficult experiences with 'wide arms,' letting what's obvious come to the surface, and asking 'What else is happening right now?' This patient, non-assuming presence allows the mind's own wisdom to understand how suffering is put together—and how to let it go. The practice is remarkably simple: just asking 'What is this?' again and again, while the insights that arise can be 'mind-bendingly elaborate.'*

As human beings, we seem to be creatures of wanting to understand things. Often that expresses itself as trying to figure out why things happen. This happens to us in our practice as well. When we're meeting struggles of various kinds, there can be a temptation, a sense of "why is this happening?" This arises especially, it seems, after we've seen something a few times and begun to recognize it isn't so helpful, yet our mind keeps doing it. Why? Why does it keep doing this?

We may want to go back into our past and try to figure things out based on our history. There must be some very deep tendency in my family that makes me keep doing this. We feel like wanting to dig, wanting to understand what's going on based on our conditioning from the past.

Understanding conditioning is helpful and important. We talk about the conditioned nature of our experience and how valuable it is to understand that our experience is conditioned. Yet this kind of foray into the why—understanding the why of our experience—often involves thinking and trying to figure things out. It can involve our views, our ideas, our beliefs, our attitudes, the things that have shaped us.

This is something to recognize: when we are trying to understand something through the lens of our prior conditioning, our views and ideas and attitudes, we may well find what we're looking for. We'll find things that are shaped by those conditions. It can become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. We're looking for something, trying to find meaning, trying to understand why something's happening, but that very search is shaped by our conditioning and so tends to go in particular ways.

Our practice, instead of using this habit or familiar way of exploring why things are going on, encourages us to simply look at what is happening. What is happening right now in this present moment? This present moment is all that there is. It's all that we have access to in terms of understanding what is happening. So we explore what is actually happening right now, dropping below the ideas and views to simply ask: What is this? What is happening?

Last night Richard talked about one description of a difference between an enlightened person and an ordinary person. There's another sutta that has a similar contrast. In this one it says that an untaught ordinary person doesn't understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, they attend to those things unfit for attention and do not attend to those things fit for attention. This is how they attend unwisely:

"Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?"

Or else they are inwardly perplexed about the present: "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?"

In a way, these are all questions about the why. Where have I come from? Why am I here? Having been that in the past, why am I this now? This is that flavor of why, why, why—what's the meaning?

And then he goes on to say that a well-taught noble disciple understands what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, they do not attend to those things unfit for attention, and attend to those things fit for attention.

They attend wisely: "This is suffering." They attend wisely: "This is the arising of suffering." They attend wisely: "This is the ending of suffering." They attend wisely: "This is the way leading to the ending of suffering."

You probably recognize those statements as expressions of the Four Noble Truths. When I first read this, when I first began studying this teaching, I just kind of blew past this part and thought, "Well, that's just the Four Noble Truths. An enlightened person understands the Four Noble Truths." I'd heard that this was the insight the Buddha had—the insight into the Four Noble Truths—and so I just moved on.

But what it's pointing to here, the way it's phrased, is that one attends wisely. *This*—what is happening right now—has one of these four flavors. It will be either suffering, or suffering coming into being, or suffering ending, or it will be the cultivation of qualities on the path leading to the end of suffering. We can use this framework of the Four Noble Truths as a framework for understanding our experience. And the Buddha says this is the way a wise person meets experience.

One way to look at the difference between these two approaches is that the ordinary person attends to experience through the perspective and view of their sense of self—who they are, all those questions of "why am I?" The enlightened person understands suffering and its arising, its ending, and what leads to the ending of suffering. There's no orientation around the perspective of a sense of self in that. It's just around suffering or the end of suffering.

This looking at what's happening right now—we can look at what's going on with respect to whether it's suffering or the arising of suffering. And that's the part I'd mostly like to explore this evening: those two pieces. How can we explore that, or know that, or understand that through this investigation of what is happening? Because as we shift our perspective, our habit of exploring things from the question of "why" to "what's here, what's going on?"—this is what we begin to see. We begin to understand suffering. We begin to see the conditions that lead to its arising.

This form of suffering that the Buddha expressed as being possible to be completely free of—this kind of suffering is pointed to here as arising in the present moment. That's what this pointing says to me. *This*, right now, what's happening right now—this is suffering. It's pointing to the experience right here in this moment. What is the experience of suffering right here in this moment? And can we know that? Can we know it as suffering?

Actually, that is an insight—the recognition "this is suffering." We don't often think of it that way. We often think of it as a problem. But when we see it—"Oh, this is what's happening. Suffering is arising. The Buddha encouraged me to get to know this, to understand it"—and seeing it, suffering is arising here, now, in the present moment. This is the only place it can arise, and it's also the only place it can end.

We may think about or have the sense somehow that we've suffered in the past and that suffering is being carried along or dragged with us through our lives—that it's the same suffering we experienced months ago or years ago, and it's back, here to haunt us. Yet when we start to look at our experience, we see what happens in the present moment. We're not suffering the same suffering that happened in the past.

I saw this actually—I've seen this many times, but the first time it became so clear to me was on my first three-month course. A memory of a time when I got very embarrassed about something arose in my mind.

And that memory arose in my mind, and the feeling of embarrassment came along with it. At first it felt like this was the old embarrassment—the embarrassment that happened all those years ago when I was standing on stage in that play and forgot my line. That memory of standing there arose in my mind, and all of those feelings came up.

Over and over again this happened on that retreat, and I got to look at it over and over again. I began to recognize that the arising of the feelings of embarrassment were actually separate from the memory. I had thought at first they were interlocked, that it wasn't possible to have them be separate. But I could begin to see, just through noticing what's happening, that the memory arises, and then it's like the mind does something with that memory. It goes, "Oh yeah, that memory. Oh, I remember that. That was awful. It was terrible, and I was so embarrassed." And what happens? We become embarrassed in this moment. Our minds pick up the memory and all the things that happened there and reconstruct in this moment, right now—that suffering is being constructed. It's not the same suffering. It's being experienced now.

This happens a lot to us. We're sitting in meditation and a memory arises. Often, because thoughts are so powerful, memories are so powerful, many of the same feelings that we experienced at that time come into being in that moment. But they are now coming into being. They weren't there a few moments ago. This was a piece I didn't quite understand. I thought I was just tapping into some pool of embarrassment that was sitting there already. I didn't quite understand that it was actually being regenerated right in this moment.

Seeing that over and over again helped me to understand: this is suffering now. This is being created right now. Our suffering is created now based on conditions from the past, based on triggers that are associated with things that have happened to us, and based on how we relate to the entire thing right now. There are different threads that come into the creation of this suffering: our memories and thoughts, the habits and patterns of reactivity, and how the mind is right in this moment.

Just as an example, you've seen in your practice that sometimes something will arise that tends to be triggering for you, but you've had a good night of rest and the mindfulness is strong, and it's like it's there and it's seen and it goes. Barely any of that suffering arises because of the way the mind is in this moment. But other times maybe you didn't get a lot of sleep and you're hungry and it's been a rocky day of mindfulness, and that thing arises and a lot of suffering is created. There are many conditions that come into play for how suffering arises in the moment.

Everything we need to know about suffering—for its understanding, to be free from it, to release the suffering, for the mind to begin to understand how to let go of it—everything we need to know is happening in the present moment. That was actually a relief to me when I recognized that I don't have to figure out all the conditioning, all of that history, all of that "why" of family conditioning and conditioning in the schoolyard and all of those habits and patterns of mind that got shaped. It's a relief to recognize that everything we need to know to be free from suffering that's arising in this moment is available in this moment.

When we can see this way that suffering is put together in the moment—and this seeing happens by just being with what is happening in the present moment—as I said, everything that's needed is here in the present moment, so all we need to do is look at this present moment. Now, this doesn't mean we'll always be able to see it all in any present moment. But what we explore is the more we connect with now, connect with what's here, we begin to trust just that connection. It's enough to just connect with this. I don't need to think back through all of the whys. Sometimes even thinking we know the whys can get in the way or deceive us. It can send us down a wayward path.

This actually happened really early in my practice. I remember now—this was in the first few months of my practice. I was exploring emotions, doing this largely in daily life. I wasn't so interested in sitting down and doing sitting meditation when I first started practicing, but I was really interested in exploring and understanding my mind. And my mind was making me suffer. So I began looking at what was going on in my mind, and various threads were predominant at that time. One was anger. Another was

loneliness. These were connected to a relationship that had ended in what I thought was a very unskillful way—the other person had ended it in a very unskillful way. So lots of anger, lots of loneliness, lots of grief.

I was feeling into all of this, and at one point I noticed that every night when I went to bed, I got really lonely.

This was not a surprise to me. I thought I understood why I was lonely. But I was interested in simply observing, so I just watched my mind. Each night I'd notice, "Yep, there's that loneliness again. Okay." It was really simple—a really, really simple mindfulness. Just, "Yep, there it is. Okay, I know I'm lonely. Loneliness is happening." It wasn't even a very detailed exploration of the body. It was just acknowledging, "That's what the mind is doing right now. It's lonely. There's loneliness happening." And I watched this pretty much every night as I went to bed.

Then one night—and I don't think I was particularly trying to be mindful that evening—something different happened. Maybe it was because I had become attuned to that quality of loneliness through getting familiar with it during that regular evening recognition: "Yep, there it is again. Okay." But this particular evening, I noticed that the loneliness turned on like somebody had flipped a switch—when I set my alarm clock. I picked up my alarm clock, set it, and the loneliness switched on. I thought, "What? What does setting an alarm clock have to do with loneliness?" I didn't know.

But I just kept watching each night. "Oh yeah, here it is. Here it is again when I set the alarm clock." I don't remember how many nights passed—probably not too many, maybe just one or two more. Then one night, when I set the alarm clock, I noticed a memory arise. I was with my ex-partner and we were in Disneyland together, looking up at a marquee in Tomorrowland that had a digital clock on it. I could see the connection between what I was doing in the present—setting a digital clock—and that memory, and how the memory was connected to the loneliness.

It was as if the mind was saying, "Oh yeah, I was so happy then, and I'm never going to be happy again." That particular memory was one of my cherished memories, and it felt like these memories had been destroyed or something. But that memory had flitted through my mind and it had been creating this loneliness. That was amazing to me—that I could see this. In that moment it was like, "Wow, I thought the loneliness was because I was going to bed alone. I didn't know it was about a memory of Disneyland."

So this was seeing more of the conditions of the present moment—the trigger, the thought, and the reaction to the thought. This is seeing the *why* of the present moment. Or we could say, perhaps, seeing *how* suffering is put together in the present moment.

The amazing thing was what happened next. The following night, as I went to bed, I clearly remembered the whole discovery from the night before. But the loneliness didn't come up. And in fact, that regular every-night-going-to-bed-lonely pattern stopped happening entirely. It was as if seeing how the suffering was put together had freed me from it.

The mind understood, in that moment—and this is my way of describing it after the fact—the mind understood its own participation in that suffering. And the mind understood how not to go there. I couldn't consciously say, "Oh yeah, I don't want to go there." But the mind, having seen that construction, having seen how it was put together and that its own processes were responsible, it was as if the mind said, "Yeah, I don't think so."

This was really amazing to me—to see how witnessing the *why* of the present moment, or how suffering was put together in the present moment at a clear level, had such power. It was seen very clearly in that moment. That was what mattered: seeing *what* happened in that moment, what was arising.

What was the mind doing with it, moment to moment? Seeing that created the conditions for the mind to let go of that suffering.

So this is the power of that "what" – of looking at the what. What is actually happening right now? It won't always be suffering. But so often when we're looking at what is happening right now, we are seeing it through our habits and our views and our beliefs and our attitudes. We may not be able to stop that, but we can be aware or curious about it. Yes, there are all of these ideas about what's happening, but can I actually be curious about what's actually happening here? What is actually happening? What's happening in the moment?

There are body sensations happening, and emotions and moods that are happening, and thoughts that are happening, and the other senses – the smells and sounds and sights. All of that is happening in the present moment. That's kind of the ground of our experience.

A thought arising in the present moment is just a thought arising in the present moment. That can be known as a what. But often our mind, when thoughts arise in the present moment, isn't simply recognizing, "Oh, there's a thought." We're jumping onto that thought and thinking about it and believing the views and ideas that it's expressing. But we can be aware: "Oh, there's a thought. There's a body sensation. This is

what's happening. The body feels like this. The emotions feel like this. Frustration is arising. Confusion is happening. Delight is happening. Joy is happening." Whatever is happening, we can know that just as a happening, as an arising.

Another aspect of the what of our experience – there are a couple more pieces I want to point to – is that we can often have things hidden from our view or perspective of what's happening because of the habits of our mind, because of the ways that we tend to look at things. There can be perspectives in the back of our mind that we don't recognize because they're so familiar, or because that pattern is so familiar to us.

One way of touching into that, another way of seeing what's happening right now or opening to something more: there's a lot happening in the present moment, and there's a certain set of it that we're familiar with seeing and knowing and experiencing. A way to expand a little further is to check in with a simple question – and I think Kamala mentioned this morning – about what's the attitude, or what's the relationship to what's happening?

Often our relationship to what's happening can be a little behind the scenes. We can have habitual ways of relating and not really recognize that that's also a happening. Something unpleasant is happening and there's a sense of not liking it. Maybe that not liking is motivating a way of paying attention: "Well, if I look at this really carefully, maybe it'll go away. If I dive into that sensation or whatever, that unpleasantness, maybe it'll go away." Being motivated by a desire to get rid of it – that little bit of aversion – but not seen.

So checking in: What's happening? And what's the relationship? This is also something that's happening in the present moment. When we check into that, there's not much to do except notice that as a happening too. "Oh, this thing is happening and I don't like it." That's what's happening. Okay. Unpleasant and not liking. That's what's going on right now. That's the what of experience.

Sometimes there are other things hidden from view, or perspectives that are not within the realm of what we normally see. Another question that can be explored at times, which I've found is a little bit broader than "What is my relationship to the experience?" is something like: "Okay, this is stuff that's happening. I know this stuff that's happening. But what else is happening right now?"

At one point I was driving.

I noticed that my mind was leaping into the future in this frenzy of planning. I would call it restlessness and anxiety. That was the state of mind—churning, spinning, lots of thoughts and thinking. And I was like, "Whoa, wow, I'm driving. Let me come back." I

would put my attention on my hands on the steering wheel and try to settle in. "Okay, seeing is happening. Hands on the steering wheel—what's happening?" And seconds later, I'd be back in that restless mind.

This happened enough times that I finally got a little curious. "Wow, something's really going on here. What else is happening right now?" When I stopped and just checked in with that—not looking for anything, but almost more like asking my system, "You tell me. I have no idea. You tell me what's going on here"—what arose in that moment, what I saw in the next moment, was that I was really, really happy. I had missed that entirely.

When I noticed that, I wondered what was going on with that happiness. As I saw over the course of my practice, I at one point reported to my teacher, "You know, I think I talk myself out of happiness." What was going on was that there was this feeling of happiness, but there was also this propelling into the future of, "Well, how can I make sure these conditions continue in some way that I can keep this happiness?" But I was missing it entirely. I was not even experiencing the happiness.

So that kind of opening of "what else is happening?"—that wouldn't have been met with "what's the attitude about this anxiety?" It wasn't the attitude there. It was something else that was going on, something that was simply missed until I was willing to step back and say, "Okay, yeah, show me." This is in that mode of receptivity that I spoke about the other day. Just kind of, "Okay, what else is there?" Settle back. Take a pause and let what arises arise. Let your system show you what's happening.

Sometimes our struggles are a little deeper, a little more multi-layered. There's emotions layered on emotions, layered on habits and views and beliefs, and it's just like a big mess—a very complex-seeming experience. We have a sense at times of the multi-layered nature of a lot of our deeper kinds of suffering. We may even have a sense that connected with anger, there's fear and resistance and vulnerability in the mix.

Having seen this, when anger comes up, we may think, "Okay, I know what this is about. There's vulnerability in there somewhere, so let me find it." But that mode of putting something under the microscope to pull it apart and figure it out—that is often not so helpful. That idea of thinking we know what's in the middle, thinking we know where we're going, why this thing is happening—maybe that's what's happening, but our minds do lots of things and do them in many different ways, and this particular flavor might be different. So be willing to see what is actually here right now, as opposed to thinking, "Oh, I know what this is, let me find this."

The movement of meeting experience, of being with the what of experience—I like the phrase "being with," actually. We sometimes talk about investigation, and that word often invokes in our minds this exploration of why something is happening. Instead, I like to explore just the simplicity of what we mean by investigation: meeting experience, being with experience. Just landing with experience and being with this big mess of stuff.

Sometimes I just think, "Okay, well, it's a big mess. Can I hold it with really wide arms?" Meet whatever is obvious about that big mess. It's a mutating mess that turns in and out and inside out, and various pieces will come to the surface and become obvious. We can settle back and hold it with wide arms, letting ourselves see what comes to the surface, what's obvious in any given moment, and just meeting it, being with it. A gentle connection. Patience with allowing it to reveal itself. Letting the what of the present moment reveal itself.

It's really helpful not to make assumptions about what might be in there, because those assumptions may or may not be true.

And if you notice that there are assumptions, just see if you can hold them lightly. See if it can be a kind of, "Yeah, okay, that may be the case, but let's see." Just see if you can recognize whatever's obvious in this moment.

Another experience from my own practice. I hope that sharing these experiences gives you both a sense of how this can work and a sense of the possibility of what happens when we're willing to finally surrender and say, "Yeah, this is what's happening. Can I meet this?"

Over and over again in my own practice, when I finally surrendered, when I was capable of it... I mean, there are times, as we've mentioned, when mindfulness isn't strong enough to meet a really challenging pattern, when trying to meet something with mindfulness kind of takes us down the rabbit hole of it. When that's the case, we need to do other things, as Richard talked about last night—finding something else to pay attention to, opening our eyes or taking a walk, doing something to ground ourselves. I encourage people to find a place and a way to ground themselves, to have a kind of go-to method to help stabilize when something is overwhelming.

But many times, much of what I was doing—a lot of the actual reactivity—was around thinking it was a problem to be experiencing this difficulty. I had this view that as long as I was experiencing self-hatred or depression or anger or whatever it was, be-

cause I had a lot of this unpleasant, painful stuff going on in my mind, the practice wasn't actually going anywhere. It's like I had to wait for the practice to start until those went away.

When I finally recognized that this actually *is* the practice—to meet this self-hatred, to recognize, "Oh, depression, that's what's arising right now"—I could just surrender and recognize, "Yeah, this is what's happening right now. That's the honest truth." Being honest with myself: this is what's happening. And when I'm able to meet it, just holding it in a simple, simple way—"Oh yeah, here's depression. Yep, that's what's happening"—noticing when it comes, when it goes, just being with it when it's there.

The story I was thinking about sharing involves assumptions—and setting them aside, actually—because I saw something around depression. I was practicing in Burma at Sayadaw U Tejaniya's monastery for an extended period of time. There it's not always a silent community, so while I was in silence much of the time, usually once a day I would take a walk with a friend and we would have a conversation. At other times of the day, I would see other people meeting up for walk-and-talks while I'd be by myself, and I would often notice this depression coming up when I'd see other people together.

Immediately my mind went to, "Oh, I know what this is about. This is about all those times on the playground when I was excluded." I saw that and thought, "Okay, well, maybe..." And I just kind of set that aside. There was a little bit of a view in there that this was where it came from. But I just kept watching, kept noticing, kept exploring over the course of several weeks—exploring this mild, low-grade depression that was there a lot.

Then one day I felt into it in a new way. Maybe because I had been able to meet it over time, I was more familiar with it, more comfortable with meeting it and being with it. It no longer felt so threatening. That day when I was sitting with it, it felt like it was just growing. I was sitting in my room and it felt like the feeling of depression was getting really big. I thought, "Wow, that's different. What is that about?" It was just like, "Okay, what does this feel like for it to get really, really, really big, this depression?"

At some point, as it got so big, it felt like it flipped inside out. And it became mettā. It was this really vast, open heart of mettā. The very next thought in my mind was—in the midst of feeling this beautiful quality of mettā—my mind said, "This is stupid, this is sappy."

That moment was like an "Ah!" This felt like a connection to that expansive mettā being pushed down as somehow not right, as stupid and sappy. There was a repression of that feeling that was connected to the depression. That was not what I thought was at the center of that depression. That was not what my understanding of it had been.

In seeing that, it was like, "Wow, there's work to do here. There's work to do about understanding that relationship with mettā." But as I remember it, the depression was no longer so much of an issue on that retreat. Though there was other stuff to look at.

So with these multi-layered patterns, these many-flavored, messy kinds of patterns, patience is helpful. In my own experience, I've gone through many of these kinds, and there's a long arc of practicing with them. I practiced with a pattern around anger for many years, this depression over several weeks, self-hatred for many years. Just gradually the mind began to understand pieces of it and began to shift and let go of some of the ways in which it clung.

And so patience is essential, because we can jump in and think, "Okay, I've been with the what of experience for five minutes—why am I not getting an insight?"

It can take a long time. And yet this is not meant to be depressing, because in my own experience, as I think it's said in the suttas, the Dharma is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end.

Even just the beginning, where we start to recognize, "Oh, anger is happening—that's what's going on"—the mind gets some space around it. It's not like the anger is dissolving and vanishing, but we have a completely different relationship to it than when we're caught in the anger. So this opening to being with experience—immediately we start to experience the benefits. The whole releasing of these patterns can take time, but the Dharma is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end.

Sometimes, as I've pointed to, our views and beliefs and ideas can shape what we're experiencing if we're not careful. We tend to look for meaning—the why of things. "Why is this happening?" It's a movement towards meaning. And as we look for particular meaning, we may find something connected with our views about that. So again, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This overlay of views or concepts or ideas, beliefs, can happen in such a subtle way that we don't really recognize it—a kind of attribution of something happening.

Our bodies and minds have an intimate feedback loop. Sometimes things happen in our body and it affects our mind. Sometimes things happen in our mind and it affects our body. The emotional terrain is really in this mix. When a thought arises in the mind, it might move us towards an emotion and then physical sensations arise. Some-

times we can have physical sensations arise, and because they're similar to an emotion, the mind says, "Oh yeah, that must be what I'm feeling." Then that gets constructed because we're expecting it. So it's a two-way street.

We can just be curious when we're experiencing something, when we think we're experiencing certain sensations in the body. At times I've seen, "Oh, there's that kind of heaviness around the heart. Why am I feeling that way? I must be lonely." Well, maybe, maybe not. Maybe it's just a sensation.

On another retreat, I was waiting for an interview, and I'm sure many of you also experience a little bit of anxiety or agitation or restlessness of mind right before the interview. I certainly experienced that. "I'm getting ready—I haven't talked in three days and I'm getting ready to talk to my teacher. What is he going to think? Am I going to have something good to say? If I didn't write my report down, what am I going to do?" The mind doing its stuff.

This particular day, I was waiting for Joseph to finish his interview, and it went on a long time. So I got to sit there ten minutes feeling this feeling. I was like, "Okay, yep, I know—this is agitation, this is anxiety. Okay, anxiety. Yep, anxiety, anxiety, anxiety." Feeling all of these sensations and naming them anxiety.

By that point in the retreat, often the really being with an experience and meeting it clearly—there was something that happened, a shifting of the experience, maybe a settling, or something was revealed, or something new was seen. And that didn't happen. That very non-existence of something happening piqued my interest. What's going on? Kind of like that question I had when I was driving: What else is happening here?

I began realizing there was a lot of vibratory energy in the body, kind of like shaking all the way from my toes up my legs. It was intense. I started feeling it. And I stopped naming it as anxiety and just sat back and said, "What is this?"

And what I discovered in that moment was that it was rapture.

The sensations of rapture and the sensations of anxiety can be remarkably similar. In that moment, my mind had attributed anxiety to those sensations because of the situation—sitting there waiting for an interview. This is the kind of thing that happens: the views, the ideas, the beliefs we bring can shape our experience in the most amazing ways. It's quite something to start recognizing this.

Sometimes when we're observing emotions—and we haven't talked about this in the instructions yet, I think that's tomorrow—it can be useful, if you're noticing the physical experience associated with an emotion, to investigate more closely. Say you're noticing

that fear is happening. What are the physical sensations? Well, there's tightness in the throat and a kind of quivering in the stomach. You might let go of the idea of fear and just connect with the physical. Because sometimes there's a lot of overlap in terms of the physicality of various emotions. And sometimes they're vastly different, as was the case for me between anxiety and rapture. It was quite startling.

Being with our experience in this way—asking what is happening, what is happening—takes some courage. It requires shaking up our habitual ways of being with experience, because there are so many habits. We think we know. We think we know what's happening. But to keep stepping in and asking, "What actually is going on here? Is there something else happening?"—this is really simple.

This can be very, very simple. What's revealed is mind-bendingly elaborate and complex. But the practice that reveals it is so simple: What is this? What is this? What is this? Whether it's self-hatred or bliss—what is this?

That kind of commitment to asking "what is this" begins to point out and reveal these misconceptions, these overlays of concept that we're seeing through and believing. It reveals them just through the commitment. Just this, just this. We don't have to try to figure it all out. Just that simplicity.

The power of the mind and of mindfulness to understand how this is all constructed and put together is phenomenal. But that's the power of the mind and mindfulness—that's not something we can actually pick up and do ourselves. Thank goodness I don't have to figure that out. I would not know where to begin. But just the simple practice: What's this? What's this? What's this?

So let's sit and just be with ourselves for a few moments.

CHAPTER 147

Day 6 Brahmavihāra - Mettā: Dear Friend (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 43 min

In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella introduces the practice of extending mettā (loving-kindness) to a dear friend, the third category in the traditional commentarial approach to brahmavihāra practice. She explains how working with specific individuals—rather than abstract categories—allows us to touch into the particular challenges and "sticky places" in our relationships. The practice functions like a washing machine: the phrases act as soap that draws non-mettā qualities (irritation, frustration, attachment) to the surface of consciousness where they can be recognized and released.

Fella offers practical guidance for selecting a dear friend: someone with whom you have genuine connection, who is relatively happy in their current life, and to whom you're not sexually attracted. She suggests various ways to connect with the person during practice, including visualization, using their name, or simply sensing their presence as if they were sitting before you. The talk addresses both the near enemy of mettā (attached or conditional love) and the far enemy (anger, hatred), noting that both naturally arise during practice.

Particularly valuable is Fella's presentation of five skillful responses when difficulty arises: continuing with the practice while simply noting what's present; shifting to forgiveness practice; returning to an easier person; turning to vipassanā practice with the difficulty; or moving to compassion practice for oneself. The guided meditation that follows leads practitioners through cultivating mettā for self, easy being, and dear friend, culminating in imagining all three together sharing wishes for mutual well-being.

In the metta practice as passed down through the commentaries—which is where we're bringing this particular practice from—the Buddha offered in the suttas more of a radiating style of practice. And yet we appreciate the version of metta that's offered in the commentaries, because it really helps us to pick particular people in these various categories.

We've been doing easy being and self, and today we'll expand to dear friend, then in subsequent days to a neutral person and a difficult person. These categories—self, easy person or benefactor, dear friend, neutral person, difficult person—pretty much anybody in the world can fit into one of those categories.

And yet if we try to think about the general category of dear friend, for instance, we might just kind of generally think of people we like. But with bringing in a particular person, we touch into the specifics of relationship. That's really, I think, what's so brilliant about this form: we're touching into the different kinds of relationships we have through these categories, but looking at it through a particular specific relationship. And because we're looking at it through a particular specific relationship, we probably touch into some of the particular specific challenges of that relationship.

We might contemplate doing loving-kindness for all beings, and that might feel really lovely. But then if a particular person comes to mind, it's like, "Oh, well, but that person, hmm." So we go through these specifics in order to touch into and pull out some of the sticky places in our relationships. We go through these categories and pick particular people for each of them and work with that relationship.

Today we're going to be exploring the dear friend. We'll start in our practice together with the easy person and self, because one of the approaches with this kind of metta practice is that we tend to try to start where it's easiest and begin to cultivate the quality of the open heart, the connected heart, this quality of metta, of kindness, of caring. We start where it's easiest, where it may be more naturally arising for us.

The image that's offered is that with each of the easier beings, we have the opportunity for our heart to kind of fill up with this quality of metta, and then it can start to overflow. The image is offered of water filling a pool and then spilling over down to the next pool, then filling and spilling to the next pool. So we start where it's easiest and then shift to the next person as we feel like our heart has expanded a little more.

This also brings in a general tool: in exploring the metta as we go through these different categories through the days and weeks, if it gets difficult for you—I mean, we do work with difficulty and I'll talk a little bit about some of that today in the metta practice—but also, if it gets too challenging with a particular being, we can simply go back to where it's been easier. We can shift back to ourselves or to easier relationships.

With the dear friend, while I'm talking about qualities that may be useful in terms of considering a person, just be thinking in your mind of who you might want to choose. It should be someone that you have a good connection with, with whom it feels relatively easy to have that sense of caring. It's helpful if that person is pretty happy in their life right now, because we're going to be bringing this person into our mind. If they're struggling in their lives right now, it's not that you wouldn't want to wish them well, but it does shade more towards the compassion practice than the metta practice. So keeping it simpler that way—thinking about finding a person who's relatively happy in their lives right now, not going through a lot of struggle.

It's also helpful to choose someone to whom you're not sexually attracted. But it's okay if you want to play with it. I did a month of intensive metta practice, and I definitely picked someone for each of the categories that I wasn't sexually attracted to. But sometimes what happens in the metta is that we start feeling so much heart opening and care and love that it can feel kind of close to that kind of attraction. So it can be helpful to just be really clear about the difference—that this kind of open-hearted caring, that kind of connection, can be there when there's not the sexual attraction. It simplifies things, really. Choosing someone to whom you're not sexually attracted is a way of simplifying. But if you want to play with it and see what happens, you're welcome to.

I will say, if you're doing metta as a concentration practice—I know some of you here are doing metta intensively as a concentration practice—in that situation I would really strongly encourage not choosing someone to whom you're sexually attracted.

With a dear friend, in terms of offering the phrases, probably the other teachers mentioned different possibilities of connecting with the other being, of either just using their name or visualizing an image of them. Sometimes for me, visualization, active visualization, was a little of a challenge. It wasn't easy to call up an image necessarily of another being. What I found helpful is, kind of with my eyes closed, I imagined as if the other person was sitting in front of me. You might play with this right now. Just close your eyes and imagine one dear friend sitting in front of you, as if that person is with you. You don't even have to visualize it, but just as if that person was there. To me, that created a kind of field, as if I was with that person.

Now what I'd like to suggest is: pick somebody else to sit in front of you and see if the flavor of the field changes a little bit. That quality of using almost the kinesthetic sense of being with the person is available for some people.

That worked for me. So I also offer that as an option.

With a dear friend, there may be some kind of a little more ease with knowing what makes them happy. The phrases, the basic phrases that we use—may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe, may you live with ease—you may know some things about how the person would be or what they would be doing in happiness. One friend I did this for was an artist, and I just envisioned her in her artist studio as a way of thinking about her being happy, and then wishing, may you be happy. So sometimes with a dear friend we can be creative with the images, connecting to kind of knowing how our friend feels safe and how our friend feels happy and healthy.

And then because they are a dear friend—in picking a dear friend, part of the way the metta works is that especially when we pick a specific person, as I was talking about getting the specifics of the relationship in the mix, bringing a dear friend to mind and wishing may they be happy, sometimes what our mind will produce is all of the things that they've done that have irritated us. And we'll feel that. We'll feel that annoyance, we'll feel that frustration. And this is the metta practice at work. It's designed to work this way. It draws to the surface what is not metta.

It's kind of like a washing machine. We have a washing machine and we have our clothes that have stains in them. And this is like our minds—we've got in there the well-wishing and we've also got some of the grinchiness in there. So there it is. We have all of this stuff in our minds, and it's kind of like the stained clothes. We put the clothes in the washing machine, we fill it up with water, and we put some soap in there. And the soap dissolves in the water and then pushes through the clothes. Because of the way the chemical nature of soap works, it attaches to the soil in the clothes and pulls it out into the water. And that's kind of how the metta works. The effort of saying the phrases is like massaging the soap through the clothes. It's massaging those wishes through our mind. And it kind of attracts everything that's not metta, binds to it, and then pulls it into consciousness—like the soap pulling the soil into the water so that it can be rinsed away.

So this is how the metta practice works. It's not a mistake when we're doing metta and suddenly we're having these thoughts of, well, why did they do that thing? It's like, oh good, the metta practice is working. So not fighting it and not feeling like you're doing something wrong. This is the way it works. It's helpful to have an allowing attitude with whatever is arising for you during the metta practice.

The metta, as with all the other brahma-viharas, comes with what we might call near enemy and far enemy. The near enemy is a kind of relationship that's similar to the quality of metta but has some clinging in it. For metta, that would be a kind of attached love, a conditional love—I'll love you if you love me, or that neediness around love. There are different flavors of this attached quality of love. And with the dear friend, this can begin to happen. As you're connecting to these phrases, there might be a little bit of that leaning towards and wanting something back from them. So that's just something to notice. And again, the metta is designed to pull whatever is not that unconditional quality of love into consciousness. So we'll see this. It's not a mistake to see this when it comes up.

The far enemy is a quality of mind that we're not going to mistake for metta—anger, hatred. And this also can come up during our metta practice. Working with this, particularly when the aversive reactions arise, there are different things we can do. The first approach would be simply to recognize, oh yeah, this is the metta doing its work, and keep going. It's just like, okay, there it is, it's out into consciousness, let it be rinsed away—that kind of quality. It can be a little bit of a relief for those of us who are the dive-in-and-look-at-everything kind of people. When I did that month of metta practice, there was a stretch of time I was doing the evening dishes after the late night dishes, so I was the only one in there doing dishes and putting things in.

And I was doing metta for all beings at that time, because I was doing metta nonstop all day. It was during one of the February retreats, and I was just doing metta around the clock—well, probably not literally around the clock because I was asleep a good chunk of the time. But when I was awake, I was really inclining back to that practice.

While I was doing the dishwashing, something would happen. The door would be a little hard to close, or the button wouldn't respond quite right when I pushed it. And the mind just exploded: "Who designed this stupid machine anyway?" Oh, there it is—that kind of anger. At that point it was just, "Oh, I don't have to do anything with this. I just go on." And the next phrase: "May all beings be healthy. May all beings be at ease." It was kind of a relief in some ways that I didn't have to stop, put the metta down, and investigate the aversion. It was just the metta doing its job. There was a little bit of relief, and it passed.

So we can play with it in that way, just letting these near and far enemies come up and continuing with the metta practice.

If it feels a little stickier than that—say you're working with somebody specific, a dear friend, and some particular story has gotten stuck in your mind—you could explore the forgiveness practice that James talked about yesterday with that person. You could shift and instead of doing metta practice, work with forgiveness practice.

Another approach would be, as I said earlier, if it feels really sticky, you could let go of working with that being and step back to self or an easy being. Give yourself a break from that challenge. You do not have to hold yourself in there.

And then, if it really feels appropriate—and you can discern this for yourself—there are times when something comes up strongly enough that it feels right to let go of the metta practice and turn to vipassana practice with whatever has arisen. Just, "Okay, this is anger arising, this is frustration arising. How does it feel in the body? What's happen-

ing around that? What's the attitude? What's the relationship to this?" That's also another strategy that can be helpful: put down the metta practice and bring in the mindfulness practice around a difficulty.

And then sometimes—it varies for different people—I found that doing the metta practice at all different stages, with the different beings, there were times when my mind felt so compressed and contracted. It felt physically painful at times to be trying to orient to metta. This mind has had a lot of the aversive nature in it, and so while metta is its antidote, it also creates a kind of challenge at times.

One of my metta teachers suggested that if it's really painful for yourself, switch to compassion practice for yourself. It's still in that terrain of the Brahmaviharas. And that I felt like I could do. Actually, at one point during a daylong metta retreat, by the middle of the afternoon I could not even remember the phrases because it just felt like I had this steel band wrapped around my chest. It was so painful. The teacher said, "Well, try doing compassion practice for yourself." That I could do, and I could remember: "May I be free from this suffering." That was very resonant with what was being experienced. There was that ability to connect—yes, there is this wish to be free from this kind of contraction.

So that's another option. Let me review them again. I know this is a lot, but here are different approaches if difficulty arises during metta. First, just notice that something's arising and keep going. You don't have to stop just because there's a difficulty arising. Second, shift to forgiveness practice. Third, shift back to an easier person—let go of doing metta for that person and shift to someone easier. Fourth, do mindfulness practice with the difficulty. And fifth, shift to compassion practice.

You're welcome to just play with how it works, how those tools support you in your metta practice.

So we'll practice this together, and we'll start again with self and benefactor, or self and easy being.

Finding a posture that feels comfortable. It's really helpful to have ease of posture in the metta practice.

Beginning with checking in to the area of your heart, just seeing how it is right now. What's happening in that area? Nothing right or wrong—just noticing what's happening there.

And then perhaps having the sense of even breathing through the heart center, with a sense of connection and care for yourself.

Beginning wherever it's easiest for you, either with yourself or with an easy being. Let yourself first connect with qualities you appreciate, either about yourself or about the easy person or being. It could be a pet, somebody really easy, some being very easy for you. Qualities you appreciate about yourself or that being. This recollecting of beautiful qualities is said to be the proximate cause for metta to arise. So connecting to that appreciation.

If it supports you, putting your hand on your heart—sometimes that can help connect you with this area.

Allowing an image to come to mind of either yourself or this person, or the felt sense, or the name of the person. Beginning to express, to offer the wishes of kindness:

May I or you be happy.
May I or you be healthy.
May I or you be safe.
May I or you live with ease.

Continuing for the next few minutes, offering these wishes of kindness.

It can be helpful to stay connected with this area of the heart and almost envision the heart as a pool of warm water, each phrase being like dropping a flower onto the surface of that water, ripples arising as the flower lands. What are the ripples in the heart as you make that wish? Staying connected with the felt sense of the heart with each wish.

Now, whether you've been working with self or easy being, allow there to arise a sense or an image of the two of you together. We'll take a transitional time here, exploring what it might feel like to allow that easy being, that benefactor, to send metta to you—that you're receiving the well wishes from that being. Envisioning them expressing to you:

May you be happy.
May you be healthy, safe, and at ease.

What does it feel like to receive those wishes?

And now shifting. If you did self before, shifting to easy being. If you did easy being before, shifting to self. Exploring well wishes for yourself, for the easy being, for a few minutes.

And now allowing your dear friend to come into your mind. Taking a few moments to reflect on qualities you appreciate about your friend. Ways they've supported you, cared for you. Things they've done, ways they've supported others that you appreciate. Allow yourself to appreciate your friend.

And begin offering the wishes of kindness to your friend:

May you be happy.

Again, taking the time with each phrase to check in on how it feels to make that wish. Noticing the ripples. Dropping that wish like a flower into the warm water.

May you be healthy.
May you be safe.
May you live with ease.

Continuing for the next few minutes, wishing kindness, thoughts of goodwill for your friend. Noticing how it affects the heart to do so.

For the last couple of minutes of the sitting, I'd like to invite you to imagine yourself, your easy being, and your dear friend together—the three of you together, perhaps facing each other. And imagining the three of you wishing together:

May we be happy.

Reminding ourselves that wishing happiness doesn't mean that we're denying it for ourselves. In fact, just the opposite.

May we be happy.

May we be healthy.

May we be safe.

May we live with ease.

This talk was originally given at a meditation retreat. For information on how to support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org/donate.

CHAPTER 148

Exploring the Edges of the Wandering Mind

Andrea Fella · 1h06

> *In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella offers a fresh perspective on the wandering mind—typically viewed as a meditation obstacle—reframing it as a valuable doorway to understanding the nature of awareness and not-self (anattā). Rather than combating mental wandering with judgment or force, she encourages practitioners to explore its edges with curiosity and kindness.*
>
> *Fella distinguishes between different types of wandering: the drifty daydream quality, active charging into past or future, mental storms, and even getting lost in pleasant states like calm. She references the Buddha's teaching on the five aggregates (khandhas), particularly mental formations (saṅkhārā), noting that the wandering mind serves as direct evidence for the uncontrollable, not-self nature of experience. As the Buddha taught, if mindfulness were truly self, we could simply command it to remain—yet clearly we cannot.*
>
> *The talk's practical heart lies in exploring two "edges" of wandering: the moment mindfulness returns and the moment it slips away. When mindfulness returns, Fella suggests noticing this effortless arising—we didn't make it happen, yet here it is. This moment offers a taste of awareness itself and reveals what landscape the mind has wandered into. When mindfulness departs, we can grow curious about the conditions: certain locations, activities, attention shifts, or habitual states like boredom or sleepiness. She shares personal examples, including discovering an unconscious habit of looking in mirrors, and emphasizes that even states we assume preclude mindfulness—spaciness, dullness, fog—can themselves become objects of awareness. As practice deepens, wandering may actually signal the mind attuning to subtler phenomena, requiring patience rather than forceful correction.*

As we observe our minds, we start to see patterns, habits of mind that are familiar. We all have different habits of mind. Some of us may have more aversive habits. Some of us may have more wanting habits. But there's one habit of mind that we all share, and that is the habit of the mind wandering. I'd like to talk about getting curious about this habit of mind.

It's useful to get curious about any of our habits of mind and begin to investigate them, explore what's happening around them. What are the conditions that lead to their happening? What are the conditions that lead to their ending? The same is true around the wandering mind.

The wandering mind happens in different ways. What I mean by wandering mind is basically a state of low mindfulness or no mindfulness—mindfulness has disappeared. This experience while it's wandering can be very different, and when we come back there can be very different experiences given what has been happening in the wandering.

Sometimes the mind loses touch with experience and it might just be with a kind of drifting, almost a daydreamy quality. There's been a lot of this; I've heard many of you describing this in your meetings with us. As the mind settles and gets a little more concentrated, this happens. It's not like the mind is charging out and thinking about something we know about. Sometimes it's even images or thoughts about people we don't know, topics we don't care about. It's just drifting. That's one way this wandering mind happens.

Then there are the more active ways, where the mind charges out to take up the mantle of something that happened in our past or our future—strong thoughts of past or future. Then there are mind storms, where it just feels like you're swamped.

A lot of what I've described involves some form of thought. Often the wandering mind involves some form of thought, but not always, because sometimes the mind can drift into states where there's not much thought, but there's also not much mindfulness. Spacing out has this kind of quality. Sometimes the mind can get lost in pleasant states, like calm. We get really, really calm and tranquil and then the mindfulness just... there we are, somewhere in the universe.

We can't make ourselves come out of the wandering. We can't make the mindfulness come back. But it will come back at some point. This is one of the great things about mindfulness—it's a natural quality of mind, an ordinary quality of mind that happens in our lives. It functions to help us live, and so sometimes it gets lost, and then there are conditions that help it come back.

Now, this is distinguishing mindfulness from right mindfulness. Just being aware in the present moment doesn't necessarily mean that we are oriented with the perspective of wisdom, with the perspective of right view. But it's a simple perspective, and mostly when we use the word mindfulness, we mean right mindfulness. The simple perspective of mindfulness is: What is this? What is this human experience?

The quality of mindfulness being ordinary means it's a quality that naturally comes and goes. We don't have to be taught about it in order for mindfulness to arise, but we do need to be taught to use that mindfulness in a skillful way. This is what the Buddha taught us—this curiosity about what is this present moment experience as a human ex-

perience, and to also be curious about what is leading to struggle and suffering and what leads away from struggle and suffering. These are the aspects of right effort leading to right mindfulness.

We can't make mindfulness re-arise, any kind of mindfulness, but when mindfulness does re-arise, we have the opportunity to bring this perspective back—the perspective of curiosity, of kindness, of allowing, of that receptive interest in what's happening. And when we notice that the mind is waking up, we can get curious about that.

And this is one of the pieces that I really want to explore around the wandering mind.

Sally talked about working with thoughts the other day, and I don't want to go into that aspect so much. What I do want to do is really talk about exploring what I'll call the edges of the wandering mind—what happens in the mind when mindfulness returns, that edge of the wandering mind, and what happens as the mind is kind of letting go of paying attention and slipping out.

We can be curious about both sides, and there is a lot to learn about our minds by looking at this, by being curious about this part of our experience.

We often have a relationship with the wandering mind as being something of a problem. It's something we want to not do. And so we have a relationship with the fact that the mind has wandered, and that's often a judging relationship. That relationship—having a judging attitude when the mind is returning from being lost—we miss the opportunity to catch that edge, to catch that edge of mindfulness returning.

And likewise on the other edge, where mindfulness is kind of slipping out. Often we have this relationship of not wanting the mind to wander, so we might double down on trying to keep the mind here. And we might miss the opportunity to see something new as the mind lets go of what it's paying attention to and begins to orient to something else.

So I'll talk about both of these sides and what we can learn, how we might be curious about this. I've learned so much through this exploration, and I really just hope to convey some of my own delight and joy in watching this process going on in the mind—not trying to stop it necessarily, but being curious about it.

There's a lot we can learn. I want to start by giving an overview of some of the things we can discover by noticing these edges of the wandering mind.

Given that the wandering mind is often connected to the mind getting caught by something, there's much we can learn about that. When we return, we can learn something about the ways we get caught. Do we tend to get caught in planning or judging or fantasizing? We can begin to learn what makes us lose balance of mind, where we tend to get caught. We get familiar with our top patterns of mind, essentially, by noticing where we are when mindfulness returns.

Another important learning that's kind of staring us in the face—but we don't really take in often—is that the wandering mind is actually a pointer, a piece of evidence, for this truth of not-self.

We sit down to meditate. We think, "I'm sitting down to meditate." We pay attention to what's happening in the present moment; we connect with our breath, with sound, our body, a broader sense of experience. And how long does that last? The mind wanders. Who made the mind wander? We didn't do that. Some conditions came into play that made mindfulness disappear.

So we think we sit down to meditate, and then the mind gets lost. Why does that happen? Essentially, it's habits. It's conditions. It's habits of mind. We have very little control over the fact that the mind wanders out of the present moment. We have no control over how long it wanders and when we wake up.

And that's another amazing thing. We're lost in something or other—some memory or plan—and suddenly mindfulness returns. Who did that? Again, conditions. Conditions arose that allowed mindfulness to return in that moment.

And so this wandering mind, the fact of this wandering mind which we see hundreds if not thousands of times a day, is a pointer to a very deep truth: we don't have control over our minds.

The Buddha pointed to this in one of the discourses he gave about the five aggregates, or five aspects of our experience that make up the various functions of our minds and bodies. He said of all of these—and I'm not going to go into them in detail; we'll probably give a talk on the aggregates at some point—these five are form or body, feeling, perception, mental formations (which includes thoughts, emotions, and states of mind like mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom), and consciousness.

Of those five—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—mental formations contains a lot. It contains thoughts, mindfulness, and much more. And in one sutta, the Buddha took each of these five and gave a little discourse around its uncontrollability. He said, "Mental formations are not self."

Mindfulness is not self. If mindfulness were the self, it would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible to say with regard to mindfulness, "Let my mindfulness be thus. Let my mindfulness not be thus." But precisely because mindfulness is not self, it lends itself to dis-ease. It is not possible to say, "Let my mindfulness be thus."

We can cultivate conditions that support mindfulness, but we don't have absolute control. Just as this example of the mind wandering shows us—mindfulness gets lost. Habits take the mindfulness away. It's not self that it does that.

And so, if we can let it in, the fact of the wandering mind can be, instead of some kind of affront to our practice, a reminder. Mental formations are not self. It's evidence for this process nature of our minds. And so that's another piece that we can learn about. To me it's almost more of an attitude associated with the wandering mind—that we're more curious about it instead of having a combative relationship with it. Just that curiosity: when is mindfulness? Wow, here it is again. Here it is, right there. Or feeling it kind of slipping out. What's happening? What conditions are arising that it's feeling like it's getting smothered? What's going on?

So that's a significant thing that we can explore—having a different relationship with the wandering mind that helps us to take in that truth, the uncontrollability of the mind.

Another piece that we can start to really see, learn about, and explore is this: the wandering mind is a really good place to get familiar with and get a taste of what the experience of awareness itself is like. Here in this talk I'm going to be using the words awareness and mindfulness synonymously. I actually prefer awareness to mindfulness. Mindfulness to me has a kind of mental quality, whereas awareness feels more diffuse, more pervading—rather than being located in the mind. For me it's more resonant, more evocative of the quality that I think we mean when we say mindfulness, or when we use the word *sati*, the Pali word that's usually translated as mindfulness.

So we can begin to learn something about mindfulness itself, about awareness itself, through seeing the wandering mind. Essentially, what we are exploring in this case is the coming and going of mindfulness. That's all the wandering mind is—the coming and going of mindfulness. And we can explore it from that perspective.

One of the easiest places to start this exploration around the edges of the wandering mind is when mindfulness returns. We've been lost, we're not present, and mindfulness comes back. What we usually do in that moment—or many of us have had at least a habit of—is maybe judging ourselves about that. Our mind has been wandering. As

soon as mindfulness returns, there can be almost a feeling of yanking ourselves back to the breath, or pulling ourselves—it's like mindfulness has returned and we think, "Oh, I need to be back somewhere."

But in that moment when mindfulness has returned, we're already back. There's nowhere to come back to. Mindfulness has arisen.

And one of the great things to check into there is: what is the experience of becoming mindful again? It's a very distinct experience in the moment after we've been lost and mindfulness returns. It can be a very distinct experience as we catch it, as we get curious about this moment and catching the moment mindfulness returns.

At first we might catch it a little late. It's almost like sometimes the mindfulness returns behind our back. We don't see the mindfulness returning; suddenly it's like, "Oh, I think I was thinking a few minutes ago." So sometimes that happens, and then you're just there with what's happening in that moment.

But sometimes we can see the mindfulness returning. Sometimes it feels like it's kind of coming out of the mud. The more curious we get about this moment, the more we can begin to notice the moments right as mindfulness has re-arisen. There can be a kind of lingering memory, almost like a scent, of what it was like for the mind to not be mindful a few moments ago—kind of lost in a swamp or a swirl, or maybe a drifty quality.

And now, what is it like for mindfulness to be back?

Joseph gave this instruction at one point. He said, "Notice the difference between being lost and being present." And I went off and tried to explore that. I thought, hmm, I can't really know what it's like when I'm lost. But in that moment when mindfulness comes back, I have a kind of memory of what it was like to be lost. Because our mind keeps track of that, it kind of registers what preceded. So there's that recognition. And then there's this sense of, oh, awareness is here now.

As I started exploring this, I became curious about whether I could know as early as possible when mindfulness returns. And of course, you can't really do that—it's not something you can do because mindfulness just returns. But we can set the aspiration to catch it as soon as possible. And I found that this did have some effect.

There are great things about that moment. There's the beginning of seeing the quality of mindfulness itself. Because in that moment, the contrast between non-mindfulness and mindfulness can help us understand what the experience of being aware actually is.

The other great thing about that moment is that you didn't have to do anything to make it happen. You have become mindful completely effortlessly. That is a moment of mindfulness that you didn't have to work for. That was another piece I really cherished. It's like, ah, I didn't have to do anything for that—here is the mindfulness. And so it begins to point us toward a quality of easeful attention, this moment of mindfulness returning.

If we are not habitually beating ourselves up for having been lost in thought, we can catch something precious here. Because this moment of mindfulness returning is pretty quick—it doesn't last very long. And if we are habitually, as soon as mindfulness returns, thinking, "Oh, rats, I forgot to be mindful and I've got to come back to my breath," we've missed it.

But when Joseph gave that instruction to notice the difference, it was transformative. It did not matter how many times my mind wandered in a sitting. Anytime my mind wandered, it was just another opportunity to take in that effortless mindfulness when mindfulness re-arose. It cut through the judging mind so quickly for me to have that attitude around seeing mindfulness return. It was like, oh, I get to see effortless mindfulness here.

This also has a benefit: as we notice mindfulness returning and become familiar with it, we become familiar with what it feels like to be mindful. Maybe we start to get that flavor of what it feels like to be mindful. In my own practice, as I attuned to that moment of mindfulness returning, I began to notice something. It was like getting familiar with that moment caused it to point itself out to me. It became easier to see mindfulness returning because I had been curious about it.

So often when mindfulness returns, we kind of latch onto something and start thinking about it. But this moment of mindfulness returning happens all the time. It happens throughout our day, not just in meditation. We're walking down the hill and maybe thinking about something, and then suddenly we're mindful again. Or we're in the shower, kind of lost in the pleasantness of it, and suddenly awareness is back. This experience of awareness returning begins to get familiar, and that familiarity helps us see it more clearly. And so recognizing this moment of effortless mindfulness returning is itself a way of cultivating mindfulness.

That's one piece of working with the edge of the wandering mind—just that we get to see mindfulness returning. That's been such a joy to explore.

And then there is this: the moment of mindfulness returning is already aware of something. We don't have to look for an object, because when mindfulness arises, it is connected to an experience. So when mindfulness returns, there is something that it is aware of already. If we can tune into that, it's simply, okay, mindfulness is back—what is mindfulness knowing in this moment? What's here?

Probably, or possibly, what's here in this moment is flavored by what had been happening when your mind was wandering, because of causes and conditions. Our mind charges out into memories and plans.

When the mindfulness returns, there's probably going to be some of that charge present. That may be what is most obvious, in fact. And so this is another thing we can be curious about in that moment. One way I frame this sometimes is: okay, mindfulness is back. I know that I'm aware. And what has been the effect of the mind having been lost? It's kind of like the thinking process, or whatever has been going on, has been shaping the mind while we weren't looking.

So in the mindfulness returning, it's useful to connect with and be curious about what's here now—which means what has been shaped by the last few moments of mind wandering. This might be, if the mind has been lost in an argument or a plan, that when we come back there's probably going to be some lingering feelings, emotions, or tensions. The reverberations from those thoughts. And it's really helpful to take a moment to step into that and know that.

Because if we jump over it and just try to come back to the breath, or try to come back to some other experience—whatever we think we should be being mindful of rather than what's actually here right now—if we jump over what's really actually here right now, something can be constructed in that moment that might be relevant for us to understand. Sometimes after the mind has wandered, it has shaped attitudes and moods in our mind. And if we don't notice that—if our mind has gone off into an argument with a co-worker and we come back and just go, "Oh well, that's not important, I'll just come back to the breath"—that construct of the argument with the co-worker could have created in the mind an attitude of aversion and anger. And then that could be brought to the breath, brought to whatever we're paying attention to, without our being aware of it.

So it's really helpful to check in. Another phrase from Joseph Goldstein: What's the landscape that you're waking up into? The mind has gone off to some other planet when it's been wandering. Okay, what planet am I waking up on? What's the landscape of this planet? And no judgment about this—just curiosity.

I mentioned earlier there are different ways that the mind wanders. There's that kind of charging out. But there's also the drifting out, as I mentioned. Or there's a kind of getting lost in states of mind, spacing out or something like that. When mindfulness returns—and the more the mind settles and the further we get in our practice, just in general—sometimes when the mind wanders, it's not wandering into reactivity. It's wandering into love and compassion, or calm, or peace. And in the moment when mindfulness returns, again, that too will have shaped the mind.

When the mind wanders, sometimes it's not being pulled into something; it's more just a weakening of mindfulness. But sometimes the mind will wander into wholesomeness. The more we practice and the more our mind inclines in that direction, the more it might wander there without our participation. In fact, sometimes I think it's almost like the mind says, "Okay, I am sitting down and I am meditating and I'm going to pay attention to this. I'm going to be in charge." And at some point the mind just goes, "Hey, I know a better way. Let's relax. Let's find some calm." And my agenda to be here with this thing is like—the mind says, "Yeah, you do that. I'm going to go rest."

I've seen more often than I would have imagined that when I return from wandering, the mind is more settled than it was before I wandered. And if we are judging the wandering mind, we'll miss that. Because if we are judging or thinking it's a problem that the mind has wandered, that judgment will disrupt and ripple that quality of calm or wholesomeness that has been wandered into.

This is another carrot, hopefully, for being curious about that moment. Just: what's here? What planet am I on? Maybe I'm on the calm planet. And then we can begin to get familiar with that quality. Sometimes as the mind wanders into a state of calm or ease, it's finding its way to something quieter or subtler, and our mind doesn't quite know how to stay with it. But in the moment when mindfulness returns, that moment of being with—oh, here I am on the calm planet—it's like, oh, this is what it's like to be mindful of calm. And so that moment of returning, we may begin to touch into states of mind or qualities that

are more ephemeral almost, more diffuse qualities that may be a little harder to stay with at times.

And then there's the other side of the equation—the mind wandering out, getting lost. This one is sometimes, especially early in practice, people say, "Well, there's no way to see that happening. It just happens." And yet, the more we get attuned to our mind, the more we can begin to be curious about the conditions in which we lose mindfulness. What happens? When does it happen? What are the states of mind, the familiar places, the things we're doing in which it happens?

Some of this happens by seeing where we wake up. If we wake up with the mind having been bored, it's like, "Well, maybe the mind gets lost in boredom." So we might begin, in recognizing where mindfulness returns, to be attuned to that state. "Oh, boredom's here. This is a place I tend to get lost." And it's kind of like we add just a little bit of interest to that. What happens here?

What I would not want to encourage in this exploration—this is a delicate place to explore—is that if we are trying to not have the mind wander, we won't see how the mind wanders. So for instance, around seeing something like boredom and noticing that you have a habit perhaps of the mind wandering in boredom, rather than feeling like, "Oh, boredom's here, let me double down and try to stay present, hold on to that mindfulness," it's more like curiosity. At least for me, there was a kind of curiosity: "Okay, what happens in boredom that the mindfulness lets go?"

That curiosity is what I'd like to encourage in all of these different ways. I'm going to go through several different ways that we might begin to explore places or ways that we lose awareness. Again, this is to support us to learn about our minds—not to judge ourselves. Because without exception, this is happening for everyone. You are not alone in your mind wandering.

One thing we can start to recognize is that the mind might lose awareness in particular activities or places. Locations. Maybe when we're washing our dishes, or doing our yogi job, or walking down to the meal, or going into our rooms. That's a great one. Sometimes we actively give it up there. It's like, "Whew, nobody can see." Shut the door.

Those are ones to explore. As you see, you might notice—what are the rabbit holes of mindfulness? What are the places it just goes away? These you'll often notice after the fact. You'll notice sometime later, "Oh yeah, here I am back again, and I know I was not mindful when I was in my room."

When we begin to recognize the places where we tend to be lost, often we might be aware as we're walking to our room, or heading to wash the dishes. Maybe we've been very present for our meal, but then something happens as we get up and go to the dishes. As you get familiar with the places that mindfulness gets lost, again, there can be added a little interest. What happens here? It's not, again, to try to force myself—stepping, stepping, stepping, stepping, opening the door, going in. It's not to try to force yourself. It's more about curiosity. What happens? What happens as I walk to the dish station?

What happens as I go into my room? Where does the mind get caught? What does it pick up on that it gets more interested in than being mindful?

What you might start to see is that whatever it is that the mind picks up on, we don't have to get lost in that. It's almost like we have habits of getting lost in certain places or things, and so we might just be curious about that.

On one retreat I was doing this kind of exploration, noticing where mindfulness got lost, and I kept noticing that I would wake up into mindfulness staring at myself in the mirror. I never had noticed that I intended to look in the mirror—I didn't know how I ended up looking in the mirror. And so I got curious about that. Again, I didn't double down and try to stay. I wanted to just see what happens. When is it that I look in the mirror, and what's going on there?

I missed it over and over and over again. I would find myself staring at myself in the mirror. And yet I just kept that intention alive. I knew that heading into my room where there was a mirror, or heading into the restroom where there was a mirror, I'd be like, "Okay, let's see what happens. Maybe I'll get to see it this time." That was the way I approached it—not "I am going to make myself see it," but rather, "Maybe I'll get to see it this time."

At some point through this—and it probably took several days before I began to see it—I was just washing my hands, and it was a habit to look up. It was so subtle as a habit that it was just something I did pretty much every time I was in the bathroom washing my hands or in front of my sink. I would just look up. It was not that there was some kind of deep need to be seen by myself or anything like that. It was really just as simple as a habit.

One of the main places that we lose attention is when mindfulness shifts to a new object, to a new experience. We're sitting here knowing the breath or body or something, and then there's a sound of the turkey. We may be very mindful of that, but sometimes what happens is that we are so committed to staying with the breath that part of our mind thinks it's staying with the breath while the attention has actually shifted to the sound of the turkey. This is one of the primary ways our mind wanders—attention shifts and we haven't consciously recognized that shift.

This is one of the reasons why, in that form of walking I offered early in the retreat, I encouraged noticing the shift from seeing to looking, from hearing to listening. This is getting familiar with that shift of attention—seeing when the mind kind of goes, "Ooh, that's interesting." It's very similar in sitting. It might be that the attention shifts to some unfamiliar body sensation, or a sudden sound, a sneeze or a cough.

If we have an agenda in our meditation to stay with something, we might have either a kind of willful ignoring of those shifts or a yanking ourselves back from them. But we can simply be mindful when the attention shifts, just noticing. Getting familiar with seeing to looking, hearing to listening can help us understand that quality of what it's like when attention shifts. And because it happens so much, as we get familiar with it, it begins to point itself out to us. We can see the attention moving from thing to thing to thing. Then, as we see that shift, we don't have to have a sense of "the attention has shifted, let me come back to anything." It's like, "Well, the attention has shifted and I can be mindful of that now."

On one retreat I was doing this with the breath, and I began noticing that while I was with the breath, there was almost a little sinking of the attention—breath and attention very close and connected, and then this feeling of just a little sinking, the mindfulness letting go of what I had been paying attention to. Initially I was doing breath meditation, so it was like, "Oh, welcome back to the breath." I'd feel it sink, and connect again, sink and connect again.

At some point the mind was just curious—and this wasn't something I really felt like I did—but there was this sinking, and then the mind realized, "Well, I'm aware of this sinking. What's the mind doing? Where's it going?" So rather than trying to bring it back, I just thought, "Okay, it's going somewhere. Where's it going?"

going to one of those more calm, expansive states, it spread into something that was just so completely different—something I had not consciously experienced before. And it was that willingness to follow the attention rather than controlling the attention that allowed it to unfold.

I mentioned a little earlier that we might get lost in states of mind like boredom, and we can tend to get lost in familiar habitual states of mind—states of mind in which we tend to be identified. This is also useful to understand. Whatever the habitual patterns or habits might be—for me, I've talked a bit about self-hatred; this was one that I would tend to get lost in—to be curious and to learn skillfully how to work with that, seeing how the mind begins to head there and what it's like when it wakes up into that. We begin to learn something about those patterns at the edges of being lost in them.

And then there's the getting lost in states in which the mindfulness habitually gets lost, but it's not necessary to get lost. States like dullness, sleepiness, spaciness, zoning out. We might think that spaciness is inherently non-mindful, but it is just a state of mind. I would say it's a state in which we are habitually checked out, habitually not mindful. But it is possible to be aware of that state.

Sleepiness, for instance—we might have the thought in our mind, "I'm too something to be mindful. I'm too sleepy to be mindful. I'm too spacey to be mindful. I have such low energy, I can't be mindful." If you have that thought, you have enough energy to be mindful of it. Because you are mindful of it. You know it's there. You've just told yourself it's there.

It's a different kind of mindfulness. Often in those places or states, we have some agenda for how we want to be mindful. We want to be mindful in the way we want our minds to be mindful. We want to have everything clear and precise and know exactly what it's landing on. But it's more like the world is full of fog. And when it's a really foggy day here, you look down the hill and maybe you can see vague outlines of the buildings. You can't see things very clearly, but you know your eye is working. It's not a problem there. You're not trying to see the clarity of the building. Your eye is perfectly seeing the fog. It's pretty happy seeing the fog.

Similarly, when there is a low energy state like this, or a spacing out state, often the mind is much more interested in that state itself. It's not interested in being precisely clear about all the various other experiences that are happening. It's interested in the fog. And it can know the fog.

I sometimes use the analogy of a mirror for mindfulness. A mirror just reflects what is in front of it. It doesn't care what it reflects, whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, beautiful, ugly. The mirror is unaffected by what it's reflecting. In a similar way, our mindfulness can be unaffected by pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It just can know that.

And then consider the mirror in the bathroom after we've had a hot shower and it's all steamy. The mirror is coated with steam and we're standing in front of it. Maybe we think we need to do something, wipe the mirror off. But the mirror is still doing its job perfectly. It is reflecting every single drop of water on the mirror perfectly. It is just not doing the job we want it to do. And that's often what happens for us in those states of mind. There's some agenda we have. We want our minds to be a certain way. We want to have clarity. And that's not what our mind is doing in that moment.

And so if we can be curious about, well, what is it like to have a foggy mind? What is it like to space out? I had a kind of exploration around spacing out one morning. I was having breakfast and I kept noticing that the mind kept spacing out. My idea, my agenda at that point was that I wanted to pay attention to the eating—chewing and swallowing and tasting. And so I kept coming back to that. I'd notice that I was spacing out and I'd keep thinking, "Oh, come back, be mindful."

At some point, it kept happening. At some point I thought, well, okay, let's see. Can I follow the mind into spacing out? And I found I could. I could be with that. It felt like the mind hovered somewhere up here, this kind of buzzy quality. It was really pleasant. It felt really restful. And in being mindful of it, that's what I recognized. Oh, the mind needs rest. Again, it's kind of like the mind was saying, "Hey, you're working too hard. Whether you come along or not, I'm going to take some rest." And finally I let the mindfulness go with it. And in that, really felt into the rest. Within thirty seconds or so the mind had taken its rest, and then I was just with the eating.

Anytime there's a sense of "can't be mindful while something is happening," don't believe that thought. It's possible to be mindful of anything—except maybe non-mindfulness. But any state of mind, it's possible to be mindful of.

I have one last piece to share, and I want to bring it in at about this point in the retreat because sometimes—I've been talking about different times and places where we lose awareness. We lose awareness in certain places when attention shifts. We can lose awareness habitually in certain states of mind. And sometimes we lose awareness as the practice deepens. There are different reasons why this might happen.

There's a cycle that Michelle McDonald has called a purity-purification cycle. On a long retreat like this, we see these cycles. It's not just continually more and more easeful. I think you all know that by now. We have cycles. Something settles for a few days, we're maybe in a place of calm and ease, and then something else happens and there's another storm.

Someone asked Sylvia Boorstein, "Why is it that the mind gets really calm and relaxed and then suddenly it's firing off all of these problems? Why does it do that?" And she said, "Well, it's kind of like in space there's all this space junk—satellites and things left over, the detritus from rockets we've sent up. There's a whole bunch of stuff circling the planet. And apparently when they fire a rocket, they need to be careful to make sure there's a good gap in the space junk." Those moments when it's really calm and easeful—it's kind of like sometimes some part of our mind says, "Oh, finally, there's space for me to come up."

As practice deepens, our minds begin to let go of their habits, and things that have been kept under pressure, things buried, begin to surface. So it's not a mistake when something challenging arises. It's that the conditions in this moment allow that to come up now. Sometimes that's what happens as practice deepens—something that has been submerged for a while just comes up. That's one way. Another way mindfulness can get lost as practice deepens—

And again, this has to do with something I mentioned earlier about the shift of attention. We're paying attention to a certain set of things that we're familiar with. Over time, we start to get familiar with what our bodies feel like inside, get familiar with the various sensations, and what our moods and emotions are like. So we're kind of familiar with a certain set of things. And at this level of experience, our mindfulness is attuned to that—we're familiar with looking at that stuff.

But what seems to happen, and this is my own take on it, is that as the mindfulness gets more continuous, it gets interested in subtler experience. And maybe it's experience, in fact, that we're not familiar with. So what can happen is we're familiar with this level of experience and mindfulness here, but as mindfulness becomes more continuous, it begins to gravitate toward something that we're not familiar with. And that's when mindfulness will slip out—because it's moving in the direction of experiences we can't even recognize necessarily.

So this can be an uncomfortable place in practice. It's like, I don't know what the mindfulness is paying attention to. It's paying attention to *something*. And so this is a place, again, where we may need to adjust. If you see, after a period of time where the mindfulness has been pretty stable and connected to experience, that suddenly the mind starts wandering, get curious about that. Don't double down and try to stay with what you're already familiar with. Because often in that place, as the mindfulness gets stronger, suddenly it seems like, wow, I was right there, and then it's just—what happened? The mindfulness got lost. And it feels a little confusing. We're right there, and then suddenly it's gone.

So if that starts happening, just be curious about this phenomenon. You might simply ask, what else is happening here? What's going on?

I explored this on one retreat where I noticed I was right with the breath, and it had been a few days on one three-month course that I was able to stay with the breath. I'd sit down and just be right there. It was so easy. It was very familiar—every breath was familiar, and it was just so easy to be with. And then one morning I sit down and my mind is just all over the place. I hadn't taken a break from mindfulness or done anything different.

So at this point I just started getting curious. What is going on? And what I began to see is that very quickly, within one breath, the sensations of the breath—I just kind of got, so here's a breath, and very quickly that breath just disappeared. Within a breath, there was no breath anymore. And the mind would just slip out.

That helped me to understand something. At one point on a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, I said, "The breath is disappearing, so I'm turning to more obvious experience." And he said, "You don't have to do that. You just have to know the breath is disappearing. Just know that it's quiet. Just know that it's subtle."

I was like, really? And it was true. When I went back and tried playing with it, as the breath kind of went quiet, it was like, oh, quiet breath. And I didn't have to know all the precise details. My mind, again, had some agenda to know all the precise details of what the breath was. And it was no longer able to track that. But it could know that it had just gotten really quiet. And it could stay with that.

So again, I think that sometimes in this terrain, when the mindfulness starts slipping away after a period of steady practice, it may be turning towards something unfamiliar—something we're not as accustomed to meeting or being with. It could be a state of calm or concentration. That place where I finally noticed the mind slip from the breath and then opened into something vast and spacious—that was completely unfamiliar. It was a little startling. But it gave me a sense of how the mind can be mindful of things I don't know, things I'm not familiar with.

My main purpose in offering this is to encourage you to have some curiosity around this wandering mind. I also want to point out that an increase in wandering doesn't necessarily mean you've lost concentration and mindfulness. It can mean that the mind is attuning to subtler phenomena. It can take time for our awareness to come down to the level that mindfulness is operating at—for us to get in sync with what the mindfulness is wanting to attune to. Some patience during this time is often helpful.

And boy, do we get an education about our minds in this process—an education not only about our personal habits, but also about the conditioned nature of mind itself. This understanding is one of the doorways into deep freedom: seeing that it's all just conditioned processes at work.

Let's sit for just a moment.

CHAPTER 149

Day 20 Muditā Practice (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 44 min

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of muditā, the brahmavihārā practice of sympathetic or empathetic joy. She beautifully illustrates the quality through the metaphor of sympathetic vibration in music—how one string's vibration naturally causes a nearby string to resonate. This captures how an open, soft heart can naturally resonate with the happiness of others.*
>
> *Fella addresses why muditā is considered the most challenging of the four brahmavihārās to develop, noting that it's often easier to feel compassion for strangers than joy for a dear friend's success. She candidly shares her own early struggles with a zero-sum view of happiness, and how direct experience of muditā during mindfulness practice—watching a friend walk mindfully—transformed her understanding. The Dalai Lama's insight that rejoicing in others' happiness increases our chances for joy "six billion to one" points to the liberating potential of this practice.*
>
> *The talk provides practical guidance for working with muditā across different categories of beings: starting with easy subjects like babies whose delight clearly doesn't diminish our own, then moving to self, benefactor, neutral person, and difficult person. Fella offers specific phrases such as "May your happiness continue" and "May your joys increase," emphasizing that we work with intention even when the feeling doesn't arise. She cautions against false muditā—wishing happiness for difficult people so they'll stop bothering us—and suggests that when practice feels too contracted, we can return to easier beings or shift to compassion practice.*

Today we'll continue exploring the mudita practice, the practice of sympathetic or empathetic joy. I'll review a little bit of an overview of the quality and talk about the practice, probably reviewing some of what Sally said yesterday, and then talk a little about where the practice heads. Then we'll do a little bit of practice together.

I like the translation "sympathetic joy." Sometimes it's called empathetic joy, but sympathetic joy reminds me of the phrase "sympathetic vibration" in music. This refers to how if you have two strings close to each other on an instrument, when you pluck one of them, the vibration from that string will affect the string next to it. There will be some overtones, a resonance that happens in one string near the other as that vibration

occurs. That's how I understand this exploration of sympathetic joy. When we experience or see or connect with the happiness or joy of another, when our heart is open and soft, it will resonate in sympathy with that and experience a kind of joy.

But it does take a heart that is soft. It takes a heart that is available to be resonated with. And that is part of the challenge with the mudita practice. It's said—I can't remember exactly where, I've heard this many times from teachers, but I think it's actually said in some of the texts, perhaps in the Visuddhimagga—that mudita is one of the most challenging of the Brahma Viharas to develop. They say it's easier to feel compassion for strangers than it is to feel joy for a dear friend, because of how our minds work around this quality.

As I started exploring the metta practice in my early years of practice, I began to understand that my mind had a particular view around happiness—happiness, delight, joy. If some of my friends were experiencing happiness, it meant there was less for me. It was like a zero-sum game: there's only so much happiness to go around. In actively wishing happiness for others, it felt like I was wishing the opposite for myself. This was part of my challenge in working with it.

But as I began to touch into the quality itself and to feel and connect with that resonance, I began to understand more of what the Dalai Lama said. It's a rather famous quote. A number of years ago he said, "It's good to take joy in the happiness of others, because then you increase your chances for happiness six billion to one." And that's more what it's actually like—when we can delight in the happiness of others, we have greater chances for happiness ourselves. When we're not feeling the far enemies of mudita—envy, jealousy—when our heart is not constricted around it, then we can experience this delight in the delight of others.

Sometimes, for myself at least, the formal practice of mudita was not the first place I felt mudita. I really felt it first in mindfulness practice, as I began to be more open to how I was in my experience. At one point I was on retreat with a dear friend, and I was doing walking meditation in the upper walking room here. I came to the window and looked out into the courtyard, just seeing people walk by. My friend walked by, and I could see that they were walking with real mindfulness, a lot of calmness and peace. I was just filled with joy. It's like, "Wow, that's what they mean by mudita. That is so cool." I told my friend at the end of the retreat, "You were my first experience of mudita." It was just so clear what it was.

So sometimes mindfulness can be our first doorway to experiencing this quality. For some it may come through the mudita practice itself. It's a beautiful emotion when we can touch into it, and it has no element of stinginess about it.

In choosing beings to practice with, one of the places I discovered for myself a very easy doorway for mudita is babies—just seeing their delight in small accomplishments. A toddler learning how to walk, navigating something a little rough on the playground. One of my friends described how her child, as a toddler, would try to walk over this little lump on the playground and fall over. She'd get up and try it again, and try it again. Finally she walked over it without falling down and just burst into peals of laughter. Just hearing that story made me feel mudita.

We can, I think, more easily recognize that the delight of babies does not take away from our own happiness. So this may be a good place to start, to connect with that quality.

Sally talked a little bit about the phrases, and we'll touch on that again. But I also want to mention that in the mudita practice, using the phrases, connecting with the being, and wishing for their happiness to continue—this is the orientation. In Brahma Vihara practice, when we're doing compassion practice, we orient to struggles. When we bring a friend to mind, we orient to the struggles in their life. With mudita, we orient differently.

we can explore how our heart responds in relationship to the suffering of another being. In compassion practice, we choose somebody and orient around whatever struggles they have. In mudita practice, we orient around their joys and delights, wishing that their happiness, their success, will continue, will grow, will not abate.

In this practice, there can be quite a bit of contraction. This is nothing to berate yourself about. I think I mentioned when I first talked about metta how the practice is like a washing machine—metta being like the soap that pulls the dirt out of the clothes into the water. It draws essentially its opposite to it. Another teacher described the metta practice, or the brahma-vihara practice, as being like running a magnet over our heart. A magnet pulls the opposite out and brings it into consciousness. So it's to be expected that we don't necessarily have an easy time of it.

Temple mentioned this morning that with the phrases, we orient to the intention, the wish. "May your happiness continue. May your success grow." We orient around that as a wish, as an intention. We may or may not feel that appreciative resonance at first. But first we orient around the phrase, we say the phrase, we understand its meaning and connect to just the wish, just this intention that this come to pass.

The Buddha talked about how wherever we incline the mind becomes its inclination. Whatever we ponder becomes the inclination of the mind. This includes all of the hindrances and all of our conditioned patterns, but it also includes when we incline the

mind towards love and compassion and joy—it increases the possibility for those states to arise. So we are working with intention here in this practice, and we may not feel it at first. As I said, for me this was pretty dry in the formal practice, but I did begin touching into it in the mindfulness practice, which then helped inform the possibility of feeling it in the formal practice of mudita.

In this practice, as with the other brahma-viharas, we shift in categories. We start with a happy being, one for whom it's pretty easy, one who is experiencing happiness that we know we can connect with. I think babies are a great place to start. Then we shift to ourselves, to benefactor, neutral person, difficult person, just as with the other brahma-viharas. Today in the guided meditation we're going to keep it simple—we'll stay with an easy being, a happy being, and ourselves. But I want to speak a little about this so you can experiment over the next days, if you wish, making some forays into dear friend, neutral person, and difficult person.

With a dear friend, the challenge can be feelings of jealousy or resentment. When we connect to happiness that somebody close to us is experiencing, the question can arise: "Why not me? Why is that good thing not happening to me?" So that's a piece of the purification—noticing how the heart constricts or holds a view, a belief that somehow their happiness is excluding me.

With a neutral person, we may not know the specific nature of their happiness, but we can know that all beings share certain joys. We wish for them any happiness they're experiencing around connection and love and care, moments when their suffering falls away and they have a moment of delight, simple pleasures of being in nature. These are human delights and joys that we can imagine a neutral person engaging with. And if you're picking a neutral person from this retreat, you can appreciate that they have found the Dharma, that they are committed to cultivating those qualities of heart and mind. These are things we can appreciate about each other and about ourselves.

As Nyanaponica points out, in this wishing for joy and happiness, we're not wishing for somebody to be happy in harming other beings. If somebody thinks they are happy in harming others, we're not wishing for that kind of happiness to continue. We are wishing for a true happiness. Nyanaponica says, "Let us teach real joy. Many have unlearned it. Life, though full of woe, holds also sources of joy and happiness unknown to most. Let us teach people to seek and find real joy within themselves and to rejoice in the joy of others."

When doing mudita for ourselves, we can connect with that goodness, that beauty, and may find at times that taste Temple was talking about—just that contentment, perhaps a little bit of contentment with being with just this breath. Feeling that content-

ment, we can appreciate it. I think often in our mindfulness practice, we feel almost guilty about feeling good. Don't. Appreciate it. We can have appreciative joy for our own goodness and our own beautiful qualities as they arise.

The joy, the delight that arise in our practice.

And then the difficult person. As I said a few minutes ago, with a person who's difficult it can sometimes be hard to get past things that they've done to us. But again, we can potentially connect to, first of all, recognizing that the difficult things arising in a difficult relationship are about dukkha. Probably on both sides of the relationship there's some misunderstanding or some clinging happening.

So we can know that that person is potentially engaging in unskillful action. We see in our own minds how unskillful action arises as a result of conditions. And so we may be able to kind of set that aside. It's not that we're condoning anything anybody has done unskillfully. But we are acknowledging that we're all a bundle of both wholesome and unwholesome. We are not wishing for them to be happy based on cruelty or based on anything unskillful they're doing. We're wishing for a true joy, for the delights and joy to continue based on genuine happiness.

One challenge that can arise with the difficult person—and I'm mentioning this because we have a couple of days now where we're not going to have the Brahma Vihara practice in the hall, and as you practice over the next couple days you might want to explore mudita practice for the neutral and difficult person—is that sometimes, wishing them to be successful and happy, wishing for their happiness to continue, we may have the wish for them to be truly happy and have that kind of true joy so that they will stop bothering us. So that their mind will not be in that place where I'm in conflict with it. And that's not true mudita. That's the kind of mudita that wants something for me in return.

So just be on the lookout for that. It's like, "Oh yeah, I could wish that political leader to be very happy so that they stop doing these things." Well, maybe that's not true mudita practice.

In working with difficulty, as you come up against it, the first thing to do is just try to connect to the intention. Recognizing, again, we're not going to be able to feel this quality all the time. So just trying to connect with: Can I simply say the phrase and understand the meaning? That's all I need to do here.

I have seen at times in my own practice that even this is too hard. Saying the phrase, understanding the meaning, my heart just gets tighter and tighter. And so then it can make sense to drop back to an easier being, to another place. Go back to a child that makes it easy to evoke the quality. Or turn to compassion for yourself. Or turn to the vipassana practice to hold the challenge.

So let's practice for a little while. Again, the proximate cause is where we begin. Let's first start by settling in, finding a comfortable posture and checking into how your heart feels. How is the heart in this moment? However it is, is fine. How is the heart in this moment?

Letting yourself perhaps breathe through that area, seeing if there can be an inclination towards softening. Exploring the possibility of a soft heart.

And then beginning with whatever being is easiest for you to appreciate their success, their good fortune. Whatever phrase feels most connecting to you: "I'm happy that you're happy." Or if that feels like not quite an accurate reflection of what's actually going on: "May I be happy that you're happy." "May your happiness continue." "May your joys increase." "May you have happiness in abundance."

I also find it helpful in the mudita practice to give yourself time to feel into this, the way intention practice works. We express the intention and then we check in: How has that intention landed in the heart? It's like dropping a pebble into a smooth pond. There will be little ripples from the pebble, so think of dropping these phrases into our hearts. "May your happiness continue." And see how the heart ripples, resonates in sympathy, perhaps, with that phrase. Taking that time to feel into it. Connecting with the being. And if it's yourself you're working with, perhaps just your sense of yourself right now.

Connecting with the being, expressing this wish: May you enjoy happiness and abundance. How does that land in your heart to make that wish?

Continue for the next few minutes to wish joy, happiness, and abundance to this being. If it feels appropriate, you might switch to yourself if you haven't been doing that yet, or if you have been working with yourself, bring in another being for whom it's relatively easy to connect with their happiness, their success, and abundance.

Sometimes using imagination helps—imagining this being being happy can support a little spark of that quality. Or for yourself, remembering a time, if you're not in that place right in this moment, remembering an experience of joy can sometimes spark the quality.

Connecting to the being, saying the phrase, understanding its meaning, and checking in: How does that land as you drop that wish or phrase into your heart?

Now I'd like to invite you to, as we did last week, imagine yourself together with this being, with both of you wishing together: May we both enjoy happiness and abundance. May our joy continue. This is just a reminder that mudita is not exclusive.

How is it to feel that wishing together?

For the last minute or so, imagine the two of you together wishing abundance and happiness for all beings: May all beings without exception enjoy abundance and happiness.

CHAPTER 150

Not Knowing (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 1h02

> *In this profound retreat talk, Andrea Fella invites practitioners to examine the deep truth that we never truly know what the next moment will bring. Drawing from personal stories—including her Peace Corps journey and retreat experiences—she illustrates how our concepts, views, and beliefs create an illusion of predictability that obscures the dynamic, unknowable nature of reality.*
>
> *Fella offers the Buddha's teaching to Bāhiya as a central practice instruction: "In the seen should be only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized." This bare attention, she explains, creates conditions for insight into not-self to arise naturally, without forcing or searching for particular experiences. She shares Sayadaw U Tejaniya's teaching about how trying too hard to find something can prevent us from seeing it—sometimes we must stop looking to truly see.*
>
> *The talk distinguishes between the "not knowing" of ignorance (which clings to views of permanence and self) and the wise not knowing that emerges from direct contact with impermanent, unreliable experience. Fella acknowledges the fear and vulnerability that can arise when we touch this groundlessness, offering guidance on meeting these reactions with awareness. Using the story of the householder Anāthapiṇḍika debating with wanderers, she explains how the Buddha's teachings on impermanence and suffering are views designed to help us transcend all views. The talk concludes with an invitation to trust this falling, recognizing there was never any ground to land on.*

The more we practice, the more we see that we have no idea what is going to happen next.

This is true at more obvious levels—like the delay of a start of a talk because of volume issues. At more obvious levels, every day people die who wake up in the morning and have no idea they're not going to make it to the end of the day. The change, the changing nature of life is so profound and unpredictable at our ordinary levels of life, but also at the more subtle levels of our practice experience.

In entering into just this moment, just landing right here, we start to really appreciate and see that we have no idea what the next moment will be. As we receive our experience—just what's happening, what's this, what's this, what's this—when we are really present, we can be very surprised by the next arising.

We seem to think we know what the next thing is going to be. And I think often perhaps we think that because it can be roughly in the category of right. Like probably a minute from now I'll still be here sitting giving this talk. But we don't know. This thinking that we do know what's going to happen tends to obscure this very deep truth that we don't know what is going to happen.

So many things that are added to our experience obscure this not knowing. They obscure this entering into the terrain of being fully open to the next moment without preconceived ideas, views, perspectives, beliefs. These habits of mind, these patterns of mind tend to obscure this truth that we don't know what's coming next.

We carry beliefs, ideas, views from the past into the present moment. Views about who we are, views about who other people are. And we think we know. We think we know who we are. We think we know how we're going to respond, what's next. We think we know who other people are. Maybe we can open to the possibility that we are not what we think we are, and that others are not what we think they are.

We project these views, these beliefs into the future. We create these worlds of thoughts about some future that we take up residence in and believe will happen.

It can be hard to see this. This evening as I was sitting in my room down in the teacher village, reflecting about this content and these ideas, I imagined myself up here giving this talk. Because of the weather there was a recognition that I was going to have to go through something to get here, and it was kind of unknown what that going through would be. So there was a connection with that—a recognition that it's really windy out there, trees can fall down, maybe the golf cart could flip over. There was this sense of not being sure if I'd get here. But then I realized that I had assumed I would get into the process of getting up the hill, and that was still two hours away. I had no idea what would happen in those intervening two hours. It's so quick for us to pick up these ideas and just assume we know what's going to happen.

I joined the Peace Corps in my mid-thirties. This was before I met the Dharma, before I met the practice, but there was quite a startling experience that I had as I was making my way across the ocean in the plane. I realized that I had no idea what was going to meet me on the other end of that plane ride. I could kind of envision what it would be like to be on the plane until it landed, but then there was no clue. In the way my mind worked at that point, there was almost this funny kind of belief that I wasn't going to get there because I couldn't envision it. I couldn't see what it would be. It almost felt like my life ended with that plane flight. But then the plane landed and each moment unfolded—the next moment, the next moment, the next moment. And it revealed itself. The experience revealed itself.

When we think we know what's going to happen, that's a view, it's an idea, it's thoughts, it's a world of thought that is created. And the way our minds work, sometimes this view or these thoughts can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Not always bad.

The image, for instance, of my coming up here to give a talk—that becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy by remembering it and following through on that. And this is hopefully helpful, that I showed up here tonight.

But we can also, through what I was saying earlier about views and ideas we have about ourselves or others, box ourselves in, box other people in, based on our senses of who we are, who they are. Views are a huge obscuration of this entering into the mystery of the moment and not knowing—really not knowing what the next moment will be.

And even in the present moment there are ways views enter in, but also concepts. I talked a little about concepts last week when I talked about delusion, and how we often live our lives through concept, and how easy it is for concept to be distorted by mistake or emotion. It's so easy for our ideas, what we think we are receiving as experience, to be distorted or altered through our views, our ideas, our opinions.

And so we don't just take in the world as it is. As I think it was Anaïs Nin who said, we don't see the world as it is—we see the world as we are. There's a deep truth to this that we begin to really recognize by looking at our minds.

Now concepts are useful. I think I talked about that some last week too, that we need concepts to navigate the world. But it's helpful both to recognize that we are experiencing the world through concept, and that everything we experience, all of our experience, is mediated through our mind. We are not really in touch with what's out in the world. We're in touch with an internal construction that does a pretty good job of representing the world.

The use of concepts stabilizes the world. It allows us to navigate. Concepts can be a kind of shortcut for us. If I had to figure out every time I walked into the dining hall what tables were and what forks and knives were, it would be exhausting. So this shortcut of concepts and perceptions helps us navigate the world. And yet what we mistake is that we think we are accurately perceiving things, rather than recognizing that we are perceiving things—that our mind is constructing what we are seeing.

This is a way of entering into this present moment more fully: to understand this constructed nature of mind, of what we are experiencing, the constructed nature of our experience. It is such a mystery, such a mind-blowing thing that we're living in.

We can understand that we are navigating the world through concepts and still know that that is how we are. We can navigate through concepts and still understand that we are navigating through concepts. It's not that hard actually, once we begin to touch into it. We can understand concept as concept and understand how error-prone concept can be.

I talked about the elephant—the blind people and the elephant—last time. And I talked about mistaking a rope for a snake. These are ways in which we solidify, reify, consolidate our experience around perceptions and take things to be. "This is the way it is"—that's a view, a concept. It's so pervasive. And one of the ways, again, even experiencing the world through concept, the stabilizing that happens through concept keeps us from really touching into that truth of not knowing. Because we've got our concepts, we think they're right, and we're experiencing things through that. We're not really open to the dynamic nature of what's happening.

And so entering into the present moment, entering into just being here in this moment, is a way of beginning to explore this truth of not knowing. Thoughts, concepts, views can be seen as just arising. We can know them as experience that's arising, as opposed to simply believing them. We can more fully open into this not knowing.

The very nature of what we are doing here, the very nature of awakening—even this word vipassanā, seeing clearly, sometimes translated as insight—the very nature of insight is that we have no idea what we're looking for.

We tend to be drawn to the familiar. We tend to be drawn to what we already know. That comes through views, through concepts, through ideas, beliefs. All of those things shape our mind through what we have learned in the past. We tend to be drawn to the familiar. It's comfortable. It feels navigable. And yet the very work that we're doing is helping us to see things that we've never seen before.

And if we're orienting to our experience through what's familiar, what we're already aware of, if we're orienting to the world in that way, we won't see what we're not looking for. As we look for something, the very act of looking can obscure understanding, can obscure the unfamiliar.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya tells a story about how sometimes it's easier to see something—especially something we don't know what it is—when we stop looking. He was teaching a retreat at Insight Meditation Society in New England, and one of the staff members was driving him around, taking him on a tour of the area. The driver said, "Sayadaw, there's a deer alarm on this car." There are so many deer in that area that he had put a

deer alarm on his car—a kind of high-pitched sound that alerts deer to the approaching car so they'll stay away. The driver said, "You can hear it. It's not at a higher pitch than we can hear. Can you hear it?"

Sayadaw said he tried to hear it. "Can I hear that? Can I hear that?" And he couldn't hear it. But then when he stopped trying to hear it, he heard it. He didn't know what he was looking for. And when he relaxed and just took in experience more openly, without any idea about what he was looking for, there it was. It popped into sound.

We hear sometimes in dharma talks descriptions of various experiences. In some of my early retreats at IMS—maybe it was even my very first three-month course—I heard the teachers talking about an experience around impermanence, of just seeing things popping in and out. It sounded so cool. I really wanted to see it. And I suffered a lot around wanting to see it and trying to see it and imagining that I could see it.

At some point, while I was suffering over this, I realized that I was suffering. I kept thinking I was suffering because I wasn't having the experience I wanted to have. But what I discovered was that I was wanting to tell the teacher that I'd had the experience. I found myself waking up into this thought of telling the teacher about it, how great it was that I was having this experience. We were laughing and celebrating in the interview room. I was having this great fantasy about how wonderful it would be to tell the teacher I'd had this experience. And I had no idea—that was a real eye-opener for me—I had no idea what I was looking for. I had no idea what I wanted. What I wanted was for somebody to praise me. That was an eye-opener too.

So we really don't know. Often we don't know what we're looking for. And so this perspective of curiosity—what is this experience?—this opening to not knowing... Really, this moment, right now, we think we know what it is, but look at it. What's here?

This can be a way to enter into a real intimacy, that being with, an intimacy we talked about in terms of investigation, that can support us to be here, just meeting this experience without preconceived ideas. Or if we have preconceived ideas, to recognize: this is an idea that's arising right now. That's actually what's happening—an idea arising about what I'm seeing. That can be startling to recognize: I'm seeing experience through a concept.

And sometimes we can actually touch into just this experience. Just this. Without preconceived ideas. Sometimes what's called bare attention.

This reminds me of the Buddha's teaching to Bahiya. Many of you are probably familiar with this teaching.

A wanderer who was not one of the Buddha's followers, but had heard about the Buddha from a distance, had traveled a long way to see him. When he arrived where the Buddha was residing, he asked where he might find the Buddha, saying he wanted to ask him a question. They told him the Buddha had gone out for alms round over to the village. And so Bahiya followed and found the Buddha making his way through the village on alms round.

Bahiya said, "Please teach me the Dharma. I've traveled a long way." He introduced himself and told the Buddha his name. The Buddha said, "Bahiya, now is not the time. I'm going on alms round."

Bahiya asked again: "We don't know when you or I will die. Please teach me the Dharma. Please teach me the Dharma in brief, even." He just wanted a little short dharma talk. Again the Buddha said, "Not now, it's time for alms."

But Bahiya asked a third time, and in many of the stories in the texts, when somebody asks the Buddha something three times, he will do it. And so he stopped and gave Bahiya a teaching. Now I'll repeat this from memory—I don't have it in front of me. It is said that upon hearing these words, Bahiya became fully awakened.

So, listen. The Buddha said to Bahiya, "This is how you should train yourself: In the seen should be only the seen. In the heard should be only the heard. In the sensed, only the sensed. In the cognized, only the cognized."

That was the instruction. You should train yourself thus: In the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized.

This is essentially recognizing experience just for what it is. This includes recognizing that seeing is happening, and the concept—the cognition of what is seen—knowing that to be just something that's cognized. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. "The sensed is only the sensed" refers to those other three senses. And "in the cognized is only the cognized."

Essentially he was offering a form of bare attention, of choiceless awareness. This question came up the other day: where is this found in the Satipatthana? This is one of the main places this teaching is found—in this teaching to Bahiya. Notice your experience just for what it is. Just this, just this, just this. The mystery of experience.

The Buddha went on to explain to Bahiya the value of doing this. He didn't just give him the instruction and say, "Go off and practice and see what you see." He gave him a pointer. He said, "When for you in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the

heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized—when that's true for you, there will be no you in terms of that experience. When there is no you in terms of that experience, there is no you there. And when there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

And so he pointed to how this practice of entering into the present moment, entering into this—essentially this not knowing, just this, what's this—creates the conditions for the understanding and insight into not-self to arise. He didn't give Bahiya a particular teaching on not-self. He just said, "When you explore experience in this way, this is the result. There's no you in terms of that experience." You're not interpreting experience in terms of you. It's just experience. You're not interpreting experience in terms of I or me or mine.

This is the process that the Buddha called conceiving. We conceive ourselves in relation to other things, in relation to experience.

The Buddha had another pithy teaching about this—another one-line teaching, another one of these deep, penetrating sentences. He said, "In whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that."

This again reminds me of the elephant story. The conceiving around "this is what an elephant is" and the attaching to that view because I had experienced it. Holding to that view and coming to blows with the other people who had different views. It's not wrong to say this part of the elephant is like this. But again, in whatever way they conceive, there's more to the picture.

And in fact, here what this is pointing to is that when there is conceiving happening, when experience is interpreted in terms of I, me, or mine, there is a lot that's not being seen. The fact is ever other than that.

And so this simple attention helps us to enter into—maybe stumble into—this way of... He didn't tell Bahiya what the experience of not-self would be like. He didn't say, "Here, look for this. This is what not-self will be like." He said, "Notice experience like this. In the seen is only the seen. When for you in the seen is only the seen, there will be no you in terms of that." A kind of pointer to: what is this experience? A pointer to this possibility of something unknowable, unfamiliar, that might be available to be known in experience.

This is some of what we do in our talks. We point to things, we speak to things. Sometimes we can hear them, and then later in our experience we see something differently because there's been a kind of pointing in a talk or in a meeting with a teacher. Our mind has been shaken away from its familiar things.

"There is no you in terms of that." When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. It's not that the you disappears. It's really recognizing the truth of how it's always been. Nikki pointed to that last night—it's the truth of how it's always been. It's just the seeing here. The understanding of something that's hard to see because we are so familiar with looking at things through the perspective of self.

Sometimes we even—I was talking a few minutes ago about seeing things that somebody talks about in a dharma talk, that the hearing of it, we don't really get it at the time, but then later it's like, "Oh, that's what they were talking about." Sometimes something can be so out of our range of experience that we can't even hear it when it's spoken.

I'm quite sure this happened to me on another three-month course when I was doing my practice and going to the talks and listening to what they said. Some insight arose in my experience—I don't even remember at this point what it was—but it felt very profound and very important. And I was almost frustrated at the teachers. "Why haven't they been telling us about this? This is important. They should be talking about this." So this was one of those things that I felt like I'd stumbled into by myself with nobody ever having spoken about it. And these things happen. We can see things at times that haven't been pointed to, if we are really just here and available to be here.

I almost wrote the teachers a note, but I decided not to. And in the next three dharma talks, I heard them say it. And so it was pretty obvious to me that they hadn't just magically picked up on my thoughts and started putting them into the dharma talks, but that they'd probably been saying it for weeks. And I had not consciously heard it. This too can happen because when something is that unfamiliar, sometimes it's hard to hear.

So these teachings to Bahiya to me really point to the simplicity of our practice. The instructions he gave to Bahiya were so simple. And then he pointed to the possibility of freedom that comes from that simplicity. Not from trying to look for not-self, but just knowing experience. In the seen is only the seen, and the heard is only the heard.

So what's the difference between this kind of not knowing that I'm talking about right now and the not knowing of ignorance, which we can think of also as a not knowing, a not understanding? The not knowing of ignorance is really a taking things, a looking at experience through views and beliefs. It's taking things to be permanent, reliable, self. It's interpreting experience through that perspective of "me."

And so the not knowing of ignorance is not understanding the truths of impermanence, unreliability, not-self. It comes from not connecting directly with experience. It's the habit of mind before we are introduced to this possibility of meeting the moment in a different way.

This deeper kind of not knowing is entered into by precisely connecting to the impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of experience. It comes out of awareness and contacting experience directly. In the seen is only the seen. Entering into the present moment, letting go of views that create a rigid sense of what is happening, what will happen, who I am, what others will be or do, who they are, what's supposed to happen.

This entering into not knowing is a form of at least recognizing views for what they are—that they are views. I've talked about this in some of the meetings with you. It is so powerful to notice that we're holding a view. When we're not aware that we're holding a view, it is simply taken to be true. But we can become aware: "Oh, there's a view, there's a belief happening right now." And in that recognition that there's a belief happening, there's some space. We don't have to in that moment tell ourselves not to believe it, but at least to recognize: this is being believed. This particular belief may be connected to a relatively close reflection of reality, or it may be completely off. But the first step is really recognizing, "Oh, this is a belief, and it's being believed."

So if this entering into the present moment is partly about letting go of views, how does right view enter into the mix? Isn't that just another view that gets in the way?

The views that the Buddha offers as wise view are views that he articulated having come to an understanding of the nature of experience—the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. The understanding of how clinging creates suffering. This is the place where the views that the Buddha offers us land. Clinging creates suffering. Clinging creates suffering precisely because things are impermanent. Because they are impermanent, they are unreliable as a place to cling to for lasting happiness. They're all directly connected, these truths that the Buddha discovered and then articulated.

As Anisha said, the Buddha didn't make this up. It's more like discovering the law of gravity. He discovered these truths and then articulated them, like Newton discovered the law of gravity and then articulated equations that help us to navigate it. Although we were always navigating the law of gravity, even before Newton discovered it. We always knew that we couldn't place this glass in mid-air. We knew that. And at some level, maybe we also know the truth of not-self. We do, at some level, know the truth of impermanence.

But as the Mahabharata says in one place—this great Hindu epic poem, which is really kind of a play—one of the characters is asking another character, "What is the most wonderful thing in the world?" And this character responds, "This is what I think is most wonderful: that people seeing daily the truth that everyone dies, never once does it really enter that they too will die." Only the surface mind understands. The actual truth doesn't penetrate.

We know at some level these truths of impermanent, unreliable. But because we are orienting through concept, that stability of concept, we miss this truth. It's staring us in the face all the time.

And so the views that the Buddha pointed to are in alignment with these truths that he discovered. And we can frame it, perhaps, as it was done in one sutta. There's a sutta where the householder Anathapindika was talking with some people from other traditions, and they were asking him, "So, tell us what views the contemplative Gotama has." That was the name for the Buddha. And saying "the contemplative Gotama" was maybe slightly disrespectful. "So tell us what views the contemplative Gotama has."

And Anathapindika responded, "Venerable sirs, I don't know entirely what views the Blessed One has."

"Well, well," they said, "so you don't know the views of the contemplative Gautama. Then tell us what the views of the monks are."

And he says, "I can't tell you that either."

And they said, "Well, then tell us what your views are."

And Anathapindika was clever. He said, "Why don't you tell me your views first, and then I will tell you my views."

So they each—there were ten of them or so—described their views, and they all said something along the lines of, "The cosmos is eternal. Only this is true. Anything else is worthless. This is the sort of view I have." Then the next person would say something like, "The cosmos is not eternal. Only this is true. Anything else is worthless. This is the sort of view I have."

There were many of these views: the cosmos is finite, the cosmos is infinite, the soul and the body are the same, the soul and the body are different. All these different views directly contradicting each other, and each person believing that their view was the only true view.

Anathapindika said in response, "As for the one who says 'the cosmos is eternal, only this is true, anything else is worthless, this is the sort of view I have'—that person's view arises either from his own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. This view has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated—that is impermanent. Whatever is impermanent is unreliable. Whatever is unreliable is suffering. This one thus adheres to that stress, submits himself to that stress."

The very holding to the view—that is what Anathapindika was pointing to. Holding on to that view, you are suffering.

He went through all of the views that they had spoken. He said all of these views, held to in this way, are suffering. You are submitting yourself to suffering.

Then he said what his view was. "Here is the view I have: Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated—that is inconstant, impermanent. Whatever is impermanent is unreliable. Whatever is unreliable is suffering. Whatever is suffering is not me, is not what I am, is not myself. This is the sort of view I have."

The wanderers tried to put his own argument back on him, saying, "Well, you're just holding on to that view. You're suffering by holding on to that view."

And Anathapindika said, "When whatever has been brought into being is seen as suffering, right there I understand it is impermanent, it is unreliable, it is suffering—and there is the release from it in the seeing of it."

What Anathapindika was pointing to was that holding a view that clinging to views is suffering is itself onward leading. This is the sort of view that the Buddha held, that he offered to us. He offered views that help us to transcend views—to recognize that holding to any view, clinging to it and saying "only this is true, anything else is wrong," that this clinging is suffering.

When we notice that—when we notice that we're clinging to whatever, to sense experience, to concepts, to views—when we notice that clinging, the seeing of it brings understanding of the suffering of it. And the mind begins to release.

At first, the views that the Buddha offers are more of a conceptual wisdom, helping us recognize where the traps are in our minds. But the understanding that results from the seeing of that clinging, from the seeing of the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience—

That understanding is not a concept. It's a direct experience. It's a shift of understanding that allows us to be with things as they are—this entering into the mystery of experience. We don't know what the next thing will be, what the next experience, the next moment will bring. We have no idea.

It's useful to recognize that as we begin to touch into this truth—that we don't know what the next moment will bring—we have relationships to that. Often relationships of fear, a sense of vulnerability, maybe confusion, a feeling of insecurity. This too is something that needs to be seen and known and recognized. Not to try to convince ourselves, "I should just be with things, be with this not knowing," when what's arising, part of what's arising in this moment's experience, is fear. And that can be known as an arising. It's just, "Oh, this too is cognized." The cognized is only the cognized—fear is happening right now.

So there are different relationships we have to this not knowing, and it may be useful to unpack a little what's going on there. Sometimes the fear or insecurity, the vulnerability around this not knowing, is about a projection into the future. We're thinking, "I don't know what's going to happen. Maybe something bad will happen." And so we pick up some imagined future and then get afraid of that. In this not knowing place, our mind sometimes fills it in with something and then responds or reacts to that. In that case, it's not really the not knowing we're reacting to—it's the imagined scenario we're reacting to.

Another way we can react to the not knowing is to the very idea of not knowing. We might just sit here with this thought, "I don't know what's going to happen. Oh no. What do I do?" And it's more about the idea than the actual experience. The fear or insecurity there is related back to a sense of me that feels vulnerable, that feels like it's happening to me—it's me that this not knowing is happening to.

On one retreat I had an experience of this fear around just, "Wow, it's like..." I felt like I was going to step off the edge every single step. Just this really entering into having no idea what's going to happen next. A very disorienting kind of state. And so there was fear coming up, and my teachers, as we do, encouraged me to notice this fear.

So I was like, "Okay, I'm going to meet this fear. I'm going to meet this not knowing. What is this fear about anyway?" I was doing walking meditation as I was exploring this. And I would take a step. "Okay, where's the not knowing?" There is no not knowing right now. The step is known. And I'd take the next step and it's like, "Well, that step's known too." I could see that the mind was just slightly projecting—again, that sense of slightly projecting into the future: "I'm not going to know the next thing." But when I actually looked at this moment, the knowing was just revealing itself.

I felt like I was standing on the edge of an abyss, being asked to step into it. And as I took that step—just with trust, taking that step—the edge of the cliff grew out and there I was, standing on the edge of the abyss again. Every step was known. But the feeling of stepping into something unknown remained.

So it takes some kind of trust to meet this experience.

Even sometimes, in that experience, every step is known. I know what's happening there. There's the pressure and the pulsing and the tension. It's just so clear in that moment.

And yet sometimes, even being in the present moment, just the entering into the present moment, even that feels unknowable. Slippery. Streaming. Like there's nowhere to land. As soon as the mind touches any experience, it's already dissolving. It's just vanishing, vanishing, vanishing.

So sometimes even this feels very slippery. And yet this is a kind of entering into groundlessness. There is nowhere to land. The only problem is we think there should be somewhere to land. It's like our lives are an endless falling.

Joseph mentions an analogy of parachuting. First you jump out of an airplane—free falling can be kind of exhilarating, the feeling of falling. But then maybe you realize you forgot your parachute. Then there's terror. But in this practice, there's the understanding: there is no ground. There is no ground.

And so this takes trust. Letting go and trust to enter this moment.

Just this.

CHAPTER 151

Checking the Attitude (Online Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 39 min

> *In this retreat guidance, Andrea Fella begins by reflecting on the interconnection between inner contemplative practice and outward engagement with the world, noting how the conditions of seclusion during challenging times can open the heart to recognize systemic suffering and the need for justice. She emphasizes that examining our internal conditioning directly supports how we engage with external conditions, as the views, attitudes, and unseen delusions within individual minds collectively shape societal patterns.*
>
> *The teaching then focuses on "checking the attitude"—a key aspect of Sayadaw U Tejaniya's approach to meditation. Fella explains how our awareness can be imbued with habitual tendencies of greed (wanting experience to continue), aversion (wanting experience to stop), and delusion (confusion, beliefs, identification). These attitudes are often hidden because they are so ingrained in how we engage with experience. By gently checking our relationship to what's arising—whether toward sensory experience or toward the meditation practice itself—we can bring these hidden patterns into awareness.*
>
> *Fella introduces the concept of "wise attitude" or "right attitude," characterized by an okayness with whatever is arising, which may manifest as interest, curiosity, compassion, or simple ease. She references the Buddha's teaching about crossing the flood "by neither tarrying nor hurrying," offering this as guidance for the light touch of effort needed in practice. When mindfulness returns after wandering, this becomes a precious moment to notice both the effortless quality of awareness and the effects that wandering has left on the mind—sometimes tension, sometimes unexpected calm.*

Good morning, everyone.

I just want to start by saying a couple of words about our collective situation in our lives right now. We've had this interesting juxtaposition, this combination of events—the coronavirus and the shelter in place, everyone secluding themselves and turning inwards, a little more time away from our usual experiences and work and how we engage in the world. And then there are the protests that have come in the last few weeks, which really speak to a deep, very deep oppression of Black and brown people in our country. That external movement, the movement to engage, the movement to speak and act towards justice, towards change of conditions.

I think it's not an accident that these two things happened in a way together. The movement inwards, the seclusion, in some ways created the conditions for this connection outwards. The fact that people were in such a different place allowed them to be more available, to have the conditions—the videos, the situation of George Floyd's murder, Ahmaud Arbery's murder, the video with Amy Cooper—have those hit so deeply because we weren't engaged with all of our other things. I think that's a condition for the engagement, for the heart opening.

To me, this really speaks to the interplay, the dance between inward and outward, internal and external. The interplay between looking inward to what's happening inside and engagement outwards. I wanted to speak to this because we're taking this time this week, these days, to engage with an inward exploration, but it's not separate from looking outwards. Looking at the conditions in our own mind has an effect on how we engage outwardly. It's not separate. The conditions of the world are, I suppose we could say, a kind of combination of all of our internal mind states. The systemic oppression of Black and brown people originates in the views, the attitudes, the unseen delusions of people. Seeing those, taking the time to step back and see those, will support and move us all in the direction of more healthy relationships.

It has been resonating in my mind, this inner and outer—exploration inward at our own conditioning and also looking outward at the conditions in the world and seeing how they connect. I do think that this time on this retreat will be a valuable support for that in your own life and in the way in which our practice inevitably connects to how we engage in the world.

So just a few key points before the meditation, a few key points to follow on from Carol's instructions yesterday, Carol's guidance on the practice, the overview of this style of teaching. The instructions themselves are pretty simple. We relax the body and mind because that supports a very natural awareness. We don't try to make awareness happen. The relaxation of body and mind allows those processes, those natural human capacities, to do their job. So we relax the body and mind and then begin to recognize, notice the awareness itself. Am I aware? What is that experience of awareness? And then noticing what awareness is aware of. What is obvious? What's here in this moment? And the light touch of persistence—just enough effort in a moment to be with this moment, and then doing it again and again and again. Each moment: Are you aware? What's obvious? What's here?

From time to time also checking in: How am I in relationship to experience? Sayadaw calls this checking the attitude.

This checking the attitude is one of the pieces I want to explore a little bit more this morning. Checking the attitude is important because how we are paying attention, how we are noticing experience, may be embedded with or imbued with habitual tendencies—attitudes of greed, of aversion, of confusion. Our work is to begin to move in the direction of having an attitude where everything that arises is okay, and yet we don't try to deny when there's a not-okay perspective in the mind.

Often these perspectives, these attitudes, are kind of hidden from us because they're so habitual, because they're so embedded or ingrained in the way that we engage. We don't see them. And so the checking the attitude is a kind of noticing what's here. We notice what's here—oh, there's this happening right now: this experience, this thought, this mood, this body sensation, this sight, this sound. And how am I in relationship to that? Do I like it? Do I not like it? Do I want it to go away? Is there confusion about it? A belief, an identity in relationship to it? A sense of me and other, self and other?

These relationships often are not seen, but sometimes we can simply check in: How am I in relationship to this?

And then some of those hidden attitudes can come into the forefront, be revealed, be seen. And that helps the mind to begin to notice what's actually happening in the moment. When we do see an attitude, we see what's happening.

I also want to mention a fourth kind of attitude. I've just mentioned different attitudes connected to greed, aversion, and delusion. Wanting something to happen—that's a greedy attitude, a mind of greed. Wanting something to stop happening, not liking something, being irritated by something—those are attitudes of aversion. Confusion, spacing out, disconnection, beliefs or views, identification—these are connected with delusion.

And then there is another form of attitude that Sayadaw would call wise attitude, or right attitude. That's the attitude that is okay with what's arising in the moment. There's ease with whatever is happening. No problem.

So in this exploration of checking the attitude, being curious about how am I in relationship to what's happening, you might discover a relationship of greed, aversion, or delusion. You might see that in the mind. But you also might see this okayness, the mind that is not disturbed by what's happening.

That experience of okayness can take many different flavors. It might have the flavor of interest and curiosity. It might have the flavor of simply okay, it's not a problem. It might have the flavor of compassion or love. These flavors begin to point us to some of the wholesome qualities in the mind that develop as we practice.

Opening to the attitude is not just about opening to kilesa, to reactive states of mind, to defilement, but also beginning to open to the wholesome states when the mind is okay with what's here. There's this thing happening, and yes, this is okay. What is it like for the mind to be okay with that? What's it like for the mind to have that sense of no problem? It's a pretty subtle experience.

Seeing the attitude, seeing it as part of what's happening—we don't have to do too much with that as we notice it, as we check in and see, oh, there is a relationship happening here. Simply allow that to be part of the field of what we are aware of. We have become aware that there's this experience of maybe some physical discomfort, and then there's the not liking, the resistance, the aversion to it. Those are happening simultaneously—the body and mind in relationship. That can be known. This is what it's like for a human being to be experiencing pain and not liking it. Can there be okayness with that?

And so we get to wise attitude. Sayadaw often says this: we find our way to wise attitude by getting to know unwise attitude really well. Not by resisting it, not by trying to fight it, but by opening to it in a different way.

When those unwise attitudes—when the attitudes connected with greed, aversion, and delusion—are embedded or hidden in our mind, when we're not consciously aware of them, they are reinforcing themselves. They're kind of driving the show. We are acting out of them. But when we can become aware of them and hold them with this kind of curiosity—oh, what's it like to be a human being experiencing aversion to something unpleasant? That's what's happening—that's a whole different relationship to that experience. And that's where transformation can happen.

Seeing these relationships, seeing these unwise attitudes, is not a problem. It's actually how the practice deepens, how we begin to gain the wisdom that frees the mind.

Just a couple more pieces about attitude. These attitudes might be in relationship to some particular experience—the sight, the sound, the smell, whatever's happening in our experience. That's one big category of relationship that we might have. But another big category is attitudes that we have about the meditation itself—about what's supposed to be happening, about how we think we're doing. We could look at these as agendas for the meditation.

So this is another kind of relationship to be curious about: not only attitudes about what's happening in the experience, but also what's happening in relationship to what I'm doing here, which is meditation. Do I have any beliefs or ideas or views about what is supposed to be happening?

Through this exploration around attitude, we become aware of a filter or view through which we're paying attention, or perhaps we become aware of that okayness, that wise attitude.

So let's sit together, and I'll offer some reflections, a guided meditation. And again, remembering to keep it simple.

Starting with some relaxation. Relaxing the body. Consciously relaxing the body, perhaps checking in where there may be tension and allowing there to be a relaxation. Remembering how relaxation supports this natural capacity for awareness. Relaxing the body is a condition that supports a relaxed mind. And when the mind is relaxed, when it's not pulled into thoughts, worries, concerns about the past, the future, the present, it's very naturally aware of what's happening.

So relax the body. Allow the body to relax. Allow the mind to relax.

As the body and mind relax, notice: is there awareness? Are you aware? Taste, touch that quality of being aware—as Carol spoke about yesterday, that sense of just knowing. Aware. It may not be quite clear how you know that you're aware, but that's okay. After figuring it out, just: yes, I'm aware that that is happening.

And what does awareness receive? What is awareness aware of? What is obvious in this moment? Receiving experience rather than choosing or directing the attention. Maybe having a sense of what is coming to you.

Relax. What is obvious? Maybe something really simple, like this body sitting here. Or a breath. Or a sound—the sound of my voice perhaps, the silence between words. Moods, emotions.

A light touch of effort. Each moment, just enough effort to be with this, whatever this is. And then perhaps the attention shifts, picks up on something else. We're sitting here aware of a breath and then there's a sound that happens and we become aware of that. We don't have to fight that shift—just being aware. Oh, attention on this now. What's that like, to be receiving that? Just enough effort to be with this.

In one sutta, a teaching, a being came to the Buddha and asked, "How did you cross the flood?" The flood referring to the stream of greed, aversion, and delusion that arises in our minds. And the Buddha responded, "By neither tarrying nor hurrying, I crossed the flood."

That image—neither tarrying nor hurrying—has been very supportive for me in this light touch of effort. Each moment, what's arising in this moment? Not tarrying with it, not holding on to it, not sticking to it, just being with it for this moment. Also not rushing past it, not hurrying, not reaching for something else. Each moment, neither tarrying nor hurrying. Just this.

Remembering relaxation. Are you aware? What is obvious? This gentle persistence supports a stabilizing of mindfulness.

From time to time, check in: what is the connection, the relationship to what's happening? Do you want something to happen, to keep happening? Do you want something to stop happening? Is there confusion? A belief about what should be happening? Maybe it's okay. No problem.

If there is some relationship that is revealed, just allow that to be included in the field of awareness. What's now?

What's happening now? Being aware of this. Are you aware? What is obvious? Just this, this moment, this experience. Neither tarrying nor hurrying.

The mind will wander. This is a natural part of the conditions in our minds. But an equally natural part of the conditions is that mindfulness will return at some point. In that moment when mindfulness returns—that's actually a great moment. Mindfulness returned of its own nature, and you didn't have to do it. An effortless moment of mindfulness arose.

Can you take in that awareness is here in this moment? Aware again. It's a great moment to begin to really get that flavor of what it's like to be aware when awareness returns.

In that moment too, the mind will have been shaped by what had been happening when it was wandering. And so that's worth becoming aware of. How is the mind now, in this moment, having been wandering? What has been the effect of the wandering? How is that being experienced right now?

Sometimes after the mind wanders, it has wandered into habits and patterns familiar—arguing, wanting. And so maybe there's a flavor of that, of greed or tension or tightness. Maybe that's what's there. That's okay. Can that be known?

And sometimes, more than you might think, when the mind wanders it can wander into calm, into ease. That too might be the consequence of the mind wandering. Sometimes when we come back from wandering, we might notice there's actually more ease, more relaxation. If we're judging ourselves for the wandering, we will miss that this has happened.

Noticing the effect of what the wandering has created. And also noticing the possibility of the effortless quality in that moment of mindfulness's return.

Relax. Recognize awareness. Are you aware? What is obvious? Receiving experience.

CHAPTER 152

Aware of Awareness (Online Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 47 min

> *In this guided meditation and reflection from an online retreat at Spirit Rock, Andrea Fella offers intimate guidance on one of the more subtle aspects of insight practice: becoming aware of awareness itself. Drawing from her own training with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma, she shares both the instructions and the personal journey of discovering what it means to know that we are aware—not just knowing objects, but recognizing the awareness that knows them.*
>
> *Fella uses the analogy of wearing glasses to illuminate this teaching: just as glasses are the medium through which we see the world yet often go unnoticed, awareness is the medium through which all experience is known. She guides practitioners to explore the simple question "Am I aware?" not as something to figure out intellectually, but as a way to spark curiosity about the nature of knowing itself. The talk addresses how awareness receives experience in different ways—sometimes focused and precise, sometimes broad and diffuse—and emphasizes that there is no "right" way for awareness to work.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is Fella's honest account of her own practice mistakes, including giving herself a headache by trying to force awareness of awareness. Sayadaw's corrective instruction was simply to notice when it happens naturally rather than trying to manufacture the experience. She also addresses the sometimes disorienting experience of knowing we are aware without being able to identify the object of awareness, explaining how the mind can attune to diffuse experiences like exhaustion, joy, or interest that resist precise definition. This teaching offers both practical guidance for meditation and a deeper understanding of the knowing quality of mind.*

Good afternoon, or evening for some perhaps, or maybe even morning, wherever you are in the world.

For this time, I thought of starting with a period of sitting together and offering some reflections in the sitting, then at the end having some time for further reflections and perhaps some questions.

Just continuing your practice, aware of experience, encouraging relaxation. Recognizing awareness. Is there awareness? What is obvious?

Awareness of the objects of experience—awareness of what's happening in our experience—is often our most familiar way of being aware, of knowing that we're aware. We know that we're aware because we know there are objects. We may recognize some specific qualities of those experiences, body sensations. We might recognize or know heat, pressure, coolness, vibration, movement, hardness or softness. We might recognize mind states, aware of emotions, thoughts.

Often in practicing, our attention more familiarly does seem to gravitate towards attending to the objects of experience. We're not as accustomed to noticing awareness itself.

At one point Sayadaw, in a group that I was in, said that he'd been reflecting on how to talk about being aware of awareness. He said, for those of you who wear glasses, this may be a kind of analogy that resonates more than for others perhaps. But if you wear glasses, the whole way that you see the world is through the glasses. The glasses let us see the objects in the world. But we don't often recognize that we are wearing glasses and that the glasses are the whole way that we're able to see the world. We can become aware of the glasses through recognizing that we are seeing the world more clearly.

Similarly, we know that we are aware partly through being aware that the mind is knowing experience. We know awareness is working through how it experiences objects.

Becoming aware of awareness doesn't mean that we turn back and look at awareness. Objects don't disappear. It's more of a stepping back, a sense of broadening or opening and being aware of the awareness that we are aware of.

Are you aware?

The mind has a capacity to recognize awareness. The simplest way is just knowing that you're aware. You may not quite know how you know you're aware, and that's okay. Just knowing, yes, there is awareness. If you're aware of objects, you can acknowledge to yourself: yes, there is awareness. This is awareness.

Is there awareness? This question—you can ask that question to yourself. Aware? But then you don't have to try to find the answer. Asking that question can spark the mind's interest, spark the curiosity of what is awareness anyway. But it's not something to do, to try to figure out. If you remember to ask the question, "Is there awareness?" you get to answer yes, you are aware. Just take in that experience. This is awareness.

And that awareness will be aware of something. So what is obvious?

Relax.

Again, this isn't something to try to do. Sometimes the mind is more interested or attuned to the objects of experience, and sometimes it can become more interested in the experience of being aware. The mind has the capacity to do both and also to be aware that we're aware and know the experience as well—knowing the awareness and the experience together.

Are you aware? Which is obvious.

You also might become aware, or there might be an interest in noticing how awareness receives experience. It's not always the same. Sometimes awareness might notice experience in succession—one object after another. It might feel like the attention is shifting from experience to experience, like the mind is moving from object to object. Or it might feel more like the awareness is still, and those experiences are coming into awareness.

It might be that the experience feels like a flow from one experience to another. Or it might feel more jumpy—one thing pops in and then another thing pops in. Just different ways that awareness can receive experience. It might be that awareness is receiving many experiences at the same time, more like the awareness is broad, knowing many things together. Sometimes awareness recognizes experiences that are diffuse, not very precise. And sometimes awareness is very precise, noticing a very clear, focused experience.

There's no right way for awareness to work. There are many ways. Just notice how it is for you in this moment. Are you aware? How is awareness receiving experience?

And from time to time, checking the relationship, the attitude. There can be attitudes about how awareness is working. Sometimes we like it, sometimes we don't like it. Sometimes it's confusing. Sometimes it's simply allowing just this.

Are you aware?

When I was practicing with Sayadaw in Burma, he talked about awareness a lot. At the beginning especially, I wasn't so clear about what it meant to be aware of awareness. And yet he kept talking about it, and I kept being with my experience and checking in: Am I aware? Yes, I am aware, but I have no idea how I know I'm aware.

That kind of curiosity, the encouragement to notice awareness—it's like the first thing we explore. Am I aware? That begins to encourage the mind to get curious about that experience. So we are aware, we know that we're aware, but we don't know how we know we're aware. There's not quite the felt sense of knowing that we're aware.

What I've seen in my own experience and in working with others is that this continued curiosity about "Am I aware?" begins to help the mind touch into that felt sense—that sense of a clarity of knowing that you're aware. We know that we know that we're aware. We may not be able to describe it, as my vague language speaks to. It's not easy to talk about what the experience of being aware of awareness is. But there can be a kind of sense of, "Yeah, I know that I'm aware," and there's that understanding. It's not just the knowing. There's a sense or a feeling that we have. We know that we're aware. There's no question about it anymore.

And what I found at some point—in Burma this happened—there was a kind of real recognition. At one point that clarity was like, "Oh, this is what he means to be aware of awareness. Oh, I get it. This is what that's like." It wasn't an unfamiliar experience, I think, because we do touch into this. This is something our minds have the capacity to know. It wasn't unfamiliar, but it wasn't clearly known in the same way. So there was a real recognition in that moment.

That was exciting, and it was very cool. That particular experience that felt so cool was the awareness of the awareness and the objects at the same time. I knew the awareness, and I knew the objects.

And I thought, "That's what I was supposed to be doing. I figured it out. This is what Sayadaw has been talking about. This is how I'm supposed to be practicing." And so I spent the next few hours trying to make it happen—and gave myself a huge headache.

So that's a warning. It's easy, as we first get the sense or flavor of what this is like, to think we're supposed to do that, to make it happen. I went back and reported to Sayadaw this experience of having given myself a headache trying to notice the awareness of awareness. And he said, "Well, don't try to do that." He said, "Just notice when it happens. Notice when awareness is aware of itself, when there's awareness of awareness, and when the awareness is more interested in the objects."

The attention will go back and forth. Sometimes it will be more interested in the texture of feelings or sensations or sounds—the sense of the objects may be where the interest is. And at other times it begins to gravitate toward interest in the awareness itself, in the quality of being aware. So he encouraged me to just notice that shift. And that was very helpful. That was really helpful.

Sometimes we can know that we're aware but not know what the object is—not have a sense of what awareness knows. That can be a little odd at first. In my experience from prior practice, if I didn't know what the object was, I thought it wasn't awareness. I wasn't being mindful. If I didn't know what the object was, then I wasn't practicing properly.

But this practice began to attune me to the awareness itself. And it's like, "Yeah, I know I'm aware, but I have no clue what the object is." I know there's seeing happening, but that doesn't really seem like what awareness is attuning to. So there can be these times where we know that we're aware, but there's not a lot of clarity about the object of awareness—and that's okay. You can sort of hover in that space of, "Well, I know I'm aware."

There is an object there. It's not that there's not an object. Sometimes what's happening in that kind of experience is that awareness is attuning to something we're not so familiar with. This can happen as the meditation goes on. As mindfulness becomes stronger, it may begin to gravitate toward objects that we know nothing about, that we can't articulate, that we're unfamiliar with. And so if we can trust that "I know I'm aware" and just hold the space, perhaps the experience or the object will slowly reveal itself—or not.

Sometimes in that kind of experience, the object may be what I might call diffuse. These aren't very specific or precise experiences. The first kinds of objects that we become really clear about are usually very defined: this contact with the body, this pressure, that sight, that sound. They're very clear. We can almost name them, identify them. It's almost like we can draw a circle around them. "Yes, that's what I'm aware of." They seem almost delimited. This pressure, that itch, the sound that arises, that smell. Even emotions can have this quality of, "Yeah, I know this is anger. I've felt this many times." Or, "Oh yeah, this is irritation." We know the texture and shape of even our emotions.

But there are other experiences that the mind can know that are not so precise, that are more vague. There are many experiences like this. Exhaustion is like this. Several of you have mentioned this in the past few days in our meetings.

You can't really put your finger on exhaustion. There are qualities within the experience that may be more precise, like a feeling of heaviness in the body. But the quality in the mind of exhaustion or low energy—that's much more diffuse. The quality of joy and delight is also diffuse in this way. The mind knows how to take in diffuse experience.

In all of our sense experience, actually—I'll give you an analogy. If you're out walking and it starts to rain, you might feel the drops of water on your skin. That's a pretty precise experience. You know that sense of the drops landing on your skin. That's one way objects can be received.

Another time you're out walking, you might notice the experience of humidity. Not a precise experience at all. How do you describe humidity? We know it, but it's more of a gestalt kind of experience. We know it based on—well, we say, "Feel the air." We just say, "Feel how the air feels." And we know what we're talking about. It's a broader kind of sense, that experience of humidity. It's not precise, but we know it.

The same kind of awareness around precise experience and diffuse experience can happen with mind states as well, with mental objects. Sometimes that place where we feel like we're aware but don't know what the awareness is aware of—it may be that the awareness is taking in a diffuse experience. Maybe that's what's happening.

At one point I was meditating and noticed this quality of, "Wow, I notice that I'm aware. I have no idea what the object is." But what I did know was that the mind was really interested. That's what I could know—interest was present. I didn't know what the mind was interested in, but there was awareness and there was interest. Interest is kind of a diffuse experience too at times, depending on what the interest is connecting to.

CHAPTER 153

Retreat Opening Part Two

Andrea Fella · 57 min

> *In this opening session of an online retreat, Andrea Fella introduces the foundational practices of receptive awareness meditation in the tradition of Sayadaw U Tejaniya. She explains how this form of practice differs from concentration-based approaches—rather than choosing what to pay attention to, practitioners learn to settle back like a naturalist studying nature, receiving whatever experience arises moment to moment. The key elements are relaxation of body and mind, recognizing that awareness is present, and noticing what is obvious without trying to control the flow of experience.*
>
> *Andrea explores the relationship between attention and mindfulness, clarifying that while attention can be consciously directed, it doesn't have to be. Using the analogy of being a passenger rather than a driver, she encourages practitioners to watch where attention naturally lands. She emphasizes checking one's relationship to experience—noticing when aversion, craving, or confusion are present, as well as recognizing moments of balance and ease. This 'wise attitude' allows practitioners to be at peace with whatever arises.*
>
> *The session also includes Anne's presentation of the three refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha) and the five precepts as ethical foundations for practice. The precepts are framed not as rigid rules but as guidelines for non-harming that support clarity of mind. Anne extends the fifth precept beyond intoxicants to include awareness of impulses toward distraction—the habitual tendency to avoid unpleasant experience through phones, television, or other escapes. Together, these teachings establish the container for intensive yet integrated practice within daily life.*

We can think of ourselves as being in our meditation hall together.

This retreat, this form of retreat—a couple of you mentioned it was your first retreat online. Some of you, your first retreat altogether. This is I think the sixth or seventh online retreat that I've taught since April, and I'm beginning to appreciate and discover that it's a whole new form of practice.

It does have this possibility of blending the intensive retreat that we do when we seclude ourselves at a retreat center with daily life. And it's been very powerful for a lot of people to enter into this form in which the intention and the cultivation of the practice is infused right into your home environment, your daily lives, some of your more normal interactions—with family perhaps, or with neighbors, or going to the grocery

store even. Some of you may be choosing to seclude yourselves a little more, and that's absolutely fine. As I said a little while ago, this practice carries between intensive, silent, formal practice and daily life practice.

But this form where we are practicing as a community, but in our own environments, has a power that I was not really prepared for. I wasn't really prepared for the depth of new kinds of learning that seemed to be happening for people in this form. And we are creating this form together. It is a little bit of an experiment, how these retreats work. But I like to think in this way: that our meditation hall has become enormous. We span the globe from California to Europe to China. It's kind of amazing that we have this huge meditation hall. And so maybe when you walk out your door, you might think of that being your meditation hall too.

Our practice, the reason we practice—I just like to remind us all of this at the beginning of a retreat—we practice so that we can understand our minds, understand how our minds habitually get caught in stress, in suffering, in confusion. And that understanding, the wisdom that comes through understanding: the natural consequences of that understanding are that the mind, our organism, our system begins to reorient, to let go of those patterns and habits that tend to take us to suffering, that tend to create stress, dissatisfaction, unhappiness in our lives. And the system moves in the direction of qualities of heart and mind, of action that supports happiness, that supports ease, peace in our lives.

And yet this is not an instantaneous kind of transformation. It is a gradual path. The Buddha speaks of the path as being a gradual path. And so it requires patience and trust also in watching our minds do the things that we do habitually. That's a lot of what we get to see when we open our attention to what's happening in our experience. We get to see the ways in which we're struggling, the ways in which we're caught. And just simply seeing it usually doesn't make it go away. The understanding that develops takes time. It takes time for that wisdom to grow.

And so part of what we get to do is to watch those habits and patterns. We watch them from the perspective of being curious about them. One analogy that I really love in connection to this practice is that what we're doing is really studying nature. Our systems are a form of nature. We are studying our hearts and our minds as nature, like a naturalist who goes out into the world, into the forest, to be curious about how the systems of the forest work. What kind of animals feed at these plants or where do they live? What kind of communities do they form? How do the plants and animals interact? A naturalist sits in nature and observes and learns. And that takes time. You don't sit down for one day or even two or three days and learn everything there is to be learned.

This is the kind of approach we are taking here. We are curious about our systems. How do our systems work? Where do they tend to get knotted up and constricted? How does that happen? And the seeing of that, the understanding that grows with that, begins to release those patterns in a skillful way.

And the key tool, the key tool in many ways to this being a naturalist, being an observer of our own system, is mindfulness. Awareness. Being aware of what's happening in the present moment. And as with a naturalist, if you're sitting out in nature and falling asleep while in nature, you're not going to learn very much. Awareness needs to be there. There needs to be an establishment of that mindfulness, establishment of awareness over time.

And this is our work. We explore how we can become aware moment after moment after moment.

Going to help the mind learn and understand, to shift the mind and heart away from stress and suffering—it is a kind of awareness that has a particular perspective. A perspective of curiosity about experience. A perspective of curiosity about what is this human system.

Like a naturalist who goes out simply to be curious about how these systems interact, what is this nature? The naturalist isn't going out to try to find those things that will make them rich, or to try to get rid of the things they don't like. It is simply to be curious. This is the form of mindfulness—this curious, balanced curiosity about what is this human experience. And so that's the kind of mindfulness we explore establishing.

Tonight I'm just going to take a few minutes to overview some of the tools that help this establishment of mindfulness. Then tomorrow morning, we'll go into a little more depth.

The first tool that is incredibly helpful—not only for this form of practice, which I would call receptive awareness—is relaxation. In receptive awareness, we are not necessarily choosing what we pay attention to. Instead, we are seeing what our system is up to. What is already happening? What's already going on? We settle back like the naturalist and just receive what's happening, not trying to control it.

Relaxation is a key support for this kind of receptive practice. Sayadaw U Tejaniya talked about relaxation a lot, and it finally got into my head how important it was for this form of practice. But subsequently, I've seen how valuable relaxation is for any form of meditation practice—whether you're doing loving-kindness practice, concentration practice, breath meditation, or receptive awareness practice. Relaxation is key.

Starting with relaxing the body, allowing the body to relax. You can play with this now while I speak about it. Just letting the body relax. Allowing the muscles of the body to relax. As the body relaxes, it helps our mind to relax a little bit.

The body and mind are very tightly connected, very tightly coupled. When the mind is tense, it reflects in the body, and the body tends to become tense. And likewise, that reflection goes two ways. When the body is tense, it also reflects on the mind, and the mind tends to become tense. It's a two-way street.

If you can relax the body—in particular, there are a few areas of the face. The face is such a reflection of what's going on in the mind. If the face can relax, that sometimes really helps the mind to relax. So letting the face relax, maybe the neck and shoulders and other parts of the body. And perhaps inside the body can relax—the throat, the heart, the stomach, the intestines. As the body relaxes, maybe you'll notice there's a little bit more relaxation of mind.

The body relaxing supports the mind to be more relaxed. A mind that is not relaxed, that is tense, tends to be caught up in past and future, wound up in thoughts, worries, concerns. When the mind relaxes those thoughts, those worries and concerns, what happens is that the mind tends to land in the present moment—being here, available to know what's happening.

Relaxation—relaxing the body, relaxing the mind—creates the conditions for a very natural awareness, for mindfulness to be present. With this relaxation, perhaps you notice that you're aware.

This is actually simple, although not something we tend to orient to. Mostly, when we are aware, we are curious about what we are aware of—body sensations, thoughts, emotions, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch. But can you be curious about whether you are aware?

You may not quite know how you know you're aware. You don't have to figure that part out. But do you know that you're aware right now? If you're listening to me, you're not lost in thought or asleep in this moment. You are aware. Just knowing that you're aware, having that understanding—that's enough in this moment.

This aspect of recognizing that we are aware is a key support for this practice. Because if we can recognize that we are aware, it doesn't matter what we are aware of. The establishment of mindfulness, the continuity of mindfulness, is connected with just knowing that we're aware. This is how mindfulness is established in this practice—the recognition that we're aware.

And what happens in that is a flow of changing experiences. We don't have to try to stay with one object or experience, such as the breath.

Often we have practiced or cultivated meditation practices around being with the breath or being with one particular experience. That is a way, and a very helpful way, to cultivate mindfulness. This practice is slightly different. We're not choosing what to pay attention to, but rather anchoring or connecting with the experience of being aware, and then simply noticing what's here.

It doesn't matter moment to moment—just aware of a body sensation, then a thought, another body sensation, perhaps a sight, perhaps a breath, perhaps an emotion or a feeling. Moment after moment: are you aware? And what is happening? What is obvious?

This is the other piece of being mindful. There's the knowing that we're aware, and then: what is awareness aware of? Recognizing awareness, and what is obvious. What is the mind already paying attention to? We don't have to choose it. We don't have to choose what to pay attention to.

This was a shift for me. Early in my practice, I thought that if I was not choosing the object of meditation, if I didn't have control over what mindfulness was paying attention to, then it meant I wasn't being mindful. This more receptive practice helped me understand that mindfulness is a different function of mind than attention.

Attention is what pulls experience out of our environment to orient to. And there is a way that attention is subject to our conscious control. We can choose: I'm going to pay attention to my hands right now, I'm going to pay attention to a breath right now. So attention is amenable to conscious control; attention can be directed. But it doesn't have to be consciously directed.

If we are settled back like the naturalist, our attention may be drawn from one thing to another without our consciously choosing where it lands. We can watch, or be curious about, where attention goes—not being in charge of it.

Another analogy that might support this approach is to think about being the passenger in a car as opposed to the driver. When you're driving, you're making the choices. You're deciding where to go, which turns to take. You're in charge and having to navigate. As the passenger, you can just sit there and watch the scenery go by. You don't have to be concerned about making the choices. You don't have to check out and go to sleep either, though. You can be there, alert and curious about the environment passing by.

This is the form of practice we're exploring. Are you aware? And in each moment, what is obvious?

How about right now? Maybe something in the body—body sensations are often pretty obvious. It could be a breath. But how about now? Maybe it's hearing, attending to the sound of my voice. Or maybe it's a feeling, an emotion or a mood. Are you aware? What is obvious?

There will be times when we can't be with what is obvious—when what is obvious is too painful, too habitually sticky, and it pulls us out of awareness. I sometimes use the analogy from Alice in Wonderland of going into the rabbit hole. Sometimes our mind states that come, that naturally come, can pull us into them. It's like they're quicksand or a whirlpool. We get pulled under.

When that's happening, sometimes we can't simply be with what is obvious, and we may need to redirect our attention, to choose a place for attention for a time. Use some of your familiar tools—perhaps those of you who've practiced before know tools that help you regain your mindfulness. We'll talk more about working with difficulty, working with it when we can't just be with what's obvious.

And yet, very often, we have more capacity to just be with what's here than we give ourselves credit for.

Can you just know right now what's happening? Are you aware? And what is obvious?

If it feels like the mind is flailing, unable to simply take that stance of settling back in the car and watching things come through, then just start by picking something easy to connect with. Maybe it's the contact of your hips against the chair, cushion, bench, or couch. Maybe it's a breath. Maybe it's the sensations of your hands. Just let your attention land somewhere.

But then you don't have to hold on to that. Once you've let your attention land somewhere, it can stay there for as long as it wants to. But at some point, the attention will be pulled to something else. You'll be paying attention to your hands and then suddenly you'll notice that the attention is listening instead. Then you can just notice, "Oh, the attention has shifted to listening. Aware that listening is happening." And then maybe it shifts to a breath, and then maybe to an emotion—a kind of following where the attention goes.

Our effort in this practice is very light, very settled back. We simply receive what's here, what's here now. What's the next thing? Just enough effort to stay connected with this moment. Just enough to be with what's happening now. And then do it again, and again, and again. Just this light—the lightest touch of effort. A little bit of effort each moment.

The other piece of this practice, alongside relaxing, recognizing awareness, and noticing what's obvious: from time to time, it's useful to check your relationship with experience—how you are in relationship to experience. This is a place where, in the mind, we tend to get caught in stress, suffering, dissatisfaction, and aversion.

Something is happening, an unpleasant experience, and we don't like it. Sometimes that not-liking is hidden behind the scenes. We're not consciously aware. We're not recognizing that there's something unpleasant and that not-liking is part of what's happening. Instead, there's something unpleasant and we are not liking it, in a way trying to adjust or figure out how to get rid of that thing. We're not clearly aware of the not-liking. It's not an experience that we're knowing as another creature that's come out of the forest—"There's this unpleasant experience, and the not-liking creature has joined it."

That's the approach: exploring what the relationship is begins to reveal hidden creatures. And then we can simply become aware of them.

So notice, from time to time, how you are in relationship to experience. It might be a flavor of wanting something to happen, a flavor of greed. It might be a flavor of aversion, of wanting to get rid of something. It might be a flavor of confusion, uncertainty, not sure what to do—views or beliefs, a flavor of delusion at work in the mind. Or it might be the flavor of balance of mind: "This is okay, not a problem." The mind is calm, connected, with a feeling of compassion or kindness toward experience.

This is what Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls wise attitude or right attitude—a perspective that allows us to be at ease with whatever's happening in the present moment. It's useful to notice when that's happening, because when the mind is at ease, wholesome qualities are present in the mind. It's useful to recognize those wholesome qualities.

We'll talk about all of this more in the coming days. This is really just a basic overview of the teachings that Sayadaw U Tejaniya offers: Relax. Recognize the awareness. Recognize that you're aware.

That's so important. Are you aware? What is obvious? And then, from time to time, noticing how you are in relationship to experience.

So the instructions are pretty simple. And yet what they reveal in terms of the workings of our mind is amazingly complex. The practice itself, however, remains simple—a simple mind meeting experience. It's like the simplicity of the naturalist sitting there observing, while the vast complexity that is observed unfolds before them. But the naturalist's job is simple: just to observe. In that observing, our natural intelligence begins to put the understanding together. You don't have to do that part.

Another piece of the opening evening is an entry into the retreat container in the form of commitments, agreements that we make together to practice together. And so we'll talk about the refuges and the precepts.

A few words about what the refuges and the precepts are and why they are important to talk about at the beginning of retreats, as is usually done in this tradition on the opening evening. The five precepts are five ethical guidelines introduced by the Buddha, five ethical practice guidelines. In Finnish, we usually say *viisi harjoitusohjetta*.

If you're new to this practice or to this tradition, you might be surprised to hear that actually quite often when the Buddha taught meditation—or actually before he taught meditation—he taught ethics, taught about ethical behavior in the world as an important foundation for practicing meditation.

The essence of these precepts is to refrain from harming any living beings. In Finnish we would say, *pidättäydytään vahingoittamasta eläviä olentoja*. So refraining from harming the other yogis on the retreat, refraining from harming the managers or the teachers or anybody around here, your family members, friends, colleagues. Also including yourself—we so often forget about ourselves, and our attitude towards ourselves might be quite harsh and demanding and judgmental oftentimes. So this retreat could also be taken as an opportunity to really take care with your attitude towards everybody else and yourself, and then see if it could be about acceptance and kindness and compassion.

The first precept really encompasses all the others, but traditionally we chant these precepts. That's kind of challenging on Zoom, we have noticed. So I would actually like to invite you to pause for a moment, closing your eyes if you like, and just silently in your own mind, in your own words, take this first precept in your own way—to refrain from harming living beings for the duration of this retreat.

As I was already beginning to say, the first precept really encompasses all the others, but the Buddha chose to give us some more detail in the form of the four others.

The second precept is about refraining from taking that which is not given—refraining from taking the possessions of others. What we want to avoid is that our own happiness and well-being wouldn't come at the expense of others. And we might discover with practice that our well-being and happiness and contentment is actually much more about inner life and what happens inside rather than about our material possessions. So again, inviting you to pause for a moment and committing to this precept in your own way—refraining from taking that which is not given for the duration of this retreat.

The third precept asks us to refrain from harm through our sexuality. All kinds of impulses can arise and do arise in the human mind, and that's okay—we can allow all that. But what we are trying to do is to let go of any impulses that lead to harm, in this case, any harmful sexual impulses. So again, pausing for a moment, committing to the precept of refraining from harm through sexuality.

The fourth precept is about refraining from harmful speech. This one looks a bit different depending on your circumstances. As has been said before, some of you might be sitting this retreat in seclusion and silence, not meeting anybody the entire time. Some of you might be interacting with your family, even going to work. There's no right or wrong way of doing this retreat. Definitely, if there's any comparing mind, you can try to let go of that as best as you can. This practice and these precepts can be applied to any situation.

If you are in a situation where you're interacting with others, this is a really great and valuable place of practice. Really paying attention to how you speak to others—trying to do it in a way that's not harmful, saying things that are truthful, saying things that are useful, saying things when it's a good time to say them, saying things with a kind intention in a kind way. This is a practice that can really carry over till after the retreat, because harmful speech creates so much suffering in our lives. Something really valuable to practice if you have the opportunity.

So again, pausing, and in your mind, in your own words, committing to the precept of refraining from harmful speech.

The fifth and final precept is about refraining from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind. On this retreat, in this practice, we are trying to create conditions that best support clarity of mind, alertness of mind, to support the arising of wisdom. If we take that beer or that glass of wine, it's rather counterproductive. So perhaps not the thing to do here. However, if you're on medication prescribed by your doctor, please do continue taking that. It's very important that you don't quit your prescribed medication on retreat.

I like to extend this precept to a more general situation. Our mind has such a tendency to want to avoid the unpleasant, to not feel the unpleasant, to distract ourselves from the unpleasant. If you're in a home environment, you might get interested in impulses—impulses in the mind. When you meet something unpleasant in the body or in the mind, like an unpleasant emotion, perhaps there's an impulse to open that beer, or maybe there's an impulse to look at the phone, or maybe there's an impulse to turn on the TV, just to distract yourself or escape from that unpleasantness.

So perhaps we can expand this precept to mean refraining from distractions to the practice, distractions to awareness, distractions to presence as much as possible. Instead, we give ourselves a chance to actually feel what's going on, to turn towards what's going on, to allow what's going on. This can be a really healing thing to do, a wise thing to do. So again, in your own words, pausing to commit to this precept—to refrain from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind.

A few words about the three refuges. Refuge is a word that refers to a place of safety or a source of support. We all take refuge in something. We all need to take refuge in something in life. When things get difficult, we need some help and support when facing something challenging. Our refuges can be more or less skillful, and in the context of this tradition, we offer you three skillful refuges to take. These are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—the so-called Triple Gem.

Taking refuge in the Buddha doesn't mean anything like blind adoration of a statue or anything like that. Rather, it's about remembering that there was this real human being living in the area of Nepal and India about 2600 years ago, who was practicing and one day sat under the Bodhi tree and became awakened. He found freedom—full, complete freedom from suffering and distress and dissatisfaction and confusion. Remembering this reminds us that it's not just one special being or a few special beings who have this capacity to find freedom and awakening, but actually all human beings have that capacity, including you. So taking refuge in the Buddha means taking refuge in knowing that you have that seed of awakening inside you, that capacity yourself.

Taking refuge in the Dharma—Dharma is a word with many meanings. One of them is the teachings of the Buddha. Taking refuge in the Dharma could mean trusting that those teachings work. They are teachings about how the mind and heart get caught in suffering and distress and confusion, and teachings about how the heart and mind can be freed. Taking refuge in the Dharma means trusting that these teachings actually work and are enough to lead where you want to go.

Finally, taking refuge in the Sangha, the community of practitioners. The manager so beautifully spoke about this, how all of us are here to support each other, how the managers themselves find it so important to feel this connection and offer support, even feeling gratitude for being able to do that.

Perhaps at this point, taking a look at your screen, all these small tiles, really taking in everybody here, seeing all these people who are going to be here on this retreat with you for these five days. Most people feel that it's so much easier to practice in a group than alone. Imagine being just alone for four or five days without anybody—no yogis, no teachers, no managers. But you have all these people here in front of you who are going to sit with you and practice with you, go through challenging times with you and perhaps more joyful times with you.

This is your sangha for the retreat. Taking refuge in the support that everybody here is going to offer to everybody—the yogis, the managers, and the teachers. So inviting you one more time to pause for a moment, closing your eyes, and in your own way, in your own words, taking refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma, and in the Sangha for the duration of this retreat.

When you're ready, at your own pace, coming back to your screen.

We have just a few minutes left together this evening. So let's sit together. Finding yourself a posture that feels relaxed and yet alert. Relaxation and alertness are not opposites. The body and mind can be very relaxed and very alert at the same time. Sometimes I find a way into this with a word or two: sitting with dignity. An expression of integrity. Relaxed dignity. Allowing the body to relax, the mind to relax.

Maybe taking a few moments to scan through the body. Just noticing if there are areas of tension and seeing if they can be softened, relaxed, released.

As you're relaxing the body, you are using awareness. Awareness is present. Aware while relaxing. Being aware while relaxing the body.

As the body relaxes, it supports the mind to relax. Maybe the mind can relax.

And checking in, curious about being aware. Are you aware? Starting with aware while relaxing, and then just shifting to aware. What are you aware of? What is obvious?

Settling back like that naturalist, curious perhaps of the feeling sense in the body and mind.

We often use language about looking at, seeing, observing for mindfulness. And yet some other language might serve us—perhaps feeling, being with, experiencing, receiving. It's receiving. It's already here.

In each moment this may change, and that's okay. You don't have to chase after experience. Let experience come to you. Relax. Recognize awareness and notice what is obvious.

It's the end of your day, and you've been on the computer for quite a while. You're welcome to turn off your computer, but I would encourage you—if you are planning to find your way to resting at this point—can you be aware? Exploring that possibility: aware while taking care of your shiftings to get towards bed. Being aware.

For some of you, you may still have some energy, perhaps to do some walking or another sitting. The hall is always open, and you're welcome to stay connected with people in this way as well.

But if it is time for your rest, please take your rest—and rest with awareness until you fall asleep.

See you in the morning.

CHAPTER 154

Retreat Opening Part One

Andrea Fella · 17 min

> *In this opening session of an online retreat, Andrea Fella introduces herself and her teaching colleague Anna, setting the foundation for five days of practice in the tradition of Sayadaw U Tejaniya. Andrea shares her journey from initial skepticism about meditation during her Peace Corps days to becoming a dedicated retreat practitioner and teacher over more than two decades. She describes how meeting Sayadaw U Tejaniya in 2005 profoundly shaped her approach to practice, finding his teaching style deeply resonant with her own experience.*
>
> *Anna, based in Finland and a lead instructor at Nirodha, reflects on how her first vipassanā retreat sixteen years ago transformed her life priorities and led her to dedicated practice. Both teachers emphasize the distinctive qualities of Sayadaw U Tejaniya's approach—describing it as both easeful and relaxed while also powerful in cultivating awareness throughout daily life.*
>
> *The session covers practical retreat logistics including the schedule of guided meditations, teaching sessions, optional group meetings, and community sittings. Andrea touches briefly on the practice itself, encouraging participants to bring curiosity to all activities—whether formal sitting and walking meditation or daily tasks. She introduces the valuable exploration of noticing the urge to change postures, suggesting practitioners might let such urges arise and pass before acting on them. This opening establishes the retreat's emphasis on awareness in all moments rather than rigid adherence to form.*

I've been teaching meditation retreats for about fourteen years now and been meditating—I can't even remember exactly—twenty-three, twenty-four years, something like that. I started meditating when I was in the Peace Corps and very quickly was drawn to long retreat practice. I loved the long retreat practice, which was a surprise to me because when I first started practicing, my entry into the practice was through daily life practice. I was not interested in meditating at all. In fact, the friend who sent me the book about meditation told me she had been attending a daylong retreat, and I thought she had joined some kind of cult and had gone off the deep end. And then I came back from the Peace Corps and immediately started attending long retreats, so I joined the group.

I met Sayadaw U Tejaniya in 2005 and very quickly felt that his style of practice, his style of teaching was so resonant for me. And so that is the kind of teaching that I'm sharing on this retreat.

I met Anna when I was teaching the 2010 IMS three-month course, I believe. So we've known each other for about ten years. We've worked together quite a bit on the long retreats at IMS and then started working together individually in the last six years or so. I nominated her for the Bodhi College Teacher Training Program, so she'll be assisting on this retreat. I have a lot of confidence in her. She'll be doing the groups and some guided meditations and also participating in some of the teaching sessions, offering some teachings. I think many of you already know Anna, but I'll give her a few minutes to say hello and introduce herself.

Anna speaking:

My name is Anna and I am located in Espoo, which is a city on the south coast of Finland, right next to Helsinki, for those of you who are not familiar with Finland. I'm one of the lead instructors of Nirodha, so I've been sharing the teachings here in Finland for some years now and will be doing that in the future too.

My first Vipassana retreat was almost exactly sixteen years ago. It was such an experience for me that it really changed my priorities in life. I became a dedicated practitioner right after my first Vipassana retreat.

I feel really honored that Andrea is here with us, our special guest, first time in Finland. She is such a popular teacher in the US that we had to actually invite her three years in advance so that she could find the time to come here. And now the time has finally arrived.

I've been hearing Andrea's teachings a lot, but I keep getting so much out of them. I can honestly say that Andrea sees the processes of the mind with so much clarity and is able to teach about them and describe them with so much clarity that it's really amazing to me. I think it's very rare amongst the teachers in this tradition. So this is a great chance for all of us to learn from her deep wisdom and all that clarity.

The managers of this retreat, Aini and Anu—I know both of them and I've worked with both of them before, and I have full confidence in them. I know that you will be in very good hands during these five days.

I've been practicing different styles of Vipassana, but for me, Sayadaw U Tejaniya's style is my favorite, and I feel it's a style I've benefited the most from. So it's especially great for me to be involved in this particular retreat with this style and with this teacher.

Andrea and I were teaching a retreat for the Swedish group a couple of weeks ago, because Andrea was supposed to visit both countries on her first visit to Northern Europe. I could really see the power of this practice in that group. People were really appreciative and grateful at the end. It's a very easeful and relaxed style of practice, but it's also a very powerful way of bringing a lot of awareness into your life. I find it a great combination, a powerful combination. I'm very glad to be here.

Andrea speaking:

Thank you, Anna. I've been pronouncing your name incorrectly for so many years. I think I might not pronounce your name correctly still.

Just a few logistical reinforcements to mention. The two teaching sessions that I'll be involved in are the morning instruction session at 6:30 in the morning and the evening session at 7:00 in the evening. The morning will primarily be a guided meditation instruction with a little bit of reflection at the end. The evening session will be...

a little more teaching, some more elaboration on the instructions, or perhaps what looks like a Dharma talk, followed by an opportunity for questions. These are the two sessions that I'm able to be involved in, given the timing and time difference, and these are the two sessions we ask you all to attend each day.

We know that there may be internet glitches and things like that, so the recordings for those sessions will be available hopefully not too long after the sessions themselves. The recordings will generally be posted in the morning time each day, your time. The hall needs to go down for a short time after the morning session in order for the talks to be uploaded.

Each day when I'm asleep, Anna will be offering group practice meetings—most days at 9:30, though the first day will be at 4:30 in the afternoon. These are optional groups, but they will be pre-assigned based on the form we sent out asking whether you wanted to participate. Those group meeting times will be posted and available for you to see.

Anna will offer a guided meditation at the two o'clock sitting in the afternoon. On that first day, this guided meditation will largely reinforce the instructions offered this evening and tomorrow morning, reviewing them in Finnish. On subsequent days, that guided meditation will be in English with an opportunity to ask questions at the end, where Anna is happy to translate questions asked in Finnish.

The community sittings are also optional. Largely the practice will be in your own rhythms, but we do have these structured sitting times to support your practice. I find this helpful in the online format—to have a little bit of a check-in, to be with the community. We don't have each other together to be inspired by each other's presence, so these times are there to support your practice.

The hall is open for the whole day but will go down for a short time each day so the talks can be uploaded, which will happen after the morning session. When the session goes down, you'll be briefly kicked out of the meeting, but you can log back in immediately following that.

During the evening sessions when there's an opportunity for questions and responses, there are a couple of different ways to submit questions. One is through the form—some of you have already found your way there and submitted questions or comments. That's one way to submit questions for that afternoon session, and you're welcome to submit them in Finnish; Anna will translate. If you can submit them in English, I would appreciate it, but if it's easier to ask in Finnish, that's fine. You can submit those questions in advance anytime, as the form is always available.

During the question session itself, we can take questions either through the chat or by raising the blue hand. If you click on the participants icon, you'll see a place where you can raise your hand. That's the easiest way for us to see that you've raised your hand with two screens. Sometimes if you're raising your physical hand within the camera and you're not on the screen we see, we may miss you, but we'll try to keep track of that as well.

For the sake of the recording, we'd like to start the Q&A sessions with questions through the form, then open it up to chat and live participation. We'll break the recording at that point so that the live question session can be available for you but would not be posted publicly on the Naroda website at the end of the retreat.

For the Q&A, you'll be able to unmute yourselves. And if you walk away from your computer at any time, especially if there are other people in your house, turn the camera and the mic off. We've had situations in previous retreats where people didn't turn

their camera and mic off, and then members of their family walked into the room unaware that the camera was on. Who knows what can happen in that situation. So it's really useful to turn your camera and mic off when you walk away from the computer.

There was one question around what to do during the breaks in the schedule when there's no sitting marked—the possibility of doing walking meditation, or more sitting, or lying down, or standing, or just your daily chores, or interacting with your family if you're in that situation.

I'll talk more about that tomorrow morning. That's a good part of this practice—a kind of curiosity about why you would sit, why you would walk, why you would do anything, for that matter. Just to be curious, to be aware in all activities.

You are welcome, if it feels unfamiliar to have an unstructured schedule, to create your own schedule. If you're doing a more intensive, secluded kind of retreat, you're welcome to create your own: sit, walk, sit, walk, sit, meal, sit, walk, sit, walk, sit, meal. You're welcome to do that.

But it's also a valuable exploration to sit until the urge to stop sitting inspires you—and then look at that urge. Be curious about it. Maybe let it arise and pass once or twice, and then follow through on it.

CHAPTER 155

Taking the Practice Home

Andrea Fella · 32 min

> *This closing session from an online retreat addresses the crucial transition from intensive practice back to everyday life. Anna begins by acknowledging that retreat participants, especially those who have maintained silence and seclusion, may find themselves more sensitive and reactive than usual. She offers practical advice for a gentle transition: taking quiet time, avoiding immediate demands like clearing emails, and being selective about sharing deep experiences with those who may not understand.*
>
> *Andrea Fella then explores how to maintain the momentum of awareness in daily life, which she describes as "graduate level practice." She emphasizes that while the instructions remain the same—relaxation, awareness, noticing what's obvious, checking attitude—the quality of experience in daily life differs from formal practice. A key practice she highlights is simply noticing when mindfulness naturally returns throughout the day, even briefly, without trying to hold onto it. This recognition of effortless awareness builds momentum over time.*
>
> *The teaching introduces Sayadaw U Tejanīya's practice of "50-50 mindfulness"—maintaining half attention on the content of activities while half remains aware of how we are responding internally. This can be cultivated gradually, such as when reading news, first alternating between content and checking in, then developing the capacity to hold both simultaneously. Throughout, both teachers emphasize self-compassion about the difficulty of daily life practice and offer resources for continued support through saṅgha connections, online groups, and regular sitting practice.*

For quite a number of you, this has been your first retreat, and some of you have been practicing this entire time in silence and seclusion. It's important for you to be aware that during this sort of time in silence, we might become more open and more sensitive than we might realize.

So when you leave this retreat container, you might find yourself reacting to things more strongly than usual, having stronger emotional reactions than usual. You might find that your ordinary life all of a sudden seems way too busy and fast and full—and life in general out there. You might find that you get agitated, or you might find that you get really tired and exhausted, or you might find that it keeps changing in the next couple of days. This is all a normal reaction to the changing conditions.

It's going to take a while to transition back to your ordinary life if you've been in seclusion, just as it took a while to transition to the silence of the retreat. For you and for everybody else as well, it's wonderful if you happen to have the opportunity to take good care of yourself in these next days—to have some more quiet alone time for yourself than usual to ensure a smooth and comfortable transition back to your life. If possible, avoid too many demands on yourself. It might not be the best idea to go check all your emails right after the closing session and try to reply to all of them tonight. You might try to spread that over a longer period of time. Perhaps the to-do list can wait a little bit too.

Also, if it's been your first retreat and you've had deep experiences, take care about who you share them with. Somebody who hasn't been on retreat themselves might not understand very much, and it might feel dismissive sharing with somebody like that. So maybe just share with people who seem to be genuinely interested in your experience, to avoid any hurt feelings.

When you go back to your ordinary life and the retreat ends, it's really wonderful if you're able to keep practicing. You might be feeling energized and inspired and motivated right now at the end of a retreat, but you know that everything changes—so that will change as well. As months go by, the memory of the retreat might fade and the memory of those experiences might fade. It's helpful to maintain connection to what's truly motivating you to practice. Maybe you had a significant experience that put you in touch with something deep within that you feel is important to you. If you have an experience like that, try to bring it to mind every now and then just to remember what's important in life and why you want to be doing this. Or perhaps regularly listen to inspiring Dharma talks or read inspiring Dharma books—just keep that flame of inner motivation burning.

It's also very helpful to have a regular practice going on. If you don't have a regular daily practice yet, right after a retreat is an excellent time to establish one in your life. There's this momentum of awareness going on, and motivation and energy. This is a really good time to establish daily practice. You might consider making a plan for the next month or so—something that seems realistic given your particular life conditions. How long to sit? What time to sit? Where to sit? For instance, making a plan that for the next month, it would seem wise and realistic to sit half an hour per day in the morning between brushing my teeth and having breakfast, in the corner of the living room where nobody disturbs me at that time of day. Then after a month, sit down to evaluate how it went and whether any changes need to be made.

When you get this practice going, when you get this habit built up, this regularity built up, it's going to start supporting you even more. When we have habits like brushing our teeth in the morning, we don't have to think about them every morning—whether we have the time and the energy to brush our teeth or not. We just do it. The same thing with practice. If you manage to build this kind of daily practice habit, it's going to be very helpful for you in the future.

Several things can support your practice and help you build up that routine. One is perhaps using meditation apps like the Insight Timer. You might want to listen to a guided meditation sometimes instead of doing silent meditation. There are also certain websites with helpful resources. There's a website called dharmaseed.org—there's enough to listen to there for the rest of your life, probably. There are tons of good books around as well. And of course, other people, a group of practitioners, a sangha, is a great support.

I'm going to mostly talk about practicing and how it feels a little different, perhaps, after the retreat ends. Some of you have been doing a more integrated practice in this form and have perhaps gotten more of a taste of what it's like to have that practice infuse regular activities. But what I would mostly say is that the container of the retreat itself is significant. Some of you have been doing just the morning and evening sessions while working during the day, and so maybe it feels like whatever momentum of mindfulness you've found will simply continue. But the container of those morning and evening sessions is a condition that really supports the momentum of mindfulness.

You'll probably experience some momentum continuing as you come out of the retreat—some elevated capacity and natural awareness happening. But it will change. It will not likely continue at that level. So I'm going to point to a few things, a few of the instructions that might support you.

As we said around sitting versus walking, or sitting versus daily activities, the instructions are the same. That's one great thing about this practice—there's no difference in the instructions. Allow there to be relaxation. Are you aware? What's obvious? What's the attitude? We can do this in our daily lives.

What is different, though—and for those of you who have been more secluded, this will be a bigger shift—is that in formal practice, the experience tends to be a little more internal, can get more subtle perhaps. We're noticing more about the subtlety of body sensations and thoughts in the formal practice. In daily life practice, the objects may be different. They may be just more ordinary—ordinary experience.

This is a place where recognizing the awareness is so important. Recognizing, "Yes, I'm aware of ordinary experience." It has a different quality. It's got that more panoramic quality, being aware of ordinary experience. To begin to recognize the awareness in the ordinary will support the continuity of mindfulness. And what I've seen is that as the continuity of mindfulness builds in the ordinary activities of daily life, then when you sit down to meditate, that momentum is more available. There's a kind of nice flow between sitting and daily life practice.

A couple of key pieces from the instructions to highlight: in the retreat form, we can notice the efforting potentially, although we've been encouraging a more relaxed and receptive approach. Still, the intention toward "Am I aware?"—the recognizing of awareness—has been your main focus this whole time. When we shift into ordinary life, into daily life, we have other things to do. Those of you doing the more integrated retreats know the shift that happens when we have to go to our jobs or our work. There are agendas we have to pick up and engage with. When we have those agendas in mind, holding two agendas—holding the agenda of writing this memo to my boss and being aware while doing it—can be quite challenging.

And so what I find in working with people in daily life, in terms of cultivating the momentum of awareness, is to not emphasize trying to do the mindfulness when you have a particular agenda that takes a lot of mental activity.

You can do it when you're doing things like being in the kitchen, perhaps. You've got the agenda for preparing a meal. We've been practicing that kind of awareness. And so in those times you could be trying to remember awareness. But when you have a particularly mental emphasis on the activity, trying to do the awareness is going to feel like it gets in the way. It's like, "Oh, I've got to think about what to say to this person. Oh, can I be aware? Think about what to say. Oh, can I be aware?" It just doesn't allow the natural flow of the mind following its train of focusing on that task.

And yet, we might think that this means we can't have mindfulness in that task, and that's not true. It is more that the momentum of mindfulness needs to build, and then that momentum can infuse that experience. The momentum of mindfulness builds over time.

One of the key ways for that to build, and I may have mentioned this earlier, is to notice the moments of mindfulness returning. It will return in many situations. And so that one practice—I would say that one practice in my daily life has been the key for building and inspiring and having the mindfulness begin to infuse everything.

Mindfulness will return even in the midst of a very intense activity. It will return even just for a moment, and just—oh, there it is. This is what it's like to be aware while focusing on writing an email. But then you don't have to try to keep doing it. Just take in that that is possible. Let it go and get on with your day. But notice those moments of mindfulness returning. It happens way more than you think. It happens a lot.

And yet we often don't notice it because when that moment of mindfulness returns, it's like, well, in some ways the attention shifts, and for a moment we know that the attention has shifted, but we're immediately picking up on what the attention has shifted to—and not aware that we recognized there was that shift of attention.

So noticing that shift of attention is another piece. Sometimes when the attention shifts, like we're sitting there doing something really intensive and then we get distracted, we hear a loud noise, there's a split second of being aware in that moment. But often we just leap immediately on annoyance for whatever made that loud noise. If we can attune ourselves to those moments of mindfulness returning, recognize the effortless nature of those, see that it's revealing something in that moment, but then just get on with your day—just get on with whatever you're doing. Not trying to hold on to the mindfulness there.

The other key piece, the practice tool that Sayadaw offers, is fifty-fifty mindfulness: fifty percent of the attention on the content of what we're doing, fifty percent of the attention on how we are. That's a great practice for daily life. And that can be used in many activities. The intensive focus, maybe not. But you can cultivate and practice with it.

For instance, if you're reading the news at some times, it's really great to practice this fifty-fifty awareness. You're essentially, in reading the news, taking in content, taking in information. It's kind of like you're receiving the contents of somebody else's mind there. So you're receiving information. And how are you while you're receiving that information? How does it land? How does it affect you?

In reading the news, you can slow it down a little bit so that you can practice this fifty-fifty awareness. At first it might feel like a going back and forth. You may like just look at the headlines at first. Okay, how did that land? Let yourself read the headlines, then take a moment and sit back, then read a couple paragraphs from an article. Okay, how did that land? How am I with this?

At first it can feel like a going back and forth, but over time we develop the skill to be able to read, to take in the content and know simultaneously, even as we're reading a word, how we're responding to that word. This fifty-fifty awareness can be used in so many different ways. And I really encourage exploration of that piece.

This is hard. Daily life practice is genuinely difficult. This is graduate-level practice, the advanced work of taking what we learn on retreat out into our ordinary lives. So please have some compassion for yourself about how challenging it is. Don't berate yourself when you find mindfulness getting lost more frequently, when the habits and patterns, the ways you typically respond to things, keep coming back or are just right there. If you're noticing them, that's great news. If you're noticing those habits and patterns, that itself is the practice working. So just hold some compassion for yourself around all of this.

There were a couple of questions I want to address before we shift the recording. One person mentioned that this has been helpful, that waking up consistently at six o'clock has been fantastic, and they're hoping to keep it up. They wondered if there might be some support for that, perhaps groups meeting at that time.

The schedule here has been 6:30 to 9:30 Greenwich Mean Time plus two, which I think is about Finnish time zone. I don't know of regular meetings that happen at that particular time. Anna and I were talking about it, and we think it would have to be groups further east in Europe, perhaps Russia, that zone of the world. Neither of us is aware of groups meeting at that time, but you can certainly look online.

There are many regular meetings available at times that do work for that time zone, usually in the later afternoon. In California, Gil Fronsdal is currently offering sessions at 7:30 a.m. Pacific time, which I think is about 5:30 p.m. Finnish time. Every morning he offers about an hour with a guided meditation and a short dharma talk. It involves quite a lot of guidance, but he does wonderful series working with various themes in practice. So that's available.

I'll be teaching as well. I have a regular group that meets at 9:30 a.m. my time, which would be about 7:30 p.m. Finnish time on Tuesdays. That's available most weeks, though if I'm teaching a retreat like this week, I don't hold it.

I'll also be offering another Daily Life Retreat online. In August, I offered the first one, which uses this form of practice with an emphasis on integrating it into daily life. If you were interested in that small taste I gave you, just those ten minutes on working with this in daily life, I do a whole week retreat on that theme. The format involves two sessions a day, with the most important one being the instruction session happening

7:30 to 9:30 a.m. California time, which again is about 5:30 p.m. Finnish time. Then there's a second session just for questions later in the day that would probably be overnight Finnish time, but that's recorded so you can listen on your own schedule. This will be happening in the February-March timeframe. I just taught it in August, and after about six months, I'll offer it again.

But there's so much happening online now. I think there's actually a resource I can find, an Excel spreadsheet listing groups around the world with their time zones and meeting times. Someone emailed it to me. I'll see if I can locate that and have it sent as a resource following the retreat.

Anna added a few more possibilities. She's also not aware of anything happening early in the day Finnish time, but Gaia House, the retreat center in the UK, offers an online Dharma Hall with five weekly sittings. Some take place in the morning UK time, which would be a bit later in the morning Finnish time. There's also a website called Sangha Live with many teachers from this tradition, and they sometimes have daily morning meditations that might work. They also offer weekly classes. Bodhi College is another source for weekly dharma teaching classes. So yes, there's plenty available online, and Neroda's website lists some of these resources.

And someone just posted that at 9 a.m. Swedish time, a Vipassana group holds daily online meditation sittings for an hour. So that's also available a little later in the morning for those in that time zone.

And then another question about practicing for longer periods—where that might be possible. Longer than one week, not possible in Finland at the moment, and feeling like this particular style feels right but not sure where to go. Clearly the pandemic is an issue.

The person asks about Gaia House or Shwe Oo Min, which is the monastery where Sayadaw U Tejaniya teaches. There's also the long retreats in the U.S. that are available. The three-month course at IMS is probably the first really intensive retreat that's been offered—for forty years now. Anna has been to that. I teach at that most years. That's not happening this year; it has been canceled. And so it will be a while before the long retreats come back.

I've not seen many teachers doing long retreats in the online form, although some are experimenting with that. Right now this month, Sally Armstrong and Guy Armstrong are doing a month following a week more intensive—and then one session each day for the rest of the month. So people are starting to experiment with long retreats online.

In terms of this practice, Carol Wilson and I are scheduled to teach a month-long in this style at the Forest Refuge in June 2021. I don't know if that will happen. It's possible because it's nine months from now. We'll see. That is a lottery; we just had it. So at this point, that's a waiting list.

But Shwe Oo Min is a good option. It is also at this point closed—no yogis allowed. But just keep an eye on that. And I would encourage you to practice in daily life because the momentum of that is valuable. Listen to Sayadaw's teaching. There's a lot that he's published online. I've got many talks online that support this style of practice. Carol Wilson and Alexis Santos are other teachers who teach in this style. Some of Steve Armstrong and Kamala Masters' talks teach in this style as well. So you can search out the teachings and support yourself in daily life in this way until the retreat centers open again.

I am working on creating a webpage for myself. At this point, my own teachings are hard to find because I don't have a way to collect them. I teach at five different centers, and that's where things are posted, so I haven't yet created something central. I hadn't felt a need to do that. But now in this time, it feels useful to have everything gathered together—where am I actually teaching? So that's in process; probably in the next month or so it will get posted. It's a bit harder to find right now, but I have some resources that I'll send to you in the email that will go out at the end, in terms of where my teachings are available.

CHAPTER 156

Working with the Dear Friend

Andrea Fella · 50 min

In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers detailed guidance on the formal mettā (loving-kindness) practice, specifically focusing on extending well-wishes to a dear friend. She begins by addressing the historical roots of this practice, noting that while the phrases themselves appear in the Paṭisambhidāmagga (around second century CE) and the category system comes from the Visuddhimagga (fifth century CE), the practice may even predate the Buddha.

Fella introduces a powerful analogy of mettā as a washing machine: awareness is the water, the mind with its difficulties is the dirty clothes, and mettā is the soap. The agitation of repeating phrases massages the loving-kindness through our mental patterns, drawing out whatever obstructs genuine goodwill. When anger, frustration, or resistance arise during practice, this isn't failure—it's the mettā doing its purifying work. She shares a transformative personal experience from a month-long mettā retreat where, despite feeling miserable, she discovered that simply saying phrases while checking how each one landed in the heart gradually rekindled an ember of loving-kindness.

The talk offers practical tools for navigating difficulties: continuing to hold both the phrases and arising reactivity together when possible, returning to an easier being if reactions escalate, exploring forgiveness practice, or shifting to mindfulness. Fella concludes with a guided meditation that includes an innovative alternation practice—wishing oneself well, then the friend, then both together—specifically designed to address the belief that happiness is a zero-sum game.

Today we're going to continue the formal metta practice using the phrases and exploring in a little more depth the category of a dear friend.

I'd like to speak to begin with just a little bit about this form of practice that we're offering. The question came up yesterday about wondering if this is a more modern form of the practice. The form that we teach here, with using the phrases and using the categories—the phrases themselves are pretty old. The phrases are found in the Sutta Piṭaka, in the Pali Canon, the Sutta basket, in a text called the Paṭisambhidāmagga, which is not from the time of the Buddha. Most scholars think of it as being a little bit later, like second century common era. So it's not time of the Buddha, and the teachings, the Sutta teachings attributed to the Buddha, do offer a more expansive or pervading

teaching of the loving-kindness. So the more specific form of practice was somewhat later, but certainly not what I would call modern—thousands and thousands of years old.

I did hear from one teacher—Gil Fronsdal, I believe—who said that this practice of metta may even predate the Buddha. I couldn't find any verification of this in the time that I was looking at this yesterday, but if so, it's a pretty ancient practice, this practice that we're doing here.

The categories that we use, the staging through first looking at self and then picking a particular person in a category, that's found in the Visuddhimagga, which is a commentary in the Theravada tradition that's about fifth century common era. So that's also fairly old, this going through the categories.

I appreciate the different options for exploring metta practice. I think there are different times where the different forms or styles of metta practice might be useful. For myself, the formal metta practice was challenging at the beginning. It was not something that allowed me to have ease in the mind. And that's really important in the metta practice—we do begin with that ease. For me, the way into metta was insight practice. As the insight practice softened my heart and mind, the allowing—"this is the way it is, it's okay that it's this way"—all that allowing practice that I did in insight practice took me to the place, after several years, where the metta practice was available again, and very powerful.

So there can be different approaches. Sometimes we can cultivate metta through the insight practice, through recognizing when metta arises, through cultivating that quality of love through being with experience, loving what's here. There are a lot of different ways into metta practice.

The form that we're teaching has some advantages and supports for us. One of the benefits of the phrases is that it uses a capacity of our minds—the intention, the aspect where we can put a thought into our minds. Thoughts have a very powerful shaping capacity in our mind. As the Buddha said, whatever one frequently ponders becomes the inclination of the mind. So if we frequently bring in thoughts of goodwill, that begins to shape the mind, even if the feeling of goodwill is not there. This is a powerful tool to support cultivating this quality of love, of kindness, of care—thinking thoughts, bringing thoughts of goodwill into the mind.

It's supportive in a way that we can do this practice even if we're not feeling the metta, if we're not feeling that sense of goodwill. For plenty of time when I was doing the metta practice, I was not feeling the feeling, but I could connect with the wish. May I be happy. May you be happy.

In fact, there was one experience I had. I did a month-long retreat at Spirit Rock one February, a month of entirely metta practice. I was in the dining hall one day, not feeling a lot of metta, feeling kind of miserable, feeling sorry for myself, a lot of pain in the body. I was like, "I cannot feel metta at all." But I was committed to doing it the whole time, so I just said, "Well, I can say the phrase and know what it means. I can bring that into my mind and I can know what it means. And with each phrase, I can check in: How does it land? How does it affect the heart to feel that, to make that wish?"

So I began wishing myself well. "May I be happy today." Say that, know what it means. And then feel in the heart this tiny little shift, hardly barely discernible, but just a tiny little shift. Then another: "May I be at ease. May I be healthy. May I be safe." With each phrase checking in: How did that one land?

And it was as if each phrase was like touching a little ember of metta in the heart. The expression of that wish, the expression of the metta, was like gently blowing on that ember—just a gentle breeze blowing on that ember. And within about twenty minutes, my mind was completely shifted. I was just so happy as I got up and walked up the hill from the dining hall. It was such a teaching for me, such an eye-opening revelation about the power of using this formal practice.

That said, there are many times in my practice where the phrases were not helping—where doing the phrases was making me more and more tight. And so we do have to honor where we are. We have to honor what is happening in our hearts and minds. I found in the formal metta practice this quality, and Dawn mentioned this the other day: saying a phrase and checking in to the heart. And for me it was not only heart but body, checking in—how does it land to make that wish? So that it's not just saying the phrase, it's saying the phrase and being aware of how that phrase impacts or affects your experience. And maybe it's not much of a shift, or maybe it's a subtle shift, or maybe it brings up the opposite. Maybe it brings up anger or frustration, and that's okay. That's part of the metta practice too.

As both Dawn and Bob mentioned, sometimes that's the function of the metta practice—to draw out everything that's in the way of the metta. I sometimes think about the metta practice as a purification practice. It's talked about as a purification practice, and the washing machine is an interesting analogy.

In the washing machine analogy for metta practice, I think of the water as our awareness. The clothes with dirt in them—that's the mind with all of its messy stuff. And the soap is the metta. So you put the soap in the water in a washing machine, and then you have some agitation. You have to agitate the machine, turn it on. And that massaging of the soap in the water through the clothes, it pushes the soapy water through. The way soap works, it latches onto the dirt and pulls it out into the water.

That's what the metta does. The metta is the soap, and the continuing of the phrases, the energy of the practice, is like that machine turning away. It will massage that metta through our minds, and it will latch onto anything that's not metta and pull it into consciousness. It's not a mistake when that happens. It's the metta doing its work. So sometimes that is what happens—we feel the opposite of metta when we're practicing it.

In the formal practice of metta, the way we've learned it from our teachers—Sharon learned it from Sayadaw U Pandita in Burma, and I learned it from my teachers here, plus my teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma—this way we've learned the practice, we generally start where it's easiest, as we've been doing the last couple of days, starting with an easy being. And then moving into beings with whom we perhaps have a little more complex relationship.

So today we're going to explore the possibility of offering these wishes of kindness to a dear friend. Now, we might think that it would be easy to offer metta for a dear friend, but as we rest with the friend in our mind, in our hearts, and begin to express, "May you be safe, may you be happy," sometimes what comes up—that soap of the metta going through our minds and the thoughts that come up with the relationship—is that they did that thing, they said that thing. How can I wish them well when they did that? And so it can get a little more complex sometimes with a dear friend.

This is actually part of why the use of these different categories is useful for us. Because if we are exploring the metta, and sometimes I've done this, touched into a kind of open-hearted quality that feels like, "Yes, may all beings be happy," and then a particular person comes into mind and their specifics come into mind—there's some constriction there.

The mind, in the "all beings" category, if we're just pervading metta, sometimes that pervading quality can be a little diluted. It can be not really taking in the specifics. And if we bring in a particular person, there may be that feeling like a wrench in the works. It feels like the washing machine gets stuck because we're connecting with particular things or actions, things they've done or said where we have some rub, where we have some challenge in opening our hearts. And so that's part of the reason for specifically turning to specific beings.

Each of the different categories involves picking a specific being to help us find the terrain of where that particular category challenges us.

For someone we're close to, we may have expectations that they wouldn't do something that would hurt us. And then when they do, there's a barrier. For someone who is doing things that are harmful or hurtful to us, we may feel like there's simply no way we could even feel that kind of well-wishing for them. So picking specific beings helps us find the ground-in dirt in our relationships.

In exploring the dear friend, we may find a little bit of this rub. And it's okay if that comes up. When there's difficulty in the mettā practice, sometimes we can just hold it and say, "Yes, this is the mettā working." That's fine.

At one point I was doing my yogi job during a retreat where I was doing mettā all the time. I was doing the dishwashing at Spirit Rock, and I was finding the machine a bit hard to work with. I was doing "may all beings" at this point—"may all beings be happy"—and the machine would get a little stuck. I'd think, "Who designed this stupid machine?" The anger would flare up in my mind, and then I'd notice, "Oh, there's the mettā. There's the anger. Okay." I didn't have to drop the mettā and look at the anger. I just noted, "Yes, that comes out into the wash," and kept going.

If we can keep going, noticing that kind of rub or grinchiness or reactivity coming out into the wash, that's fine. That's what happens in the washing machine—the dirt comes into the water, and then that water can be rinsed away. The reactivity can come into our consciousness and then be released. We can appreciate that the mettā is doing its job when that kind of reactivity happens.

So if we can keep going and hold the phrases, the well-wishing, and the reactivity all together, that's fine. Sometimes, however, the reactivity does get stronger. If that happens, it can be useful to let go of that particular being. If the reactivity feels like it's escalating, it can be useful to let go of that being and go back to where it's easier in the mettā practice—to yourself or to the easy being, wherever it feels more comfortable, more useful to practice.

There's an analogy with mettā that in starting where it's easy, it's like we're filling up a pool of water with that quality of mettā. As that pool fills up, it can overflow and begin to fill up the next pool. We may find that we can start with the easy being or with ourselves, and that creates a container for well-wishing. Then, bringing in another being where there may be a little more difficulty, the mettā from the prior work or practice can support us. But if that pool dries out completely, we may have to go back and nourish it again, returning to an easier being.

Another support—and I think this will come in tomorrow's session—is to shift to another practice in the flavor of the mettā practices: forgiveness practice, either forgiveness for ourselves or forgiveness for other beings. If it's too hard to wish well, sometimes we can explore the forgiveness practice. And it's okay also, if the reactivity is too strong, to let go of the mettā entirely and just work with mindfulness with the reactivity.

So these are tools for navigating difficulty. First, if difficulty comes up, stay—just keep going if possible and allow it, knowing that this is the mettā working well. Then, dropping back to an easier being, using forgiveness practice, or shifting back to mindfulness practice.

Let's explore the practice again together today.

Finding a posture that feels comfortable. Allowing a relaxation in the body. Perhaps taking some time to connect with relaxing the body and mind.

Then connecting with the area of the heart. Just allowing what's there to be there, completely okay. Whatever's there in this moment, allowing that to be as it is.

If it's supportive, sometimes it can be helpful to remember—as was suggested yesterday—that many, many beings have been offering mettā to all beings: all beings now, all beings to be born. We are the recipient of mettā. Somebody right now, somewhere on the planet, is offering mettā to all beings. You are one of them.

Opening your heart to the worthiness of yourself to receive that mettā.

Then allowing an easy being to come to your mind. That may be yourself, it may be a benefactor, maybe a pet, a child. Beginning by recollecting something that you appreciate about that being—something kind that they've done, or that you've done if you're exploring yourself in this moment. Things they've done, or qualities you appreciate about that being or about yourself.

This reflection on what you appreciate about a being is said to be the proximate cause for this quality of care and connection.

Holding this being in your mind in some way—it may be as an image. For yourself...

It may be your sense of yourself now, sitting here. Sometimes it might just be the sense of being with that person—not an image, but just as if they were sitting in front of you while you sit with your eyes closed, knowing they're there. Sometimes that can invoke that being. A connection. Exploring a connection with this being.

And beginning to offer or wish those phrases. *May you be safe.* With each wish, each offering, expressing that wish and understanding what it means to make it. But then coming back—how does it feel here to make that wish? Nothing needs to happen particularly. It's more of a checking in, in the area of the heart. *May you be safe.* How does it feel in the heart, in the body, for you to have expressed that wish? *May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you live with ease.*

I'm going to offer some silence now for you to explore this on your own—connecting with the being, saying the phrase, seeing how it lands. And you're welcome to be creative with the phrases, whatever phrases are resonant for you in this well-wishing. Taking your time and exploring a relaxed connection with the easy being, the phrases, and the response in your heart.

And now perhaps offering an inner bow to your easy being. In a way, saying goodbye to that being for now.

And allowing yourself to greet a dear friend. Imagining perhaps an image, or as if they were sitting in front of you. Sometimes using their name can be a way to evoke some sense of them in your mind. Creating some kind of connection with this friend. Reflecting for a few moments on what you appreciate about your dear friend—qualities that you appreciate, kind things that they may have done or said.

And if your mind is also including things that you don't appreciate, just kind of say, "Thank you for that opinion, but we're focusing on the things we appreciate right now."

Then whatever appreciation you may feel, that can be a support for offering the phrases. *May you be safe.* And then how does it land in your heart to make that wish? *May you be happy.*

You can be creative sometimes with the images or connection. Sometimes when I'm exploring connecting with a dear friend, I know what makes them feel happy. One friend I've offered metta to is an artist, so I envision her in her studio for that phrase. So you can be creative with the connection part if that feels easy and natural for you, keeping it relaxed. *May you be healthy. May you live with ease.*

Exploring for the next few minutes offering these wishes of kindness to your dear friend. If some kind of rub or something non-metta comes up in this process, that's just part of the process, part of the way metta works. But if it feels too challenging, you're welcome to drop back to the easy being. Refresh that quality of connection and care. And then after a few minutes, explore coming back to the dear friend.

Exploring your connection with your dear friend in this moment, I'm going to offer a revised way to practice with the dear friend. And that's an alternation between yourself and the dear friend. Envisioning yourselves together, you can envision both of you doing this together. With each phrase: *May I be happy. May you be happy. May we be happy. May I be healthy. May you be healthy. May we both be healthy. May I be safe. May you be safe.*

May we both be safe.

Continuing that exploration, if it seems supportive for you—this alternation of wishing yourself well, wishing your friend well, and wishing you both together the wishes of kindness.

For me, this is a way to address a particular belief in my own mind that somehow happiness is a zero-sum game. That wishing happiness for someone else means I'm getting less of it for myself. I discovered this pretty early on in doing my metta practice—this belief that wishing somebody else well triggers a response of, "Well, what about me?"

But it's not a zero-sum game, actually. When we wish somebody else well, it can nourish us as well. This kind of alternation was a way for me to acknowledge that wishing myself well and wishing somebody else well are not mutually exclusive. And then bringing the two together—"may we be happy"—explicitly acknowledges that it doesn't have to be a zero-sum game.

CHAPTER 157

Exploring the Wandering Mind

Andrea Fella · 1h02

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella invites practitioners to transform their relationship with the wandering mind from one of frustration to one of curiosity and discovery. Rather than viewing mental wandering as an obstacle to meditation, she presents it as a gateway to understanding the nature of mindfulness itself and the profound teaching of anattā (not-self).

Drawing from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta and her own practice experiences, Andrea explores how the comings and goings of mindfulness demonstrate that we don't have complete control over our minds—a direct pointer to not-self. She examines different flavors of wandering, from charged reactive thinking to surprisingly calm drifting, and offers practical guidance for exploring both edges of the wandering mind: the moment mindfulness returns and the subtle process of losing awareness.

The talk provides valuable insights into how attention shifts between focused and diffuse states, and how states we typically label as non-mindful—spaciness, drowsiness, zoning out—can actually be met with awareness. Andrea shares personal stories illustrating how following the mind's natural movements, rather than forcing attention, can reveal deeper layers of practice and new terrain of experience. This teaching encourages a receptive, curious approach that honors the lawful unfolding of conditions while supporting the cultivation of mindfulness.

It's nice to see you all in this form that we have, seeing all the tiles with your faces, scanning through and greeting you. It's really a privilege to be able to sit with you and to share the Dharma.

I think we're all in the teacher community appreciating the retreat. We meet each evening, and it's a lovely time for us as a community, as a teaching community, to check in. It's been a lovely retreat, so I'm appreciative of your practice and your commitment, your dedication to doing this.

This is not easy. You all know that it's not easy. We sit and we feel all kinds of stuff. Sometimes it's great. Sometimes we find concentration, we find some ease and some peace. And then the next sitting is completely different. Sometimes there's some stability of mind, more presence of mind. Sometimes the mind is wandering all over the place.

This is actually what I'd like to reflect with you about today: exploring curiosity about this phenomenon of the wandering mind.

The other day, Dawn said that things that seem like obstacles, that are in the way, can be a gateway to learning, to understanding, and to freedom. That includes all of our hindrances, our reactivity. We also often think of the wandering mind as being an obstacle. After all, what is the wandering mind but a loss of mindfulness? And that feels like an obstacle when mindfulness isn't here. But we can really get curious about this phenomenon of the wandering mind.

The other day somebody asked a question along the lines of, "Why does the mind do this?" It's a great question. There's not one answer. And I would say that this talk I'm going to offer is my own personal exploration of this question. It's a great question to let motivate you. Why does the mind wander? Check it out. See if you can learn something, rather than having a contentious relationship with the wandering mind—"Oh, the mind's been wandering," or "The mind feels like it's getting pulled to wandering." Instead, explore it. What is the wandering mind?

We use that phrase a lot, but there are different flavors of the wandering mind. Sometimes it just feels like the mind loses touch with the present moment and wanders out of it. Maybe that's why we call it wandering—it just kind of drifts. There's a drifting quality to it. Sometimes that drifting has a non-directed feeling, kind of floaty. Sometimes that experience is more like a charge out of the present moment. The mind picks up on some thought and just runs with it—active thinking, active reflection, a lot of charge in the content of the thinking. Sometimes the mind isn't so much thinking but is just pulled into a storm of emotional turmoil. This can include thinking, but doesn't necessarily have clear thinking to it. Sometimes that wandering can be kind of calm, actually. That's an interesting flavor.

But all of these flavors, when we call it wandering mind, have in common that they're a state of low or non-mindfulness. So really, what we're exploring when we explore the wandering mind is mindfulness itself. We're exploring the comings and goings of mindfulness. This is a useful exploration.

We can't make ourselves—I think Sally said this the other day—we can't make ourselves come out of the wandering. We can't make it stop. When we're not mindful, we can't make mindfulness come back. It will come back. It will spontaneously come back. It will re-arise at some point due to causes and conditions, but we can't make it come back. What we can do is notice that moment when the mind wakes up, when mindfulness returns.

What we often call the wandering mind is actually mindfulness returning and noticing that mindfulness wasn't there a few moments ago. This is one of the things we can be curious about in that moment—curious about what the experience of becoming mindful actually is, curious about the experience of mindfulness itself. There's so much we can learn by exploring this phenomenon.

And without question, I'm pretty sure—I wouldn't say 100% sure, but pretty sure—that every single one of us deals with this phenomenon regularly. It's a pattern, a habit that we all share. It can be really useful to explore patterns and habits that happen a lot, and wandering mind happens a lot.

Having some curiosity about it, rather than a sense that this is a problem I need to get rid of, helps the mind begin to understand the causes and conditions that lead to the mind wandering, as well as the supports for remaining present. There are other things we can learn as well. In seeing the habit of the wandering mind, one of the things we often get familiar with are the main or key habits of mind that tend to pull us out of the present moment. Jack Kornfield talks about this when exploring the thinking mind—get familiar with your top three tunes, your top three favorite kinds of thoughts to have, and see if you can find a way to relate to those in a light way.

We begin to learn what our familiar go-to strategies are, our familiar strategies for navigating life. When we sit down to meditate, we may think we're going to stay still and present, but our habits, our conditioning, have other ideas. What we see when we see these patterns unfolding—all of these patterns that we explore in our practice—is how the mind wanders, the kinds of emotions that arise frequently. We are seeing our conditioning unfolding. We are seeing how our mind has been shaped. We're learning about our minds.

One of the key gifts of exploring the wandering mind is that we really get to taste, if we're open to it, how out of control the mind is—that we don't have so much say over when the mind wanders. Habits and conditioning will take us out of the present moment. Mindfulness will re-arise in some moment, but we didn't do that one either. We didn't have control over that either.

Seeing the comings and goings of mindfulness, watching the mind wander and come back, is a teaching for us on the teaching of *anattā*, not-self. We sit down and plan to stay present. We have that idea or hope to be present in the moment. A few minutes later, we're off in thought. Who did that? Most likely you didn't actively decide to do that. It was habits, it was conditioning that led to that. And then mindfulness returns.

Who did that? Again, not-self. There's so much evidence for this understanding of not-self, but we tend to view our experience from the perspective of self: "I'm going to be meditating. My mind wandered. I woke up again. I did that. I'm so good. I came back."

We tend to have that perspective of self, and when we're viewing experience from that perspective, it's very hard to see evidence for not-self. It's like a kind of delusion—the view or belief, the framing or orientation, the filter through which we see experience, this sense of self—almost prevents us from taking in the evidence for not-self. So every time the mind wanders, when that mindfulness returns: not-self. Not-self.

The other day, Bob mentioned the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, the discourse on the characteristic of not-self. I'd like to share a little section of that sutta with you. Bob mentioned the aspect of the uncontrollability of our minds, and this is the part I'm pointing to here—that we don't have complete control over our minds. He pointed to this with respect to various areas or aspects of our experience, beginning with the body. The body is not under our control.

If it were under our control, we'd be able to say, "May it be like this, may it not be like that." And the Buddha explored this with several different areas of experience. One of those areas he called mental formations or volitional formations.

Volitional formations are a huge category of experiences that include thoughts, emotions, as well as wholesome mind states. Concentration is a volitional formation. Mindfulness is a volitional formation. And so there's a little piece in this sutta that's repeated for each of these different areas of experience. I'll read the one for volitional formations, but I'm going to replace "volitional formations" with "mindfulness," since mindfulness is a volitional formation.

Mindfulness is not self. If mindfulness were the self, it would not lead to affliction. It would be possible to say with regard to mindfulness, "Let my mindfulness be this. Let my mindfulness not be this."

Wouldn't that be nice? Anybody able to do that all the time? But precisely because mindfulness is not self, it lends itself to affliction. It is not possible to say, "Let my mindfulness be this. Let my mindfulness not be this."

Now, that maybe sounds hopeless. If I don't have control over mindfulness, what do I do? How do I do anything? Conditions will support the arising of mindfulness. And one of the conditions that supports the arising of mindfulness is recognizing mindfulness. It's sometimes said that the proximate cause for mindfulness is mindfulness. The teaching, or the hearing about mindfulness being helpful, is a condition that supports our in-

terest in what mindfulness is. We start to get familiar with the experience of mindfulness. That familiarity creates the conditions for more mindfulness. It's all unfolding lawfully.

You are fortunate enough to have heard about these teachings and been curious enough—curiosity was aroused through hearing that—and the practice began. It's all not-self. You're fortunate to be on this not-self path. We're all fortunate to have heard the Dharma and had the conditions that inspired us to engage.

So noticing this wandering mind—for me, this recognition that it's not my fault the mind wandered, this is conditions—and yet we take responsibility for our minds. Yes. Curiosity about this experience when mindfulness returns. This is a key way where mindfulness can be cultivated: recognizing that, noticing the return of mindfulness. This is one of the key areas of exploring the wandering mind.

We really can only explore the edges of the wandering mind, I'd say—the going, the coming out of it. We can notice the moment when mindfulness returns. That's like the edge of the wandering mind. We can see something about that moment. We can also see something about the going out of mindfulness. That one is a little more subtle, but it is possible. And so I'll talk about both sides, both edges of the wandering mind.

The easiest place to begin this exploration is that moment of remembering, the moment when mindfulness returns. We often have a conflicted relationship with this moment—a sense that I should have been doing it better. And again, that's picking up the belief that I had control. For me, that understanding of "this is not-self, it's coming and going, it's not-self"—that helped to frame the experience of the return of mindfulness with a little bit more allowing and acceptance. It's not my fault that it happened, but here I am, and the mindfulness is back. Awareness of that is supportive.

That moment when mindfulness returns—it is actually an amazing moment. It's got a quality that helps us begin to recognize what it's like to be mindful. If you're curious about it,

If you're beating yourself up about it, you miss the opportunity to get curious about mindfulness itself in that moment. When mindfulness re-arises, if you're simply curious about that experience of mindfulness re-arising, there's a kind of lingering memory, I'd say. It's like the mindfulness has re-arisen and there's the knowing: now I'm present. This experience is: I'm here. We have that understanding.

But there's also a lingering memory of what it was like a few moments before, when the mindfulness was not here. Perhaps there's a sense of the fuzz of being lost, or the wrapped-upness of the mind being caught in something, and the mind is kind of emer-

ging from that. So there's a difference—a difference in the quality of the mind between what it was like a few moments ago and what it's like now. And it's not like you have to look back and think about it. It's almost right there in the moment of mindfulness returning. There's a sense of the difference. This is what it's like now, with mindfulness present.

So we get a taste or flavor of the experience of mindfulness there—what it's like to be aware. And that, as I said a few moments ago, mindfulness is the proximate cause for mindfulness. When we become familiar with the experience of mindfulness, it supports mindfulness in the future.

As we begin to get interested or curious about that moment of mindfulness returning, there was one point in my practice where I was just so curious: how early can I notice that mindfulness has returned? Sometimes it feels like the mind is coming out of the mud, or slowly waking up. And we're already a little ways into the waking up when we realize that we've kind of been mindful for the previous moments but weren't really aware that we were mindful. There can be a slow emergence from that.

But at one point I got really curious about how soon I could know that mindfulness had returned. And the more we get curious about that moment, the more it attunes us to that experience of mindfulness returning. The more we see it happening all the time—everywhere, not just in the sitting practice, but when we're walking across the street, or picking up a glass, or putting our hands in dishwater—suddenly there's this: here's mindfulness again.

Often we're not so attuned to that moment. We're more attuned to what we are aware of and what we have to do about it. But if we can be curious about the quality of awareness itself, that begins to help the mind attune or become sensitive to the returning of mindfulness. This creates more possibility for continuity to happen. We get more of these moments of mindfulness returning.

Another great thing about that moment of mindfulness returning is that it was effortless. You did not do that moment of mindfulness. It was completely effortless mindfulness. And that's a pointer to the possibility of what it's like to be present without working so hard. All of these things can be explored as mindfulness returns.

It's also useful not only to notice the mindfulness returning, but to be curious about what's going on in the mind. There's the mindfulness returning, and then there's something that mindfulness is attuned to. If the mind has wandered based on thoughts or emotions, if it has wandered out of the present moment based on some kind of reactivity, those thoughts have a very potent conditioning power on the mind. While the mind

is wandering—especially when we're not aware of it—if some kind of hindrance or reactivity has taken hold, then without mindfulness, that has been shaping our experience.

When mindfulness returns, that experience is what we're waking up into—what has been shaped by that wandering. So rather than in the moment that mindfulness returns thinking, "Okay, I was using the breath as an anchor, let me come back to the breath as soon as possible," it can sometimes be really useful to be curious about what the mind has woken up into.

If you try to jump right back to the breath, and there has been some kind of reactivity shaped while the mind was wandering, that reactivity may get applied to how you're attending to the breath—if you're not consciously aware of it. So it's really useful to take a few moments when mindfulness returns. Notice that it has returned. Notice that experience. Oh, mindful again. And what's here? I sometimes use that question for myself, because sometimes when the mind wanders into

whatever—it's wandering into some whole world. Sometimes I've had the experience of waking up and it's like, wow, this whole world or bubble had been created of experience. And it's like, where am I?

So sometimes I'll use this analogy: What planet am I on when the mindfulness returns? What is this place that I'm returning to? Just have some curiosity about that. Again, no judgment, but simply curiosity. What planet am I on? What has been the effect? The mind has been wandering—what has been the effect of that wandering on the present moment experience?

Now, you might think that often we would see great aversion, delusion, anger, frustration, irritation, annoyance that has been constructed while the mind was wandering. And sometimes we do. But the great thing about this particular curiosity of "what planet am I on" when the mindfulness returns is that the more we practice, the more experienced we become with the meditation, the more we settle into a retreat, sometimes we can find that when the mind wandered, it actually didn't wander into directed thought or some kind of reactivity. Sometimes our minds will wander into calm. We lose mindfulness, wandering into calm.

And when we come back, especially if we're not judging ourselves for having been lost, when the mindfulness returns we may ask: what planet am I waking up on? Sometimes it's planet calm. Sometimes there's more calmness, more ease after a wander than before.

When I discovered that, it was a great little carrot to being curious about what planet I was on when the mind returned from wandering. Because way more often than I would have expected, the mind did wander into more relaxation, more ease. It was almost like when the mind wandered, I was working really hard before—I was like, "I'm going to be present, I'm going to stay here, stay here." And the mind is going, "Yeah, you're working too hard. I'll show you how to relax. Let's relax." And it just does it for me. It just relaxed for me. And then the mindfulness returns, and it's like, oh yeah, that's a lot simpler, a lot more ease, a lot more relaxation. So sometimes when we return from a wander, it's not necessarily that the mind has gone somewhere problematic. What has been shaped might be calm, might be ease or peace.

So that's a little bit about the wandering out and coming back side of the wandering mind. The other side, the flip side, is getting curious about how and where we lose mindfulness.

Now, this kind of investigation is really light, a soft kind of investigation. Almost by definition, if you're trying to say, "Where's the mind wandering? Where's the mind wandering? How's it going to wander?"—you're kind of jumping on top of it. The activity of that doing, trying to see the mind wander, is either going to keep it from wandering or it's going to obscure what happens as the mind wanders. So this is a really light kind of interest or exploration.

Often what we do is notice what happens when the mindfulness returns. That is sometimes a clue to the kinds of things our mind wanders into. When we wake up, the planet we wake up on, that experience that we're having when mindfulness returns—that's sometimes a clue to the state of mind or the place or the experience that the mind gets hooked by and lost in.

So that curiosity around what planet am I waking up on is a real support for attuning to the experiences or states of mind that the mind can get caught by. As we see over and over again that the mind gets lost in a particular state—maybe it gets lost in frustration, or it gets lost in boredom, and you wake up with that sense of boredom—that waking up in boredom, checking into planet boredom, you get familiar with that experience. Then you might start to see planet boredom making itself before the mind wanders. And then you can be present with that.

There could be some choice points at that moment. At one point I noticed, while I was paying attention to the breath, a kind of going out, leaving the breath—like flattening or spreading or something like that.

The attention got drawn to something other than the breath. At that point, I was attending to the breath, and when I noticed that shift—the mind beginning to let go of the breath—I would bring the mind back. That's a choice. You can do that. It's possible. When you notice that kind of shift or a pull toward something, sometimes we can simply return to the primary object.

But at some point, this experience of the mind drifting out from the breath happened enough times. This was in one particular sitting. I'd seen it many times, and I came back, and I came back, and I came back. Then at some point, as the mind started to shift away from the breath again, there was this recognition: "Well, I'm mindful. I'm mindful of this—the mind letting go of the breath. Let's see where it wants to go. Let's see what happens." I let the mind follow that experience, and it opened into a kind of vast space of experience that I had not explicitly or consciously seen before. It was startling. It actually shocked me out of it. I thought, "What was that?"

So in familiarizing yourself with the construction of the planet, you could make the choice to return to something, or you could simply be curious. "Oh, planet boredom is arising. What's this about? What's that experience?"

This exploration around where we lose awareness can begin with a kind of inventory. What are the times of your day where mindfulness tends to disappear? Sometimes we lose awareness in particular activities, places, or things we're doing. That might be a curiosity worth exploring: What activities do I do where I tend to lose mindfulness? "Well, when I go into the kitchen to make dinner, that's where I lose it." Or, "When I take my walk for exercise, that's when mindfulness disappears." Be curious about it, not judging yourself, but simply noticing where those sinkholes or rabbit holes exist where mindfulness gets lost.

When you begin to notice those areas, I want to encourage curiosity. I've found that curiosity about this is the most powerful tool—not using that recognition of "my mind wanders when I go into the kitchen" to then grip tightly: "I'm going to hold my mind present when I go into the kitchen. I'm going to stay mindful for every single thing I do." That's an efforting way to approach it. You can do that. You can recognize this is an area where you tend to get lost and work hard to stay present. But often that hard work, that trying to stay present, obscures what is actually happening to make the mindfulness go away. And that's the invitation I'm offering here—curiosity about what has the mind wandering.

So as you walk into the kitchen or enter the activity, perhaps you're mindful. It's like, "Okay, I'm mindful now. I know I tend to get lost in the kitchen. Let's see if I can notice what hooks the mind." Maybe it's the first time something happens that you need to do

quickly. Or maybe it's just habit—how you've always engaged in the kitchen. Maybe that's been a time when you've let your mind drift. So perhaps it's simply habit. Just be curious about what happens there, rather than forcing yourself to stay mindful. Be curious about what hooks the mind.

We also might lose awareness in particular habits of mind: boredom, depression, planning, remembering, anger. These can manifest as thoughts, as thinking, or simply as an energetic experience. Sometimes we get lost in the energetic experience as well as thoughts. But often with habitual states of mind, we get lost in the content of the thought. And that content has a stickiness to it.

It kind of pulls us into believing that we need to think about things from that perspective of the content.

So again, recognizing what we wake up into—what particular flavors of mind, whether boredom or fantasizing or judging or remembering—might give us a clue as to where the mind wandered. That familiarity with the experience as mindfulness returns may help us to notice the mind going into that state.

Another key way that the mind wanders, or that mindfulness gets hooked into something, is when there's a shift of attention. You're paying attention to the breath—that's where your conscious intention is, to notice the breath—and some sound arises. Maybe you kind of sort of notice the sound, but you're trying to stay with the breath, so you don't really acknowledge it. It's possible that shift of attention to the sound has more momentum or more energy to it than we're acknowledging or giving it credit for. And then the mind will wander.

The attention shifting without our consciously noticing that it has shifted—I would say that's one of the key reasons why the mind wanders. The attention shifts, and we haven't noticed it.

This is something we can start to get curious about. What is it like for the attention to shift? We can get familiar with that experience. And as we become familiar with what it's like for attention to shift, it's almost like that experience highlights itself for us. It will help us recognize when the attention shifts.

In the instructions for the practice we're exploring this week with the use of an anchor, this is actually part of the instruction. We stay with the anchor, but if attention is drawn to something else, we acknowledge it. We get curious about that shift. We recognize, "Oh, the attention has shifted." We take in what it shifted to, notice it, and then we

have a choice. Once we've noticed that shift of attention, if it feels compelling, we may stay with it for a while. If it's not so compelling, we can simply return to the anchor. This noticing of the shift of attention begins to help the mind stay present.

There's another way attention shifts that I experienced this morning in the guided meditation. I hadn't quite articulated it this way before. I've noticed this experience many times but hadn't been able to articulate what was going on. This morning the articulation appeared, which was lovely, so now I can share it with you.

It's a kind of shift of attention, but often we think of a shift of attention as looking at one thing and then looking at another thing. We're paying attention to the breath, then there's a sound, and attention shifts from breath sensation to sound and hearing. But there's another way that attentional shift can happen—perhaps more like what was happening when I described paying attention to the breath and then the mind expanding, leaving the breath and wandering into this expansive space.

There's a shift from where attention is focused, attending to something in particular—the breath, a sound, a body sensation—to something else entirely. Attention is not just one-dimensional. Attention can have that focused quality, but it can also be wide-angle. Attention can be broad and vast, taking in diffuseness, taking in wide experience.

That shift from attending to something specific to opening out—that's a shift of attention too. It's an attentional shift to a different quality, attending to a different kind of object, essentially. A shift from noticing something very precise to being aware of something very expansive.

At this point, the feeling of that shift is a very familiar experience for me. It's one of the main ways I allow my mind to settle—feeling into being with something and then feeling that shift into expansiveness. Being present for that, allowing the mindfulness to track into that expanding experience. It feels like a dropping, a spreading, a kind of expanding of mindfulness.

It also feels remarkably like falling asleep. It's a very similar quality. And so if you're not curious about this experience—it's like a drop and spread, almost. That's what it is for me; it may have different flavors for each of you. A dropping and spreading experience.

The attention shifting from focused to broad. You might think that you're falling asleep, or that your mind is getting sleepy or drifty or daydreaming. But if you can track it into that, it's like, oh, expansive mind is happening. Calm mind, diffuse experience is happening.

So that shift—there can be a shift from focused attention to broad attention. That can be another way the mind wanders, when you shift from that focus to something diffuse. And if we're not familiar with this experience, or if we're not giving credit to the experience of diffuseness and think it's just spacing out, then we may have an agenda or thought that, "Well, that's not mindfulness. I'm not used to that." But there are so many different flavors of what it's like when mindfulness is present.

So this curiosity about what is the experience, and am I aware? We often base whether we think we're aware or not on what kinds of objects we are experiencing. And when objects of different flavors happen—especially these diffuse objects, spaciousness, that kind of object—we may not have familiarity with being with them. And then we'll just get lost in that spaciousness. That's kind of how the mind can wander into calm sometimes, wander into spaciousness. It's very pleasant. You can end up just—have you ever noticed that? Sometimes wandering mind where it's just really pleasant but not very mindful. It's not that it's an unwholesome state. It's that the mindfulness hasn't quite attuned to what it's actually like to be mindful in that state. It's possible.

I want to go into a little more depth with these diffuse states, because this is such a powerful place of practice. For myself, learning how to meet these diffuse states was one of the ways my practice really did begin to deepen into new terrain.

There are a whole bunch of states of mind that we might habitually get lost in—sleepiness, spacing out, zoning out, these kinds of states that we think of as non-mindful. But these states are not inherently non-mindful. They are more habitually non-mindful.

I'll give an example from my own practice. This was probably the first time I really clearly saw this. I was having breakfast and kept noticing while I was eating that I would space out. I was trying to be mindful while eating my breakfast, so I would bring my attention back to the breakfast—lifting the fork, lifting the food to my mouth, chewing—and I noticed the mind would space out again. So I just kept bringing it back.

But at some point, I thought, "Let's see if I can notice this mind moving away from focused attention to this spacing out." And it was possible. I had had enough practice with noticing diffuse states by that point. So instead of trying to stay with the breakfast eating, I thought, "Okay, so here's the spacing out." It kind of felt like the mind hovered somewhere up and to the right of my head. It was like this fuzzy, buzzing quality.

As I hung out there, I noticed I could be mindful of it. The mindfulness of that state let me recognize several things. One, there was a quality of pleasantness. There was a withdrawal from sense experience. And there was a deep resting that felt like it was happening.

That rest was the clue, actually. It was like, "Oh, the mind is so tired. It wants to rest." Well, okay, let me let it rest here. I'll be with it while it rests.

After about thirty seconds of resting, mindfully resting in that state—what I had been calling spacing out—after about thirty seconds of resting with that, letting the mind rest, it was like the fog cleared. That fuzzy, buzzing quality just dissipated.

And then there was a clarity of being with the body. The sense experience came back clearly. And as the sense experience came back clearly, it was like, "Oh, wow. The mind needed to take its rest, and it was going to take it whether I was on board or not."

That kind of seeing, recognizing that mindfulness could follow that state—there are so many states like this that we think we can't be mindful in. Fogginess, dullness, day-dreaming, drifting, spaciness. All of these have this quality of being diffuse. And so the kind of awareness that we cultivate in being with that is this broad awareness, rather than the precise knowing of "I know what this experience is—there's this sensation and that sound and that experience." There's a whole host of experience that's much less precise, and the mind can know it with this broader awareness.

So it's really worth exploring the edges of these states that we tend to think are not mindful, that we tend to think are inherently not mindful. Curiosity. Can I be with drowsiness? Can I be with spaciness? It's possible, actually. It's possible.

The last piece I'll mention—I don't have a lot of time for this, so I'll just drop it in there with a little encouragement to be curious. Sometimes we might start losing awareness as the practice deepens. When the mind suddenly seems less stable after a period of pretty stable mind, rather than thinking, "What did I do wrong?"—it often is an indication that something is shifting in the practice. There's something new happening, and the mindfulness is trying to find its way to meet a new experience. You're a little bit lagging behind, perhaps. Your agenda for what you're paying attention to may be lagging behind what the mindfulness is settling towards.

It is possible, after a period of time where the mind has been stable, for mindfulness to start really wandering. There are different reasons why that can happen. One of the reasons is that something old or deep, a kind of hidden old pattern or habit, is finally—it's like celebrating that there's enough space to be seen. It's like, "Oh, finally there's room for me. Okay, I'm going to explode." That can happen; that can definitely be one of

the things that happens. But at the same time, well, okay—that pattern had to wait until there was a little more stability to actually come out. So some patience with that, practicing with that as we practice with difficulty.

But there's also the possibility of the mind orienting towards more quiet or more subtlety. At one point when I was practicing at Shwe Oo Min with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma, I'd had a period of time where there'd been pretty consistent mindfulness, a lot of continuity of mindfulness. There'd been some intentionality to that mindfulness—the gentle reminding, this patient, gentle persistence of reminding myself to be aware. But it was pretty stable and pretty easeful. And then suddenly I started noticing, "Wow, the mind is all over the place."

That kind of shift, when there has been some stability and then suddenly the mind is all over the place—that's an interesting point. When that happens, pay attention. There's something, maybe something new happening. And so when I began looking at that, by this point it was kind of like, "Oh, okay. The mind is wandering. Let's see what's going on."

Rather than trying to track what I was aware of, it was more like a settling back in. "Well, what is the mind naturally aware of right now? What's it already aware of?" The slight agenda of staying present had kept the mind at a certain place, a certain level—yep, seeing, hearing, body sensations, vibratory energy, hearing—all of that the attention was tracking. But the agenda of tracking that was keeping the mind at a certain level, and mindfulness and wisdom were shifting to a subtler level of experience.

And that's what I noticed when I took away the agenda for the kinds of things I'm familiar with being aware of. Just asking, "Well, what is already here?"

Sometimes in that opening to what's already here, it may not be obvious. It may not be clear what's here. If you can just kind of hang in that space, that diffuseness, that non-specificness, maybe the mind will begin to recognize new kinds of experiences.

And that's what happened in this case. When I opened to what the mind is naturally aware of, it was a subtler kind of experience that the mind was naturally aware of. If I had been trying to effort my way through it—"Okay, I'm going to keep myself being mindful here"—it would have stayed at that same level, the things I'm already familiar with.

So there are often these shifts in practice where mindfulness will begin to orient toward experiences, toward states that we're not so familiar with. And that's a prime place where the mind can wander. So that kind of curiosity of "Well, what's here?"—it can be a little uncomfortable not to be familiar with our experience. It takes some trust.

Like that time I described following the mind where it wanders, and it went to this vast space I'd never experienced before. It kind of shocked me out of it. But the next times it happened, I was more ready, more available to meet a new kind of experience.

I hope this is mostly an encouragement to be curious about the wandering mind. Let go of judging it. What does it have to teach you?

There's a lot in what I described that may sound like I'm encouraging you to do something, but really what I'm encouraging is curiosity and a very receptive mindfulness—to see what the edges of the wandering mind are like in any given situation. "Oh, the mind has wandered. Let's see what's here." It's not so much a doing; it's more of a receiving. And curiosity, I'd say, is our greatest support for this.

Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 158

Mindfulness of Thoughts

Andrea Fella · 40 min

In this guided meditation talk, Andrea Fella offers practical instructions for working with thoughts and thinking in mindfulness practice. Building on previous teachings about the wandering mind, she explores how thoughts—while often pulling us away from presence—can themselves become objects of mindful awareness. The talk emphasizes an important distinction: rather than getting caught in the content of what we're thinking about, we can learn to recognize the process and fact of thinking itself.

Fella introduces several skillful approaches for relating to thoughts. When thinking has emotional charge, she suggests acknowledging the type of thinking (planning, remembering, judging, fantasizing) and checking in with underlying emotions. For less charged thoughts, she encourages curiosity about how thinking manifests through different sense modalities—as internal speech, visual images, or even kinesthetic sensations. She shares her personal experience as a dancer, where thinking could manifest as felt movement in the body.

The teaching culminates in exploring the conditioned nature of thought—how thoughts arise from and condition emotions, and how sense impressions generate thinking. This investigation reveals the impersonal, lawful quality of mental processes. Rather than trying to stop thoughts, practitioners are invited to know that thinking is happening, observe its arising and passing, and recognize the patterns of mind that unfold moment to moment. The session concludes with a meditation period allowing practitioners to explore these approaches directly.

This morning, for the instructions, I'd like to offer some reflections on working with thoughts and thinking.

Last night in talking about the wandering mind, I didn't really so much talk about working with thoughts themselves, but more about noticing the edges of the wandering mind—noticing when and how the mind returns from wandering and how it slips out into wandering.

With the wandering mind, thoughts are often a part of that experience of the mind going off. Not always. Sometimes the mind, as I said last night, can wander into states of calm or non-thought. But often thoughts are a part of the wandering mind and can pull us out of mindfulness.

But thoughts don't have to pull us out of mindfulness. They're just another object, just another experience. The eye sees, the ear hears, the mind thinks. We can be aware of seeing and hearing, and we can be aware of thinking. Yet we have a strong habit of not being aware of thinking. We have a strong habit of getting caught or pulled into the content of thinking, what we are thinking about, as opposed to recognizing that we are thinking. And so this is actually an important part of our learning in mindfulness practice—to learn how to become aware while thinking.

An important understanding or recognition around thinking is the distinction between the content of the thought, what we are thinking about, and the process, the fact of thinking, the experience of thinking.

It's often helpful in our meditation to acknowledge in a light way some aspect of the content of thinking, rather than the detail of the thinking. This is often an early instruction. I know you've probably all heard this instruction: when you notice that you're thinking, acknowledge the type of thinking—planning, remembering, judging, fantasizing. This is a way to begin to step us out of the detail of the content to just acknowledge the flavor of the content. It's like one step back from being in the content, where we can acknowledge, "Oh, this is the kind of thinking that's happening."

When our thoughts are really strong, there's often a strong emotional pull underneath. That emotional pull can take us into the content. The kind of dynamic between emotion and thought seems pretty habitual for us in our minds—when there's a strong emotion, we get pulled into thought about what the emotion is connected to, thinking or believing in a way that the thinking part of it is going to help us navigate the feelings. And so when there is strong thought, when we feel really strongly pulled into the content of the thought, it can be really helpful to check in: Is there an emotion connected with it? This is again a way to step back from the content of the thought, the words, the meaning, the story or narrative, and become aware of the emotions connected to the thought. So again, we're stepping back from the direct content of the thought here.

At times when we notice thinking, it may not feel like the content is particularly relevant. The thoughts seem random or maybe dreamlike images, or just some memory that flits through but there's not a particular charge to it. And there it can be really interesting to step more fully back from content and be curious about how the thinking is happening. This gets more into the process of thinking.

Thinking as a phenomenon can be experienced through many sense modalities. Often the most familiar way we first recognize thinking, for many of us, is as if we're talking to ourselves. So it's coming in through almost the hearing door—it's like an internal experience of hearing. Or we might experience thoughts as images. I didn't think I

thought with images until I started meditating. Then I began clearly recognizing this. I think one of the first times this was really clear, I was sitting meditating and I saw this image of being in a place I was traveling, seeing the detail of this building, this place that I was at, and recognizing, "Oh, that's a thought. That image is a thought."

So thoughts actually can come in through any of our sense modalities. We can experience thinking through the avenue or inner sense of hearing or seeing, and sometimes even smelling. I've experienced that rarely, but it has happened. And there also can be a kinesthetic experience of thinking. This one I knew from being a dancer. I was a dancer when I was younger, and when I closed my eyes to envision the dance, I would feel it—as if the body were doing it. That's a kind of thinking.

Sometimes it can be useful or interesting to step back from the content of the thinking and recognize how the thinking is happening—what the sense modality is. For myself, I would acknowledge this with a light note. Instead of simply acknowledging it as "thinking," I would acknowledge it as "seeing" or "hearing." I knew I wasn't really seeing or hearing in the external sense, but it seemed helpful to recognize that this was thinking happening in a particular modality. So it's a recognition of thinking as process—how the mind is thinking rather than what the mind is thinking about.

To me, this particular way of acknowledging thinking seems most easy and most appropriate when there's not a lot of emotional content or stickiness to the thinking. Although sometimes it can actually help to diminish the stickiness if we acknowledge, "Yep, this is just the mind thinking through this, telling myself a story."

There's a particular kind of thinking that most meditators stumble into at some point, and that's the almost dreamlike experience. You're not asleep because you're not falling over, but the mind is in this kind of state where it's producing dreamlike images—random, almost nonsensical images. Those I find really useful to acknowledge with the recognition of seeing: "Seeing" or "Images are happening." And again, in the exploration of this as a process, we don't have to stop it. We can simply know that it's happening.

Last night I talked about beginning to recognize states that we habitually get lost in—spaciness, sleepiness, fogginess, dullness. This dreamlike state is one of those that the mind can be very relaxed and receptive to, but not quite present. The state itself is not inherently non-mindful. It's more of a habit of not being mindful. And so the gentle recognition of "Oh yeah, images are happening" can shift something. Then you may begin to be able to recognize or touch into the state of mind—the soft, relaxed state of mind that is happening in conjunction with those dreamlike images.

One last piece I want to share about thoughts in terms of exploring with curiosity, investigating thought: this is again part of exploring the process of thinking—to begin to recognize the conditioned nature of thinking.

One of the easiest ways to recognize this is to notice the pattern between emotions and thoughts. Thoughts arising in the mind can generate an effect in the experience of the body. The thought arises, and then there's how that thought lands. That's a really interesting exploration. Thinking's happening—how is the body responding to that? Noticing the conditioning nature of that process in the mind.

A thought arises. You're sitting, minding your own business, and a thought arises—not random, because thoughts are not random—perhaps about a friend or a partner. That particular image or memory is about a time where there was a charged experience between the two of you. What happens? That thought has arisen, and then often the body and emotional tone respond. Those emotions, that charge—again, the conditioned nature of thought.

And thought can also be conditioned by emotions. An emotion can arise, a feeling based perhaps on some experience of the body. A pain in the body can arise, and then there's a little bit of resistance, a little bit of aversion, and then the mind starts thinking about it. Again, the conditioned nature of thought.

Just noticing this as a pattern, independent of the content—this is how the thought-emotion-thought cycle happens.

Sometimes too we can notice that sense impressions will generate or condition thoughts. We hear something—the sound of a bird. We recognize it as a bird. Then we may notice that recognition itself is a subtle kind of thought. That perception, that recognition, can be understood as a subtle kind of thought. It may be seen as an image of a bird, or the mind may say "bird," may actually name it without your doing the naming. That's a thought arising. And then we might start thinking about the bird. What kind of bird is it? Is it that kind or that kind? So the arising of a sense impression can also be how the process of thinking unfolds.

Some curiosity around the process of thinking.

So let's settle in to the experience. Thoughts are going to happen most likely during the sitting at some point. I'm not going to lead or guide a particular meditation around exploring thought, but as you're practicing, as you're sitting, when you notice that thinking is happening...

Be curious about it in these ways that I've described. If there's a content or an emotional tone to it, notice the emotion that's connected with it. Perhaps notice the content, the flavor of the content, or maybe notice the modality—how the thinking is happening.

So connect to your experience and allow the body to relax. Maybe there's a sense of allowing the mind to relax. I often find it helpful to see if there can be a relaxation deeply, more deeply inside the body. Perhaps the inside of the throat can relax. Maybe the heart can relax. Maybe the stomach and the intestines can relax.

And if you are using an anchor for your attention, allow the experience of the anchor to come to you, settling back and receiving that home base experience—body, hearing, breath.

And when you notice, as you inevitably will at some point, that thinking is happening—or that you're waking up and thinking has been happening—bring some curiosity to noticing that experience of thinking.

CHAPTER 159

Practicing Compassion

Andrea Fella · 52 min

In this guided meditation and teaching from a retreat for experienced students, Andrea Fella offers an in-depth exploration of karuṇā, the brahmavihāra of compassion. She explains how compassion arises naturally when the caring, connected quality of mettā encounters suffering—the heart's flavor shifts from loving-kindness to compassion when we are present with another's struggle without resistance.

Fella describes the distinctive quality of compassion as a "quivering of the heart"—soft, open, and accompanied by a natural wish to act and alleviate suffering. She addresses the challenge of practicing compassion when action isn't possible, emphasizing that the simple act of being present with someone's suffering without resistance can itself be profoundly supportive. The talk explores how compassion practice educates the mind about wholesome motivation, showing us that action can arise from wisdom and care rather than solely from greed or aversion.

The formal practice is presented with practical guidance: beginning with someone experiencing struggle who isn't too close to us, then extending to ourselves and all beings. Fella discusses working with the phrase "may you be free from this suffering" and offers alternatives for challenging situations, such as terminal illness. She addresses the apparent contradiction between wishing for freedom from suffering and accepting impermanence, suggesting we can hold both truths simultaneously. Drawing from her personal experience of first recognizing self-compassion arising through mindfulness practice, she encourages practitioners to remain curious about their embodied experience rather than looking for a particular feeling.

Today in our Brahma Vihara practice we'll explore the practice of compassion.

The other day Sally pointed to the connection between the various Brahma Viharas. The basic quality of care, of connection, openheartedness, kindness, friendliness—that's the quality of metta. And it underlies the quality of compassion, the quality of mudita, of sympathetic joy. When that caring heart, that experience of being present, connected, caring, feeling the sense of kindness, when that caring heart is in the presence of suffering, the flavor of the heart will have the flavor of compassion. And when that caring heart is experiencing or in the presence of delight or joy or appreciation, the flavor of that heart becomes empathetic, sympathetic, appreciative joy.

The shift in the formal practice of compassion is that we begin not just exploring the connection with our benefactor, our dear friend, the neutral person. In the metta practice, we're exploring the connection and opening the heart to connect, to have that sense of caring. In the compassion practice, we actively turn towards suffering. We bring the suffering of the beings that we're connecting with into our minds and explore how the heart is in relationship to this being who is suffering.

This can be a challenging practice in some ways in that we're actively turning towards suffering. With some beings this arises naturally—one question the other day mentioned that with the neutral person, the experience of the pandemic and how much suffering there is, just as we open to that connection, the mind naturally turns towards the feeling of compassion.

That's the exploration we're connecting with. The feeling of compassion has that connected quality, but it also is not resisting that suffering is happening. It's open. The feeling is one of openness and not pulling back, not barricading oneself from the suffering.

The phrase sometimes used to describe the experience of compassion—I don't know where this came from, but the first person I heard using it is Jack Kornfield—is "the quivering of the heart." The heart is soft, not hard, and it has this quivering quality to it. It comes with this wish to act to alleviate the suffering. Compassion has a very active quality to it. It comes with the movement to want to help, to want to do something to alleviate the suffering.

This is a beautiful feeling, that movement of wishing to do something. It can be that we experience it as frustrating when we aren't in a position to be able to act, when we can't actively do something to alleviate the suffering of that being. And yet what I come back to sometimes is remembering that the act of offering this wish for compassion is a form of action.

Being in the field with somebody who is suffering, when you are not resisting that suffering, when you're able to be with it and hold it—there's a way that can be felt as a great support.

I got a taste of this at one point. I was sitting with a friend who, we were just out at a park doing some qigong, and then we sat down to have a conversation, and my friend had a memory come up of something from a long time ago that created some distress. I said, "Well, I'm happy to sit here with you." And he said, "I don't know what to say." I said, "You don't have to say anything. I can just sit here with you while you're feeling

whatever you're feeling." And I was not at all resistant to what was going on. Actually, I wasn't practicing compassion per se. I was practicing awareness, just being with myself, being with my friend.

A couple days later, my friend came back to me and said, "What were you doing?" He asked me, "Were you sending metta?" I said, "Well, no, I was just being there. I wasn't actively sending metta." And he said, "It was amazing."

So even just our presence, even just that openhearted willingness to sit in the field when somebody is suffering, that can be an action. Don't underestimate the power of that. It's quite lovely, quite beautiful to be one who can witness suffering without resistance.

There can also be this movement to do. And when we have that possibility, action may follow very naturally. It's a beautiful thing actually to taste that motivation coming from such a wholesome quality—to taste the feeling of wanting to do something, to act, to engage in the world that's not coming from greed or aversion, but coming from wholesomeness. This really gives our mind an education and helps the belief, the view that usually comes embedded with greed and aversion, that says, "I'm the only reason you do anything." Those states of mind think they have a lock on action in our lives, that they're the reasons why we act.

But when we get the taste of compassion and the feeling of the motivation that comes with it, we viscerally learn that different place action can come from. Action can come from wisdom, from love, from care.

And it begins to de-condition that belief embedded in the midst of anger and greed.

In terms of the formal practice of compassion, for myself, the formal practices of the Brahma Viharas were initially quite challenging. The way in for me was really the mindfulness practice—beginning to simply be with experience and cultivating the allowing of everything, the happy things and the difficult things. That began to open the heart to being able to be with suffering, to being able to be with joy, without fighting anything, without holding on to anything.

The practice of mindfulness does cultivate these qualities. It's not really a separation from the Brahma Viharas; it's just a different way in. Are we more actively aiming the mind, inclining towards metta, compassion, sympathetic joy? Or are we working through the allowing quality of mindfulness?

The formal practice of compassion unfolds in a similar way that the metta practice does. We choose beings from various categories and explore the possibility of having that connection—feeling that personal connection to a being and exploring the possibility of wishing them to be free from their suffering. In that connection, we are also orienting towards whatever way they might be suffering or struggling.

For a dear friend, we might know specifically what they're suffering about, a particular thing they're struggling with. And as we've said in the metta practice, we don't have to pick the most difficult thing. We don't need to choose the friend with the most challenging situation at the beginning of our compassion practice. We could pick somebody whose struggle is lighter, where there's just a little bit of difficulty.

When we shift to the neutral person, we don't have the specifics, but we can know—just as Sally said the other day with the neutral person in metta—that they have the human experience. They have friends and family, and they also have human losses. This person too has their ups and downs, those moments of struggle. With compassion practice, as we connect with a being, we actively remember the struggles that happen with that being. This is counterintuitive in some ways, but this is where compassion is sparked. Compassion is sparked in conjunction with meeting suffering. We cannot ignore suffering when exploring the active cultivation of compassion practice.

The place to begin, the easy being for this particular category, is someone who is suffering but who is not necessarily the closest person to you. Sometimes it can be someone who cannot help themselves—a child in distress, for instance, who doesn't know how to help themselves. There's a very natural movement of heart when we see a child in distress, a wanting to do something to help, to support them. That's the flavor of compassion, and that's a place to begin.

The first being we would begin with is someone who is in distress but whom we're not that close to, because when we get close to somebody, the reactivity can intensify. We start wherever it's easiest to cultivate the quality without having extra things to deal with. When we're working with somebody close to us, often fear comes up—fear about what happens to me if that problem doesn't get solved—or there's resistance about knowing their suffering. These are the additional things we have to work with ultimately in compassion practice.

As with the metta practice, where I used the analogy of the washing machine pulling what's not metta out into the wash, similarly with compassion practice, as we orient to meeting suffering, the compassion is the quality that is not resistant to suffering, that is

able to fully open and connect to it. What we'll see as we do compassion practice is all the reasons why we don't want to do that. That's how the practice works—it pulls those things out.

It pulls out pity, that quality of "oh, poor you," that subtle aversion that isn't a true connecting. It can pull out cruelty on the other side, the sense of "well, they must deserve it if they're suffering this much." These are the resistances in the way of compassion.

So we proceed as we would with metta. We bring a being into our mind, and when we do this together, we'll start with someone you know—but perhaps aren't that close to—who is having some kind of struggle in their lives. Then we could move to the dear friend, the benefactor, ourselves, the neutral person, the difficult person, and then to all beings.

We're not going through all the categories today. We'll have just this one day with compassion practice, so you're going to get the flavor of it. We'll work with the easy being, then ourselves, and then all beings.

The phrase we use is expressive of the wish of compassion: *May you be free of this suffering.* That's the basic phrase, the basic wish. Sometimes we might have some struggle with that phrase, especially if we're offering it to somebody with a terminal illness, where we know they only have so long left in their lives, and we may be thinking of "may you be free of the suffering" as "may the cancer be gone."

We know that this is not possible, that this is the course of their illness. And so sometimes we can resist that phrase. At times it can be useful perhaps to use an alternative form, something like "may you hold your suffering with ease," or "I care about you with your suffering." Those are some alternative phrases that you could play with.

But I also want to point out that the wish for compassion is actually the wish regardless of the reality of the situation, regardless of whether the cancer or the illness could go away. The wish of compassion is the wish that they have freedom from that suffering. I sometimes connect with that by almost asking myself the question: if I had a magic wand and I could have that illness disappear, would I do that? Yes. That's the wish we're connecting to.

That wish—that all beings be free of suffering—does kind of run up against the reality of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable phenomena. But it doesn't invalidate the wish. We think it might. We might think it would invalidate the wish, that I shouldn't

have that wish given the unreliability and uncontrollability of the world, that the wish is not valid. But the wish is the deepest wish of "may it be gone." That is the wish of compassion.

And so holding both of these truths—the wish, the deep wish that that suffering be completely alleviated, and understanding the truth of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable—part of the compassion practice is holding these two together. Opening the heart to hold both at the same time.

So let's settle into a posture that feels comfortable and relaxed, taking some time to connect with the body and relaxing the body. Perhaps allowing the attention to gently coalesce around the area of the heart, taking in whatever the experience is there in this moment. Sometimes at this point I just have a sense of breathing through the heart, almost letting the breath be like a gentle massage in that area.

Bring your attention to connect with a being, someone you know who's having a little bit of struggle in their lives. Recognize the struggle. And as you explore that, connecting and recognizing the struggle, how is the heart? What happens to the heart as you connect to that struggle? Whatever happens—you may feel a quivering, you might feel that flavor of the quivering, you might feel a little pulling back—just allow that to be what it is.

However your heart is, connect to the intention of wishing they have freedom from that suffering. May you be free from this suffering. And how is it to have made that wish? Really, in an embodied way, checking in. Expressing that wish. May you be free from this suffering. What happens, particularly in the area of your heart, as you make that wish?

There is just this one phrase with the compassion practice. You're welcome to shift the phrase if it's supportive for you: I care about your suffering. May you hold your suffering with ease.

Sometimes I find with the compassion practice, with a single phrase, it's a little bit easier to really just connect with the experience that happens with the wish. I'm not needing to rush to get through multiple phrases. Connect with the being and their struggle. Offer the wish. And connect with how it feels to make that wish. Taking your time.

And remember that what's opposite, or what's in the way of that wholehearted wish for them to be free from that suffering—it's natural for that to come out. Can that be just in the field? Keep exploring the wish.

If the reactivity gets overwhelming, you could let go of exploring compassion for a moment and bring the easiest being with metta into your heart. Give yourself some time with that quality of connecting and caring with an easy being. I'll give you some time to play with that for the next few minutes with this easy being, offering them the wish of freedom from their struggles.

Now I'd like to invite you to connect with yourself. Taking yourself in as you are in this moment. Opening your heart to just how you are right now.

Turning compassion towards ourselves, again, we need to orient to some area of struggle, of unease, of stress. Perhaps there could be something slight in the moment—a slight difficult body sensation, or perhaps there could be a little bit of resistance to the practice of compassion. So holding yourself with this, whatever the flavor of unease is, and expressing the wish for yourself: May I be free from this suffering. May this suffering release.

In practicing self-compassion, if there's any resistance that comes up, or holding, or pushing and pulling that happens around the practice itself, that can be included. This too. May there be ease with this. May there be release of this suffering. May this release. May there be freedom from this suffering.

And remembering to check in: How does it feel to make that wish?

If it feels too challenging to offer this wish for yourself, you're welcome to step back to where it's easier again—the first being that we explored. See if you can hold that wish for freedom from suffering for another being for a few minutes, then come back to exploring it for yourself again, opening the heart to this wholesome wish that we ourselves be free of suffering. It's okay to have that wish.

Now, shifting towards an opening of this wish for freedom from suffering, allowing the mind to expand to take in other beings. In a shift to all beings, sometimes I find it helpful to just open the mind and let whoever wants to come in and have that wish expressed to them. Let them show up. May you too be free from your suffering.

Allowing a relaxation of a focus on a particular being and a sense of expanding—first to beings you may know, beings in your household perhaps, or around you. May you be free of suffering. Maybe expanding a little further to beings in your neighborhood that you see on walks. It can be helpful to let these images of beings just pop in, and as images come in, just wishing them that: May you be free from suffering. Knowing that all beings have their struggles.

Relaxing as you open. Opening out to express the wish for all beings. You can use that phrase: May all beings be free from suffering, distress, unease.

And remembering that you are one of all beings. Perhaps you can reflect that you're a recipient of the wish from everyone else, as well as a recipient of your own wish for freedom from suffering. May all beings be free from distress and unease.

As you open out in this way, if particular beings appear, give them a little extra wish. You too.

You can get creative with the compassion practice, like we've been encouraging with the metta practice. It can be helpful sometimes to bring in some support of friends and benefactors to send compassion with you, or sometimes to be surrounded by dear ones who you know wish you well, and explore receiving compassion for yourself, opening to that possibility.

The experience of compassion has a soft quality to it. The heart does not feel hard or constricted at all. But it does have that quivering flavor to it.

When I first felt a real sense of self-compassion, it was a little bit odd. In that first experience, I was suffering a lot at that point. There was something going on that was really hard. Life was pretty challenging.

And as I was going out to try to do something to take care of a situation, there was this funny feeling. I was just being aware, but there was this very funny feeling in my body. And I thought, what's that? Sometimes something feels like it's wrong—something feels wrong. But I just decided, well, let's just see what it is. What is that feeling?

And actually, when I fully opened to it and fully allowed it, it came to me that what this is is self-compassion. The self-compassion acknowledges fully that something is hard. It takes that in, it's available to know that something is hard, and it feels that difficulty, it feels that suffering fully—but it's not resistant to it.

When I recognized that the quality I was feeling was self-compassion, tears sprang to my eyes. I had not really felt that for myself before—both the feeling fully the suffering and the wish to be free of it at the same time. It felt very impersonal in a way.

I share this because I had all these ideas about what it might feel like when it finally appeared. And in my own practice, a lot of the qualities of the brahma viharas began appearing in the mindfulness practice first. Then I began to understand them and could start to cultivate them, start to get a sense of them. So that was my doorway, that was my way in.

Sometimes in practicing these teachings, in practicing the practice of compassion, really opening to what is here—rather than looking for something, looking for some particular experience or some particular flavor to be there—that exploration becomes the teaching itself. In my own experience, that exploration of "what is this feeling that feels like something is wrong?"—I wouldn't have turned to that saying, "Well, that's compassion." It was really just opening to "what is this?" Just the curiosity: what is this feeling? And it showed itself to me as compassion.

The encouragement to land with your experience, your embodied experience in the compassion practice, is an invitation to see how the heart is responding without any judgment whatsoever. And it will reveal these things that are in the way of compassion too.

CHAPTER 160

Mindfulness of Difficult Mental States (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 1h05

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers profound guidance on working skillfully with difficult mental states, drawing from the Four Noble Truths and her own extensive experience with patterns like self-hatred and depression. She reframes the understanding of dukkha not merely as suffering but as the unreliable, impermanent nature of all experience, and emphasizes that meeting reactive habits with mindfulness transforms hindrances into the path itself.*
>
> *Fella introduces the naturalist metaphor for meditation practice—sitting still enough that the nature of mind reveals itself without interference. She explores multiple layers of investigation: noticing what's obvious, feeling how emotions manifest in the body through specific sensations, and touching into the broader, more diffuse interoceptive landscape of emotional experience. This pervading quality, she notes, often has a shifty, Milky Way-like character that can be unfamiliar territory for practitioners.*
>
> *Particularly valuable are her practical tools for working with recurring patterns: simply tracking whether a state is present or absent, caught or not caught; broadening awareness to include all sensory experience rather than magnifying the difficulty; and knowing when to kindly redirect attention to something neutral like the feet. She shares how deep insight arose for her right in the midst of self-hatred, revealing that even our most challenging states can be doorways to understanding the constructed nature of all mental experience.*

It's quite something, what we're doing together. It's a rare thing in this world to be privileged enough to sit in a community, to participate with a community interested in understanding ourselves with the aim of lessening suffering in the world—to be curious about our own participation in that suffering and how exploring our own minds reveals our involvement in it.

This serves as a reflection of the tendency of the human mind to get involved in struggle: in greed, wanting things to be a certain way; in aversion, wanting things to be not a certain way; in confusion, thinking that having things a certain way will lead to lasting happiness for more than just a split second.

So I appreciate your commitment, your engagement with this. It is not easy to look internally at the way our own human minds get up to what they get up to. And the hope, the direction of freeing our own minds, even in small ways, from patterns and habits of greed, aversion, and delusion, will have an effect on the world. Because just like anger and hatred are contagious—when there's anger, it often gets met with anger, that mirroring being such a human tendency—that mirroring also operates with love and compassion and wisdom and joy. Cultivating the diminishment of the reactive and the growth of the beautiful will tend to expand beyond our own hearts and minds to those that we meet.

So thank you for what you are doing. It is an amazing thing. I appreciate that you are doing it. Sometimes when we're in the midst of this kind of work, we get so involved in the details of our own habits and patterns that we forget to appreciate the amazing value it has, not only for ourselves but for the world. It can be useful to remember that value, to appreciate yourselves. Even as you may be struggling with something, even as it may feel challenging, the very connection with that struggle is a beautiful thing.

Today I'd really like to explore that meeting of challenge. We've talked about it in a number of different ways. Bhante and Anushka in particular—Bhante spoke about the hindrances, and this morning Anushka talked about working with emotions, especially some challenging ones. I'd like to elaborate a little more on ways to work with challenge, much of this drawn from my own experience.

The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths. The first is the truth of suffering: that we tend to struggle, to react to things as they are. There is suffering—this is the truth of suffering.

The second noble truth is the truth of the arising of suffering. Sometimes this is translated as the origin of suffering or the cause of suffering, but the word can also be understood as "arising." The teachings say that craving is essentially—the way I read this—that with the arising of craving is the arising of suffering. It's a slightly different framing than "craving causes suffering," which makes it sound like craving isn't itself suffering. But with the arising of craving, suffering is there. That's a way that noble truth can read: with the arising of craving is the arising of suffering.

The third noble truth is the ending of that craving, which is the ending of suffering. There is an ending of suffering. The truth of the cessation of suffering—the cessation of craving is said to be the cessation of that suffering.

And there is a path leading to the ending, the cessation of suffering, the cessation of craving: the Eightfold Path. Essentially what we're teaching here, all the tools and practices we're exploring, are found in the Eightfold Path. We're practicing the Eightfold Path here in all that we do.

The Buddha encouraged us not just to take these truths as something to be believed, but he gave us actions associated with each of the Four Noble Truths. He said the truth of suffering is to be understood. The truth of the arising of suffering—the craving, with the arising of craving being the arising of suffering—the craving is to be abandoned. The ending of suffering is meant to be realized, directly experienced. And the path, the Eightfold Path, is meant to be cultivated, developed.

Winnie the other day talked about how the Eightfold Path weaves back and supports the Four Noble Truths—there's a kind of feedback loop there. If we think about these actions we're encouraged to undertake with respect to each of the Four Noble Truths, to understand suffering, then the tools in the Eightfold Path are means to understanding suffering. The engagement with and development of the Eightfold Path will support the understanding of suffering, will support the letting go, the release, the abandoning of craving, and will support the experiencing, the recognition, the realization of the ending of suffering.

The Eightfold Path provides the tools, the practices we use to engage with those first three noble truths. So this first noble truth: understand suffering.

Our whole path could be this, in a way. Just this one truth. If this teaching were all that we explored, it would take us a very long way. And so that's the emphasis for this evening—to talk about how we can understand suffering, how we can understand understanding in this way, the understanding that is referred to in this First Noble Truth.

This is not about intellectual understanding. It really is pointing to an experiential understanding. Understanding what's arising in this present moment. Is it suffering?

There are ways that the teachings point to everything that arises as suffering, in the sense that everything that arises is unreliable. That's another translation for the word dukkha. We often translate dukkha as suffering, yet it can also be translated as unreliability. And so there are times when the teachings seem to say that everything that arises is dukkha. My understanding is that what this means is that there is nothing that arises that's reliable as a place for lasting happiness, because it is impermanent, falling away, changing.

As we have said several times over the last few days, there's nothing out there that we can hold on to that will make us happy, that will be that lasting happiness. And so in that sense, everything that arises is dukkha. Everything that arises is unreliable. Everything that ceases is unreliable experience. Just unreliable experience arising and passing away.

And we get in there and mix it up, try to hold on to it, try to push it away, try to figure out how to create a particular flavor of conditions so that we can feel happy for a little while. Then it falls apart and we get frustrated. What did I do wrong? It's either my fault or somebody else's fault. Must be because everybody else seems to figure out how to be happy but me.

The resistance to the unreliable nature of experience, the impermanent unreliable nature—the confusion in our minds about thinking there would be something out there that's reliable—that's where another kind of dukkha, the experience of suffering, comes in. And this is often in the realm of our reactive habits and patterns, habits and patterns based in greed, in aversion, in delusion.

So we explore: what is the experience when we are experiencing struggle, stress, frustration? What is the experience of that? The Buddha pointed us to the meeting of that as being the path.

We've also said this a lot: the word hindrance sounds like, and does, when those states of mind are operating in their own nature, when they are running the show for us—they are hindering our capacity to settle. But when we meet them with mindfulness, when we meet any reactive habit or pattern, any stress or suffering with mindfulness, it's no longer in the way of the path. It is the path.

I've heard my colleagues say this over and over again, and it bears repeating: these difficult patterns, when they arise and can be seen and met with mindfulness, with wise mindfulness, with the perspective that Winnie spoke about—the wise view and wise intention—whatever arises is our path.

And it's not always easy to meet whatever arises. I've spent—I don't even know how many years now, twenty-some years doing this—and it's not easy. But I will tell you, it is worth the trip. It is worth the ride.

One thing I'll say: we often explore working with difficulty, using tools or an antidote, for example, something that takes our attention away from it at times. Sometimes we do have patterns in our experience that feel very strong, and it can be useful to use some of the tools we know to settle that or turn our attention away. I'll talk about some of those this evening.

But sometimes we can jump to those tools too quickly and not give ourselves the opportunity to explore whether we might be able to meet it with mindfulness. The idea that something is too strong, the idea—if you've ever had the thought, for instance, "I'm too sleepy to be mindful." Anybody had that thought? I see a few willing to raise their hand. "I'm too sleepy to be mindful."

I would just like to propose that if you're having that thought, you're already aware that you're sleepy. That awareness is already there. So give yourself a chance. We have more capacity than we give ourselves credit for sometimes.

I'd like to offer a few things I've found useful in exploring how to work with difficulty, how to find a balanced mind amidst difficulty. These approaches have helped in my own practice to expand the terrain, we could say, where mindfulness can go. So that thought of "I'm too X—I'm too sleepy, I'm too angry, I'm too frustrated, I'm too anything to be mindful"—that thought can be met with the confidence that mindfulness can meet any experience.

Perhaps not always. There are times when whatever is arising, the momentum or the power of the reactivity can be stronger than our capacity to be mindful. And so there's some wisdom that we have to cultivate about whether mindfulness can meet this. But give yourself a chance to check it out. We'll talk about that a little bit too.

I would say that one key tool in my own toolkit around working with difficulty is the confidence that mindfulness can meet any experience. Whether or not I have that capability in this moment, it is possible. And so that gives me the confidence to play with it, even for a few moments, to play with that possibility of meeting something with mindfulness.

This evening I'd like to primarily explore meeting difficult emotions, reactive habits and patterns, difficult mental experience. Often with some of our really charged mental experiences, they feel like they come in layers. A lot of different pieces coming together. Beliefs about things, old emotions coming up, emotions that get woven together. It sometimes can just feel like a big ball of a mess.

So one of the things that can be really helpful is to start with a sense of curiosity. Often the old reactive habits and patterns are coming out of deep and old conditioning, often from family, childhood situations with playmates or family members, or trauma that happened all through our lives. All of that participates in some of these patterns.

And so the curiosity is not about thinking "how can I get rid of this?" Again, the idea is that whatever is arising, this is the path. The mindfulness of this is how the learning develops, how the wisdom grows, how we begin to understand that craving is suffering. That the arising of craving is the arising of suffering. It's not something that is a block to the progression on the path.

Myself, I've worked with a lot of self-negativity, self-hatred being one of the big ones for me. And I remember on one three-month retreat, it was coming up quite a lot. At one point, I just kind of thought—and this was delusion—I thought, "Oh well, I guess I don't learn anything. I guess I just have to deal with this. I'm not going to get enlightened on this retreat." That was the idea that somehow the self-hatred was blocking the development or growth of wisdom.

But fortunately I was willing to work with it. And to my surprise, at one point, there was really deep seeing of the impermanent, unreliable nature of the arising of that self-hatred. Right in the midst of seeing self-hatred there was really clear understanding. And that moment was a powerful moment in my practice to help me have the confidence and the sense of, yes, I want to meet these habits and patterns. It's not like they're in the way. Deep understanding can arise in the midst of seeing self-hatred. I didn't have to wait until the self-hatred was gone and I'd had a long time to settle in concentration with no hindrances arising for weeks. Right in the middle of self-hatred, deeply seeing the impermanent, unreliable nature of the thoughts that were generating it.

So that's a little pep talk. Go for it.

Curiosity is one helpful tool. Can we be curious about these habits and patterns? It can also be helpful to remind ourselves of some of the wise view that Winnie talked about the other day. This is the framework for our mindfulness practice—wise view.

"This is nature." This is a really helpful framing for the experience. This is nature. This framing comes from one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and my understanding of what he's pointing to with that language is that what's arising in this moment is a natural arising. It's arising based on causes and conditions, things that happened in the past. It's arising based on what's arising right now in the present moment. It's arising based on how I'm relating to it in the present moment. What's growing right now, what's arising, what's coming into being right now—it's nature. A relationship of cause and effect unfolding in this moment.

Just reminding ourselves of this can be helpful. Sometimes I frame this to myself as, "Well, of course this is arising." When I got to the point where I could say that about self-hatred—"of course this is arising, look at the history, look at the conditioning, look

at what happened and how the mind related to it in my history, of course this is arising"—instead of feeling somehow like I was to blame for it arising or I was responsible for it arising.

That recognition—that it was nature—really allowed a lot more possibility for just being able, or willing, to witness it. "Oh, yeah, self-hatred is arising right now. This is what it feels like. This is what's happening with it." So sometimes just that framing, if you're working with something challenging: "This is nature. This is causes and conditions. Of course this is arising. I'm bringing curiosity to it."

With curiosity, with a sense of willingness to explore experience with mindfulness, then we're in the terrain of investigation. Looking at, exploring, meeting experience as it shows itself.

Often with these really reactive habits and patterns, with all of those layers and complexity, sometimes we think we've thought our way through it a little bit. For me with the self-hatred, I had kind of thought my way through it: "Well, you know, probably this has to do with those situations, and it's got to do with this thing that happened. So there must really be that thing underneath it." I had kind of thought my way through it, and sometimes when I sat down to practice, I was like, "Let me find that thing in the middle"—rather than asking, "What's presenting itself this time around as self-hatred arises?"

That approach—"What's here with this pattern that's arising?"—embraces the big mess of it. Sometimes I think about these big habits and patterns as being this huge, wound-up ball of a mess. And rather than trying to pull it all apart and figure out all the threads and pieces wound up in there, it's like, with really wide arms, can I just hold the whole thing? Just meet that, whatever is showing up in this moment. What's here? What's obvious about this experience right now?

We might be making assumptions about what's happening in the middle, and those thoughts will arise, those ideas: "I really think there's fear in the middle of this. I've got to find the fear so I can be with the fear, and then the whole thing will fall apart." You hear some greed in that? It's like, okay, well, what is here? What's available?

You can hold those ideas about what might be in the middle—maybe there is fear, maybe. But rather than looking for it—because if you go looking for something, sometimes you'll find it, and the finding of it sometimes happens because we're making it happen—really, hold those ideas lightly. That's a hypothesis, but let's just see what's here. Let's just meet what's actually here. Meeting what's obvious about the whole complex experience.

Sometimes I approach this with an image that I first learned from Gil Fronsdal, though I think it's a pretty common thing for Dharma teachers to talk about, so he probably got it from one of his teachers. Thinking about the practice of mindfulness as being like a naturalist. We are, after all, nature. We are observing nature as we observe our hearts and minds, as we meet our experience with mindfulness. We're observing the nature of a human being.

A naturalist, when they go out in nature, tends to go to the area or kind of nature they're interested in exploring, interested in understanding. So this is about understanding—we're looking at understanding something, understanding a habit or pattern, understanding nature. Going out into nature, they'll find a place to sit in the forest, or in the desert, whatever it is. And they'll just sit and watch what happens.

They may pick their place to sit based on what they're interested in learning about. Maybe they're interested in studying the habitat of a redwood forest—what kind of creatures live there, how do they live, what do they eat, how do they interact? And so that naturalist would put themselves in a redwood forest and just observe. What creatures come out? How do they interact? Where do they forage for food?

The stiller they are, the more they get to see nature in its naturalness—what is wanting to arise. If they're going in and digging holes to see what's living in that hole, they're not going to see how those creatures live naturally.

And there is a place for that kind of science, right? We may cut up a plant, take it back to the lab, put it in the machine, pull it apart, look at the cells. There's a place for that. And there's also a place for seeing the bigger picture and just meeting nature as it shows up.

That comes with stillness for the naturalist—sitting and just being willing to be still enough that nature begins to trust the observer and to show up as it does. Our practice can be like that: non-interfering. The mindfulness can have that quality of not interfering, just allowing what wants to show up. Not digging into that big ball of many layers and threads, but simply asking: what's here? What's most obvious?

There are a few explorations that can be useful in that place, aside from noticing what is obvious. It might be looking a little more closely—as you might sit a little closer to a redwood tree, but then remain in stillness. How does it feel in the body? Anushaya really spoke to this this morning, so I won't go into a lot of detail, but just that curiosity: What is this pattern, this habit? How does it feel in the body? What are the sensations?

Often there's a particular contraction in the stomach, or tension in the shoulders, or clenching in the jaw. There can be very specific sensations associated with, for instance, anger. Anger might have a feeling of pressure and heat rising in the body, tension or clenching in the throat, a tightening in the face, a distortion of the face. We might notice some very specific sensations—things we're familiar with landing with. Particular pressure, particular body sensations.

And then there's another area of experience in the body. I found myself speaking about this in quite a few meetings in the last few days, so I want to bring this in too. There's a broader feeling of the whole—the whole feeling, the whole mess of what's happening right now.

This is a kind of experience that's not so commonly valued or taught in many of our families. I certainly didn't learn it. I learned how to be with pressure on my hands—it's pretty easy to be with certain kinds of sensations, like pressure or contact, hands touching, or a clenching of the jaw. Very discrete kinds of experience, almost like you could draw a line or a circle around a particular area. The contact points of your hips against the cushion or chair or bench, feet on the floor, contact of hands—these are sensations we know how to touch.

Some people also have a sense of what I recently learned a word for in Western psychology: interoception, the internal visceral sense of the body. This I did not have much experience with. And this kind of experience, especially with reactive emotions, has a much broader, more pervading quality. It often doesn't have the sense of something we can draw a line around. It often feels very, very big, kind of wobbly. It doesn't have a lot of familiarity to it sometimes, if we're not accustomed to meeting this kind of experience.

Our awareness can meet specific experience. When we touch our hands together, we can know those sensations. So it's almost like our awareness can narrow down to a very precise focus. Awareness can also be very broad and take in a very broad experience. Sometimes when we go broad with awareness, it takes in a sequence: a sound, then a body sensation, then another sound, then an emotion coming up, then a pressure or a tension. So in a broad awareness, we may be receiving a wider range of experience, but it still has that very precise quality when we experience something—a specific sound, a specific pressure in the knee.

But then there's also this quality of a diffuse, broad, pervading feeling that can be met with a broad awareness. I'll give you an analogy in the field of seeing. If you go out on a moonless night with a dark sky, here at Spirit Rock we can sometimes see the Milky Way when there are no clouds. Seeing the Milky Way is that kind of diffuse exper-

ience. The vastness of the Milky Way isn't taken in by focusing on a little part of it. The awesomeness of the Milky Way arises because we're taking the expanse of it in. Our minds know how to meet expansive experience.

Just there's some areas of expansive experience perhaps that we haven't gained familiarity with meeting. And in my own experience, in my own practice, this area of the expanded feeling around emotion was one of those—unfamiliar territory. It can have that Milky Way-like experience. Or maybe even more analogous, like the Northern Lights. I've never personally seen the Northern Lights, but I've seen videos of them, and they kind of shift and change. The Milky Way is apparently static—it's not static, but from our point of view here on Earth, it looks kind of static. Not a lot of change up there. But the Northern Lights do this weaving and intensification of color.

The experience when we meet a broader feeling of our emotions has that kind of quality. Not a lot of stability. Kind of a wobbly feeling. Maybe a slippery experience.

Maybe right now, just as I'm speaking, can you just touch into how you are? One way into this is just whatever you're experiencing—because this isn't just available with emotions, it's actually available all the time. It's maybe a little more obvious with strong emotions. But whatever you're experiencing right now, just taking in, letting yourself settle with how you are—that's a way in. It's like, how am I right now? In the big picture, how am I right now? And how does it feel? Not the precise sensations, but the whole thing. All that's here. How does the whole thing feel? The feeling of it?

There may not be words for it, partly because it can be a pretty shifty, dynamic experience. Sometimes it can be diffuse and vague. Sometimes it can be pervading and strong. So just see if there might be a possibility of touching into the whole, the big picture of how you are in this moment. All that's happening right now.

It often can have a shifty quality—shifting between pleasant and unpleasant and neutral really quickly. It doesn't really land with any one experience too quickly. It can be hard to put words to.

With emotions, this feeling, if we can touch into that place, it can be hard to stay with, maybe partly because we're not so familiar with staying with something so imprecise. And so you can just play with it a little bit, exploring: how is this with the body? What is the whole experience of this with the body? Just see if you can touch it for a few moments. And then just go back again to what's obvious.

But in my own exploration of this particular aspect of emotional experience, as we gain a capacity to rest with it, to land with it, there's a lot of that shifty landscape of the big mess of it that becomes available to be touched. And sometimes so much of our reactivity—our launching out of that into thoughts and justification and reactivity—is coming from that really shifty landscape of experience.

So it may be possible to touch into it. If you gain some sense of being able to meet that broad, diffuse, shifting landscape of an emotion, it can be useful in another kind of investigation. Again, we're talking about investigation of emotions through the body. It can be interesting, while holding that feeling, to just be curious: Anything here want to show up? Anything else want to show up? Anything else available? Not to look for it, but just to be inviting. What else might be participating in this show?

That may begin to touch into some of the deeper patterns or conditioning around the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience.

"Oh, I don't feel safe." Or, "Wow, I'm really vulnerable." Or, "This is not okay." Something may arise with that touching into the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience. And the seeing of it—if it can be held with mindfulness, the seeing of that whole thing can be very healing. Very healing. Bringing a lot of capacity to meeting this kind of difficult emotion.

So mostly I've been talking about just meeting the experience, with a little bit of exploring perhaps a different piece of the experience that may not be so familiar. First of all, what's obvious? How is it in the body? And then this more pervading feeling.

Another exploration that can be really useful around challenging states of mind is checking into how we are in relationship to it. For myself, with self-hatred—self-hatred arising—I carried so much aversion to that self-hatred, so much of a sense that it was a problem that it arose. And that part wasn't being seen. When there was the capacity to see that, to see, "Oh, there's self-hatred, and there's thinking it's a problem"—there's a difference between the challenge, the difficulty, and the relationship to it. And sometimes the relationship to it is really driving the show. The thinking it's a problem to have self-hatred was leading me to certain kinds of exploration about it in order that it should go away. Not the curiosity of, "What is this?" but something else entirely.

And then beginning to see, at times, the possibility of a relationship to it that's more one of curiosity, interest, patience. So these are two kinds of relationships to experience. There might be a relationship of aversion or greed—wanting something to happen, wanting something not to happen. Or there might be an attitude of patience or calm or interest, willingness to be with it, faith, confidence.

When I found that relationship—and that relationship actually comes by seeing the relationships that are in the way—the relationship of ease, of peace, of curiosity, of patience, we get to find that place by noticing that it's not okay. So that same pattern of seeing what's here holds true here. But it has to be seen.

I think often these attitudes or relationships to experience are hidden. They're below our conscious awareness. And so sometimes a little check-in can help. Like, "Okay, this is happening. This pattern, this frustration is happening. What's my relationship to this? How am I with this?" That can be something that, again, not trying to figure it out, but just that little curiosity about—is there a relationship to this? What's the relationship to this? Not trying to find it or figure it out, but sometimes just that invitation. It's more of an invitation. "Any relationship want to show up? Any relationship want to let me know you're there?" That kind of thing.

Sometimes it will show up. And you'll be like, "Oh, that's what's going on. I think this is a problem. I think this shouldn't be happening." Then it becomes something we can be aware of. It becomes something else, like, "Oh, what's going on is that frustration is happening and thinking it's a problem is happening. That's what's going on." And how does that whole thing feel? How is that in the body, that feeling of "it's a problem"?

So there are times when settling back and having this kind of exploration of what's here, what's obvious, isn't so easy. The momentum of the habit or pattern is a lot stronger than our capacity for just being with it. And so I'd like to offer just a few tools here, some things that can support some measure of being with it.

There is, you know, the redirecting of attention away from difficulty, which I'll get to in just a moment. But first, there are a few tools that exist somewhere in between active investigation—that deepening into holding what's here, meeting it, seeing what wants to show up—and simply redirecting attention elsewhere.

Sometimes sitting in nature, the naturalist sitting in nature, a forest fire comes through. You're not going to just sit there. It's like, "Oh, forest fire coming through." You need to do something. So sometimes we do need to take action. There's a middle ground between the forest fire coming through and just sitting quietly.

One tool I've found really useful is quite simple—a simple approach for working with patterns that tend to be ones that come back a lot, ones that repeat. For myself, I kind of stumbled into this tool while working with a repeating pattern of depression. Not a very intense depression, a kind of low-grade depression that was coming up a lot on one retreat.

At some point, I'd been doing a lot of investigation and diving in, but I realized that it was much more supportive for the practice to do something really simple with it. Just to notice—and Bhante mentioned this the other day, actually—just to notice when it's there and when it's not there.

When something's coming up a lot, I wasn't doing a lot of investigation because the mind wasn't able to really settle with it that much. But it was able to know: yep, there it is. Yep, it's there. I could know it was there in an almost very stepped-back, broad way. But also to recognize when it wasn't there. Because with these more pervasive habits and patterns, sometimes we can have a kind of subconscious belief that it's always there. We don't actually notice that it disappears, that we're not living in it constantly.

So that piece of inquiry—is it present, is it not present? Depression present? Not present?—I found there were a lot of times it wasn't present.

Then I began to see that when it was present, there were two distinct experiences. When I could recognize, "Yes, depression is present," there was noticing that depression was present and it wasn't a particular problem. It's like, "Oh yeah, I can know that. Yeah, that's what's happening right now. The mind feels kind of low." Not a lot of reactivity to that experience. And there were times where it felt like it was a problem. Times when I could be aware that it was present and it was just present, or I could notice that it was present and I was caught by it.

So I began just noticing the difference: caught by it, not caught by it. Caught by it, not caught by it. Often when we're caught by it, it's because there's some attitude in the back of the mind that's not clearly seen. So "caught, not caught" was just a simple way of acknowledging there's some attitude there. I don't really know what it is, but it feels like something's off. Caught. Not caught. Not here. Here. Caught. Gone.

In this exploration, through this very simple three-part inquiry—not diving in, not looking in detail—it began to be a very dynamic experience. Depression kind of there, and then vanishing. And then, oh, it would be back. And then I would get caught by it. Sometimes it went really quickly between those states, sometimes more slowly. But when I began to be okay with this pattern of being caught by it, being not caught by it, not there, I began to see just how dynamic it was. That was such a helpful tool. A really simple noticing around it, not a lot of detailed investigation.

Another tool that can be really useful is one that allows something challenging to be present without focusing on it directly. It's not quite going so far as "the forest fire is here and you need to get out," but there's something happening and it feels pretty sticky.

The depression was like this too. I discovered this tool around the depression as well. I just began to realize: well, yeah, the depression is there, but there are thousands of other things going on.

It was as if the mind had taken the depression and made it the biggest thing. I was looking at the depression, just buried in it. But when I took the mind up out of it, I could see that yes, there was a lot else going on right now.

So I consciously brought in a reminder for myself. Seeing is happening. Hearing is happening. I cycled through the senses a little bit. Yes, there's seeing, there's hearing, there's feet on the ground—oh, and there's the depression. And there's seeing, and there's hearing. Just rotating through other experience to remind myself that the depression was not everything in my experience.

Because that kind of magnetizing to the experience makes it explode and become really big. So this is simply putting it back into the context of the entirety of our experience. That can also be really helpful.

And then there are times when we really need to turn our attention away from something, when it's not helpful to try to be with it. I use a rough guideline: if I can be with something with mindfulness, even in this simple way of noticing present or absent, caught or not caught, and it feels like it's staying at about the same level—not amping up when I'm trying to be with it—then I'm still in the terrain of learning with it. But if it feels like the dial gets turned up to ten when I try to pay attention, if it just goes screaming off the scale, that's the time to say, "Yep, not the time. Not the time to be with that."

It's really helpful to cultivate something neutral to let your attention go to. For myself, I often use my feet on the ground. Walking meditation with attention to the feet can be good because there's a little bit of movement happening. I found myself working with this around anger. I would notice the mind getting into anger and it would just get so stuck. If I tried to be mindful of it, I would just get lost in it for long stretches of time.

So when I noticed that was happening, I would bow to that experience. "Yes, I see you, anger. I know you're asking for attention. I'm sorry mindfulness isn't strong enough for you right now, but I'll get back to you. And right now we're going to pay attention to our feet." It was a very kind redirecting of the attention. The kindness there is important, as opposed to, "Can't be with that, gotta go somewhere else." A kind redirecting of attention to something neutral can be really helpful at times, along with some discernment about when that approach is necessary. Is it possible to be with experience?

To end, I want to say what I said at the beginning: working with these difficult patterns and habits is not some kind of lesser practice. It really is where wisdom can grow—right in the midst of something. For me, it's so mind-blowing. Seeing in the midst of self-hatred: this is just a thought. Thoughts being believed and producing this whole show right in front of my eyes. It's just a construction of mind. Seeing not only that this was a construction of mind, but that everything in our minds is a construction of mind. Such deep understanding can happen right in the middle of looking at these difficulties.

CHAPTER 161

Guided Mettā Practice: Neutral Person (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 43 min

In this guided meditation from the month-long retreat at Spirit Rock, Andrea Fella introduces the practice of extending mettā (loving-kindness) to the neutral person—someone we encounter but don't really know, such as a postal worker or fellow retreatee. She explains how the neutral person serves as a representative for the vast majority of beings on the planet with whom we have no personal connection, marking a significant turning point in the progressive expansion of mettā practice.

Andrea offers the evocative image of mettā phrases as a magnet that draws out our resistances to well-wishing, and a washing machine analogy where the phrases act like soap, pulling old habitual patterns into consciousness where they can be released. She notes that some practitioners find the neutral person surprisingly easy to work with due to the absence of complicated history, while others experience dryness or disconnection precisely because there's no personal relationship to enliven the practice.

Practical guidance is offered for working with difficulties: returning to an easier category of being when challenged, shifting phrases from positive statements ("may you be happy") to the negative phrasing found in the original Pāli ("may you be free from distress"), or transitioning to compassion practice. The guided meditation moves progressively through self, benefactor, dear friend, and neutral person, with Andrea emphasizing the embodied dimension of practice—noticing how each wish affects the heart and chest area, rather than keeping mettā as merely a mental exercise.

Today in our metta practice we'll be expanding to another ring of beings. In this expansion, the teachings point to starting with where it's relatively easier and working out towards where it might have a little more challenge. So we start where it may be easier to really feel that connection.

Traditionally it is said that the self is easiest, and in our own culture we've often found not necessarily so. So we begin in this place potentially of what we call self and easy being—someone for whom it's easy to feel that connection. Then we expand out to a dear friend, where there may be a lot of love and a lot of connection and a lot of more spontaneous caring. Yet often in a dear friend category, with someone who is in that relationship with us, there are often rubs. We know them so well, they know us so well,

and there are rubs. You know: "Well yes, I love that person, but why did they do that thing?" This brings up some of what Greg talked about as the far enemy potentially, or the near enemy with the dear friend—the confusion between that unconditional love and the kind of reciprocal expectation.

Today we'll be expanding out to what is often called the neutral person. This is someone that we don't know very well, someone who we may have contact with but don't really have much of a relationship with. This kind of represents, in a way, a turning point in our metta practice. We can think that the neutral person is a stand-in for the vast majority of beings on this planet that we don't really know—almost a representative of our relationship to all beings in a specific person.

I find the use of specific people helpful rather than thinking generally of categories, like "all of my dear friends" or "all of the people I don't know." What bringing in a specific individual does is really highlight the relational aspect—what our relationship to that person is and how we feel, what happens when we try to wish that being well.

When we try to wish our dear friends well, we may sometimes just have it flow and feel like, "Yeah, I really want my friend to be happy." And then sometimes we come up with that rub. We're not trying to deny that rub. Perhaps one of the other teachers used this analogy: Guy Armstrong sometimes uses the analogy of metta being like running a metta magnet over our heart. And what does a magnet do? It pulls its opposite. So we can think of this practice of bringing these phrases up, bringing the wishes, the intention towards well-wishing, as being the magnet that will pull out into consciousness our resistances to that well-wishing.

In choosing a neutral person—again, an actual person that perhaps you've seen—it could be somebody here on retreat that you just don't know very well. It could be somebody in your daily life that you've seen a lot: a postal worker or a clerk at the store, somebody that you've seen a lot but don't have a strong relationship with, where there's a feeling of kind of not knowing much about them. Just a neutral kind of feeling there.

As we bring the phrases or the wishes of well-being to a neutral person, often when wishing well for a benefactor or for ourselves or for a friend, we know something about what it would mean for them to be happy or for ourselves to be happy, healthy, safe, and at ease. With a neutral person we don't know the specifics of their lives. On one retreat I did a month-long intensive metta practice here, and I picked a dear friend who's an artist as my dear friend person. I would just envision my friend in her artist studio, knowing that that was a place where she was really happy, and that kind of brought in that quality of, "Yeah, I really hope you have that connection with your art and love and express yourself in that way."

But with a neutral person we don't have that information, so we more explore the well-wishing through what it means to be a human being that might be happy. Just the general happiness of having loved ones around us, the happiness of having people care for us, the safety of having a place to live and having food, the health of being able to take care of ourselves. The connection with these phrases—may you be happy, healthy, safe, and at ease—is more reflecting on the human wishes, the wish for all humans to have that in our just basic human ways, in a way connecting with our shared humanity in this part of the practice.

There are kind of two sides that people sometimes have in their relationships with the neutral person. Some people actually find that the neutral person is their easiest being, precisely because there isn't the complication. It seems simpler in a way to just wish somebody that we don't know, "Yeah, I hope you're happy." For some of us, the well-wishing for a neutral person is a little more challenging because there's not the specificity. It may be harder to connect with those wishes, harder to deeply care about somebody that we don't know. We might find our mind wandering off, getting bored. That's okay. This is part of the filings that are not metta being pulled out by exploring this. So we just notice our relationship.

The practice of metta, these phrases that we offer—may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe, may you live with ease—they are expressions of an intention from our heart, wishing other beings well.

As an intention, the use of a phrase and the connection with that intention means that essentially we're connecting with a thought here. I think of metta practice as a reflective practice. We're bringing thought into our mind and using that in our meditation. So bringing in that thought, we connect it with our embodied experiential level. How does that wish—expressing that wish for that being, "may you be happy"—how does it feel?

Guy Armstrong suggests that having made that wish, we step inward to the heart area, the heart and chest, and simply see how it feels to have made that wish. To me, this was a huge benefit for metta practice, because before that it had mostly been in my mind. I was thinking of it as just a mental practice of saying these phrases. But saying the phrase—how does that thought affect your experience now? Give yourself an opportunity to feel it.

It might be that there's a little bit of an opening, a releasing in the heart. Or it might be that there's a contraction. That's just what we recognize. This is how it feels to make this wish right now. And if you do feel a contraction, just remember: it's the metta magnet doing its job, making these relationships of resistance, of holding on, conscious. Making them available to be released. To be seen and known.

Another analogy I like for the metta practice is that of a washing machine. The clothes we put into the washing machine—maybe they have dirt ground into them. That's what we're putting them in for: to pull the dirt out. We have the water, and then we put the soap in there, and then there's the agitation of the washing machine. The water I think of as our consciousness, our awareness. The soap is the metta phrases. And the dirt ground into the clothes is all of our relationships—the habitual old habits and patterns of relating to people around this relationship of well-wishing.

We put the clothes into the washing machine, turn it on, and it agitates. The job of the soap is to attach to the dirt—it's got a stronger connection. The chemical nature of soap is that it connects to the dirt, so the soap grabs onto it, pulls it out of the clothes, and puts it into the water so that it can be rinsed away when the water goes down the drain.

Similarly, in our metta practice, the metta phrases are like the soap searching out those old habits and patterns that are deeply ground into our minds, pulling them out into our consciousness so they can be washed away. And the repetition of the phrases—it's like that agitation of the washing machine.

I'll say one more piece before we step into practice again today. When there's difficulty in the metta practice—with the neutral person in particular, I mentioned there might be boredom or disconnection or dryness—you just notice that and keep going. It's just, okay, that's the relationship right now. That's what's being pulled out into the wash. Yes, there's a dryness there. Just keep going.

If it gets too challenging, if there's a lot of aversion, sometimes we can just let the aversion come up. It's like the metta is releasing it. On that retreat I mentioned, where I was doing metta every moment that I remembered when I was awake, I was a dishwasher here in the dining room. I was doing the metta phrases as I was doing the dishwashing. And I would see myself get frustrated as the door would stick and the switch wouldn't work very well. I'd find my mind just explode in this aversive state: "Who designed this stupid machine anyway?" May all beings be happy. Not having to hold on to that—just, oh yes, there it is being released. May all beings be happy.

You don't have to necessarily stop as soon as any kind of aversion or difficulty comes up. See if you can just keep going, because sometimes it's just a release into the consciousness. It's the release of the dirt into the water, and it can be washed away.

If it gets more activated, if the aversion begins to gain an upper hand, or the desire begins to gain an upper hand, then there are some useful tools. As we move further along in this practice with different beings, one helpful shift we can make is to go back to a place where it's a little easier. If you're doing the neutral person and you find it's getting really dry and you space out for minutes at a time, it may be useful to come back, bring in the easy being, the benefactor again, and see if you can connect with that quality of well-wishing. Then go back to the neutral person. That's a good first step if you find it too challenging: go back to a category where it's a little easier to feel the connection. Then, of course, you can shift to vipassanā practice for the difficulty.

And another thing that I found useful is to shift the phrases from being stated in the positive—may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe—to being stated in the negative: may you be free from distress, may you be free from illness, may you be free from danger. The same sentiment, just expressed as "may you be free from" rather than "may you have something." Sometimes I've found that's a little bit easier to connect with.

There are two interesting pieces to this. One is that in the Pali, the metta phrases have that quality—the words that are used have that sense of "may you be free from something" as opposed to "may you have something." The other piece is that it's a little bit closer to the compassion sentiment: may you be free from suffering, may you be free from danger, may you be free from illness. That's in the terrain of the compassion phrases.

This is another thing that can be useful if you're struggling with the metta practice. Sometimes you can just shift to compassion. For myself at times, I found the metta practice so challenging. I felt like I had this steel band around my chest—so painful I couldn't even remember the metta phrases. Guy Armstrong, one of my metta teachers, said, "You could just try shifting to compassion for yourself." The phrase there is just one phrase: may I be free from suffering. And that was quite easy to shift to.

So that's another option if it's challenging to work with metta, challenging to work with a particular being. In terms of difficulty: first of all, can you just stay with the phrases and let it come out in the wash? Then there's shifting to an easier being, shifting to vipassana practice, shifting the phrases to the negative phrasing, or shifting to compassion—and potentially compassion for yourself.

We've been doing this for a while now, so we'll start. I'll begin with just a little bit of a reminder about how to settle in, but then as we go, I'll offer a few gentle reminders—now you might want to shift to the next category, now you might want to shift to a dear friend. I won't be saying the phrases continually. There will be much more room for you to explore this in your own way.

Connect to your posture. Find a posture that's comfortable—as comfortable as can be—both relaxed and alert. Let your attention connect in the area of your heart. Just feel whatever is there in this moment.

How are you? That kind of question itself is a kind of metta toward ourselves. How are you right now? As if a dear friend were asking that question and really wanting to know the answer. Not wanting you to cover over anything. How are you right now?

Perhaps reflect on something that you appreciate about your own goodness. If this brings a little bit of a ripple in your mind or feels challenging, I will just offer you my appreciation for your willingness to be here right now. It's a rare, beautiful, and amazing gift to yourself and to the world. So let yourself appreciate that. It's a beautiful quality. We all share this here.

Today we'll begin with self. Allow yourself to connect with some sense of yourself—perhaps the felt sense of yourself sitting here, or an image of yourself. And begin offering these wishes:

May I be happy.

Let yourself feel how it affects the heart and mind to express that wish.

May I be healthy.

May I be safe.

May I live with ease.

Continue for yourself for the next few minutes.

If it feels appropriate for you, bring in an easy being or a dear benefactor—someone who has truly supported you in your life. Let yourself connect with this being, taking a few moments to feel that relationship. I sometimes envision myself standing with the person and simply feeling the energy of being in their presence.

Again, with each being, it's useful to reflect for a moment on something you appreciate about them. Notice how that reflection affects your heart and mind. And begin offering the wishes of well-being to this being:

May you be happy.
May you be healthy.
May you be safe.
May you live with ease.

Continue with yourself or your benefactor—whatever feels most resonant for you in this moment.

And if it feels resonant, allow yourself to bring a dear friend into your mind, to connect with a dear friend. Reflect for a few moments on something you appreciate about this friend, and begin offering them the wishes of well-being.

Now allow the connection with a neutral person, someone you may not know well. It may be a little harder to visualize this person, but see if you can hold them in some fashion in your mind—perhaps recalling places you've seen them.

In terms of appreciation, if it's somebody in your life like a postal worker or someone who works at a store, simply reflect on how that service supports you—that we are all connected, we all support each other in this life. We wouldn't be able to live without this interconnectedness that we share. If it's a person here on the retreat, just recollect that they are doing something here, wiping tables or chopping vegetables. That too is a gift, something to appreciate.

Begin to offer them the phrases of well-being, the wishes of kindness.

At any time, if it feels too challenging to work with this particular person, you're welcome to shift to where it's easier—to your dear friend or easy being, perhaps, or to yourself.

CHAPTER 162

Dependent Co-Arising Part 1 (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 1h03

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers an accessible introduction to paṭicca samuppāda (dependent co-arising), which the Buddha described as profound, subtle, and hard to understand. Rather than beginning with the challenging early links of ignorance and mental formations, she starts where practitioners can most easily connect with direct experience: the six sense bases, contact, and vedanā (feeling tone).*
>
> *Fella traces how each sense impression carries a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling tone that is itself conditioned by prior experience. When ignorance co-arises with feeling, craving naturally follows—the leaning toward pleasant, away from unpleasant. This craving intensifies into clinging (actually grasping what we want), which gives rise to becoming (the intentions and actions serving our clinging), and finally birth into identification. She illustrates this vividly through her own experience of oscillating between "good yogi" and "bad yogi" identities, showing how these opposed self-concepts are actually interdependent.*
>
> *The practical heart of the teaching emerges in her account of watching craving arise and pass during walking meditation—discovering that craving can vanish without getting what it wants, releasing the mind from its grip. She emphasizes that freedom is available at any link in the chain through mindfulness and wisdom, and that simply understanding experience as conditioned, without knowing all the details, can transform our relationship to difficult patterns like self-hatred.*

It feels like such a privilege to sit here with you, with a gathering of processes of body and mind interested in getting to know themselves. What an amazing thing.

From this perspective that I have the privilege of being in—witnessing the unfolding of your practice and conversations with some of you, just watching, seeing you move through your day, sitting, walking, eating—I have the sense of the Dharma steeping us all.

I know from the inside, at least in my own experience of these retreats when I was on that side of the hall, sometimes it can feel like we get pretty wrapped up in the details of a particular struggle or stress. Maybe we lose sight of the bigger picture of just the way Dharma works, the gradual nature of the wearing away of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The Buddha talked about this path as a gradual path. One analogy he used was this: He said, as if there were a ship being dragged onto dry land after it has spent months on the sea, saturated with the sea water, the wind, and the waves—all of the parts of the ship saturated by all of that on the sea—and then dragged up on dry land and further saturated by the wind and the sand blowing across it and the sun baking the parts of the ship. He points to how, over time, gradually—and he particularly focuses on the rigging of the ship, the rope—how gradually over time that rope will wear away.

If you think about this analogy, on any particular day, if you look at the rope and then the next day and the next day, it's not going to look like much has happened in terms of the wearing away. But it is inexorably being weakened through the contact with the sun, the sand, the wind, the water. Until one day, maybe a year or two later, you walk up to parts of that ship and pick it up and the rope falls apart in your hand. Maybe you didn't even see the rope wearing away.

This gradual nature of the path—to me it's important to remember that regularly. We don't measure how our practice is doing based on what happened today and whether it was pleasant or unpleasant. Over time—I think it was the Dalai Lama who said—look back five years, ten years and see: Are you kinder? Is there a little less reactivity in your mind? The practice works on us slowly. So it is an exercise in confidence, faith, and patience to walk this path.

On the night of the Buddha's awakening, I found the quote of what is said to have happened in the Buddha's mind. How we know this, don't ask me. But he's telling the story, perhaps, and he says: "Then the thought occurred to me"—telling the story of that night—"this Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful, refined, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in attachment, is excited by attachment, enjoys attachment. For a generation delighting in attachment, excited by attachment, enjoying attachment, this-that conditionality and dependent co-arising are hard to see."

He goes on to say it's also hard to see the relinquishment of acquisitions, the ending of craving—Nibbāna. And it is said he doubted whether, as Greg mentioned last night, there would be anybody who would understand him. But for our great fortune, he did decide to teach.

I'd like to offer some reflections this evening on the teaching he said would be so hard for us to understand: dependent co-arising. This is, as he said, subtle, hard to see, hard to understand, profound, unattainable by mere reasoning. It's not a simple teaching.

There are actually multiple forms of it in the teachings, the suttas, but two key forms of dependent co-arising. One describes the process by which suffering comes to be. We can look at this teaching of dependent co-arising as an elaboration on the second noble truth, the arising of suffering—that with the arising of craving is the arising of suffering. This is a more detailed elaboration on that.

The second form of conditionality described in the suttas is conditionality that describes how our minds move towards freedom. There are conditions that support the mind to see the ending of suffering, the ending of craving, the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion. A set of conditions are described that are cultivated as we walk this path, wholesome qualities that strengthen.

This same process of conditionality—which this evening I'm going to focus on, particularly the part of the teaching that describes how it creates suffering—I want to say at the beginning that this same process in our minds, this "when this arises, that arises; when this ceases, that ceases; with the arising of this is the arising of that; with the cessation of this is the cessation of that"—that simple statement of conditionality doesn't simply take us into suffering. There are processes at work: wisdom, mindfulness, concentration, investigation.

that support the movement of the mind towards release from greed, aversion, and delusion. So that's rather good news—it's not as if this process of conditionality only works to create suffering. It also supports the creation of conditions for release.

There's a famous teaching, or I'd say an interchange, between Ānanda, who was the Buddha's attendant for many years, and the Buddha. Ānanda comes to the Buddha and —you get the impression he's rather excited. He says, "It's wonderful, it's marvelous how profound this dependent origination is and how profound it appears. And yet it appears to me as clear as clear."

The Buddha, knowing that at this point Ānanda is not yet awakened, says, "Do not say that, Ānanda. Do not say that. This dependent origination is profound and appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this teaching, that this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, covered as with blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe."

He really points to this: not understanding how the process of suffering is created, not understanding how dependent origination can lead us away from suffering—this is a profound teaching, and through not understanding it, we stay caught. We stay stuck.

So perhaps we have to begin with hearing something about this teaching and begin to recognize some of what he's describing in our own experience.

I would say that the teachings of the Buddha have different flavors to them. Some of his teachings, and much of what we've been offering in this retreat, are instructional in nature—how to practice, how to meet our experience, the teachings on the four foundations of mindfulness. But some of his teachings are descriptive in nature. This one, the teaching on dependent origination applied to how suffering arises, is a description of the habitual nature of our minds. I wouldn't call it exactly a practice. It describes what our minds will do when we're not present.

This process the Buddha described about how suffering is created—it's the tendency of our mind when it is caught by ignorance, when it's caught by not seeing the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. When we don't understand suffering, the arising of suffering, the possibility of the ending of suffering, and the path leading to the ending of suffering—not understanding that, as the Buddha said to Ānanda, we stay caught.

And so he described what happens for us when we remain caught. This teaching is really a description at a very detailed level of what goes on in our mind. It's his recognition, through his own exploration of his own mind, of how suffering comes to be. He described it for us with the hope of helping us understand how we get caught. So this teaching is a very clear description of how suffering happens.

Part of why it's helpful to talk about this is that we can begin to see suffering as a phenomenon that is impersonal, human. Recognizing how these processes work in our mind as he describes them, we might begin to feel a little less identified—less like "it's my fault that I have self-hatred arising," and more like we're beginning to understand that conditions have led to this. And so there's a recognition of the humanness of our patterns of suffering. We're not alone in this process. The Buddha described a kind of archetype of how suffering happens. When we look at our own experience, any particular flavor of suffering, we can start to see these patterns—these archetypal patterns, these human patterns—happening.

This teaching also points out the conditioned nature of suffering. Suffering arises when certain conditions are in place. If those conditions fall apart—and the teachings of the Buddha help us meet our experience in such a way that the conditions supporting suffering begin to fall apart—when those conditions are no longer there, suffering no longer arises.

So the conditioned nature of suffering means it's not destined for our minds. Somebody used the phrase the other day about suffering being optional. Well, in a way it is optional. When we begin to recognize these patterns and habits in our mind with mindfulness and wisdom, we can see that there's a choice, a choice point. We don't just have

to follow the habitual tendencies of mind. Mindfulness and wisdom can release those habitual tendencies, and the releasing of them can lead to release from suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness.

So this chain, this teaching, this description of conditions that lead to the arising of suffering—it describes conditions; we're not locked in some kind of inevitable process. When conditions change, and the practice of wise mindfulness, wise effort, wise concentration, the Eightfold Path, create the conditions for the mind to take the other trajectory that the Buddha pointed to—the trajectory of conditions that lead us away from suffering.

This description of the links or conditions that lead to suffering also describes, and I think this is interesting to know, how the sense of self is created and latched onto. The same process is at work: the creation of identification, the creation of suffering. This is useful for us to remember because sometimes, especially when we start talking about the teaching on not-self, people hear that teaching and think, "I need to find not-self, I need to see through self." But sometimes what's actually present is suffering—that's what's available to be seen, the dukkha of a particular habit or pattern. Looking at the dukkha, looking at the sense of self—sometimes one is more available than the other.

We don't have to think, "I have to see—oh, there's some kind of suffering arising, where's the sense of self in that?" We don't need to find the not-self there. We can simply be curious about the pattern of suffering as it's arising. Sometimes the sense of self is more obvious, more available to be seen. We don't have to find it if it's not there, if it's not obvious, if it doesn't feel accessible. It is there—it just may not be what is easily available to touch into experientially. We may have some concept about it, but the experiential touching into—"Oh, that's that sense of self, that 'turkey feeling' Anushka described the other day"—that's different.

This chain of dependent origination has twelve links, so it's a pretty detailed description of how suffering comes to be. This evening I wanted to explore a portion of this teaching, not trying to go through the whole thing. But I'll state the links now, starting with a kind of statement of this teaching:

With ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. With mental formations as condition, consciousness comes to be. With consciousness as condition, mental and physical processes come to be. With mental and physical processes as condition, the six sense bases come to be. In dependence on the six sense bases, there is contact. In dependence on contact, there is feeling. In dependence on feeling, there's craving. In de-

pendence on craving, clinging. In dependence on clinging, becoming. In dependence on becoming, birth. In dependence on birth, old age and death—and therein, the Buddha says, is the entire mass of suffering.

This is also understood as a cyclic process. When suffering is met with habits of mind, with our familiar ways of meeting experience, it tends to lead to more ignorance, and we just go round and round in this cycle. This chain or cycle is said to describe the process of samsara, how we stay caught in suffering. There's also the understanding that if that suffering is met with wisdom, with mindfulness and wisdom, it can lead to faith. It can lead to delight and joy. It can lead to concentration and seeing things as they are—that direction towards freedom from suffering.

So there are points in this process where there can be a shift. Actually, anywhere in this process we can bring mindfulness and wisdom, curiosity to what's happening in this moment.

I'd like to start the exploration of this teaching today not at the beginning, where it starts with ignorance, because those first few links are some of the more challenging to really see in direct experience. Instead, I'd like to start us where it's easier—start the teaching where we really can contact our experience.

We have a body that's conscious, and this body with its consciousness has six sense bases: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and mind. Because we have this consciousness, the sense bases are contacted by sense impressions. Contact with the sense doors results in sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Contact with the mind door is the recognition of thought, emotion, mind states—a whole host of things going on in the mind.

This is much of what we've been looking at. Bhante did the exploration on the sixth sense basis, looking at what contact is, what happens with contact. This is the simple impression: we have these senses and there's contact with our senses. Right now you may be noticing hearing. You may be noticing seeing. Body sensation—heat perhaps, or contact points. This is contact. This is the sensitivity of the sense base being contacted by its sense object. Light waves for the eye, sound waves for the ear. The sense object comes in and makes physical contact with our physical sense bases.

So these are the first two links I'm exploring: the six sense bases, and in dependence on the six sense bases, contact. The six sense bases condition contact with the consciousness that's available to receive experience. And contact conditions feeling, the next link.

Greg talked a lot about feeling last night. And as he mentioned, every single sense impression that we have—every sight, every sound, every smell, every taste, every touch, every contact with the mind—has a flavor of a feeling tone. Pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

So we see the deer outside. Contact of that with the senses. There's perhaps a sense of pleasantness there. Doesn't have to be—could be unpleasant. Each of these sense impressions has a feeling tone, and that feeling tone is itself conditioned based on our prior experience. So as Greg said last night, the feeling tone itself is not inherently in the object itself. It partly depends on the conditions in which the object is touching our sense bases.

An example of this might be: maybe you find the taste of milk pleasant after eating a cookie, especially a chocolate cookie. For me, that's true. But if I taste milk after eating a pickle, it is not pleasant. So the pleasant or unpleasant is not in the milk—it's in the conditions. This is a simple example of how different conditions may shape the feeling tone. Greg talked a lot about that last night, so I'm not going to repeat too much of it.

Based on the feeling tone, which is already conditioned based on our prior experience, we tend to respond with the habitual tendency of wanting more pleasant, wanting to get rid of the unpleasant. This is the next link: feeling conditions craving.

I think it's important to recognize that this feeling-conditions-craving link is really leading from feeling to craving. It's conditions, not causal. Feelings don't have to lead to craving, as Greg pointed to last night. They don't have to. Seeing things with mindfulness and wisdom, we may be able to just notice the feeling tone and it not lead onward to craving.

When we don't see it with mindfulness and wisdom, basically we could say the mental function or the mental formation of ignorance is acting in our minds. That very first link in the whole chain of dependent origination—it's like the ignorance link tumbles us forward into this chain. And so when ignorance is arising with feeling, it's really strongly going to lead to craving. When we are unaware of the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience, we think there's something to hold on to. And so feeling will lead to craving in that case, with ignorance being present.

One of the ways this teaching is framed, or translated—sometimes we call it dependent origination, sometimes it's called dependent co-arising. And when ignorance is co-arising with feeling, craving comes right along for the ride. So really, a lot of our work

here is exploring bringing mindfulness and wisdom to whatever is here, whatever is happening. If we bring mindfulness and wisdom to the experience of feeling, it doesn't have to follow into this link of craving.

And yet often mindfulness and wisdom aren't necessarily strong. The movement, the habit, the pattern of this cycle is so fast. It's like in less than a split second this whole thing can unfold. This whole twelve steps can happen in less than a split second. So there is a tendency for craving to arise around feeling tone—craving to want something pleasant, to want to get rid of something unpleasant.

Craving is embedded in both greed and aversion. Aversion is the craving to get rid of. Greed is the craving to hold on to. And then there's delusion embedded in all of it. Because the mind wanting the pleasant, the greed, is kind of like the movement towards the pleasant. And that movement towards pleasant is predicated on, or based on, or founded in the belief, the delusion, that having that pleasant thing will make me happy, will do it for me. Or likewise on the flip side with aversion—the belief that getting rid of that unpleasant thing will make me happy. Those beliefs are delusion at work.

Sometimes we just see the leaning towards. Sometimes we can actually recognize the idea in the mind: "Yeah, I need that. That's what will make me happy." So based on the feeling tone, we tend to lean towards pleasant, lean away from unpleasant.

When mindfulness is not around, we're like an automatic machine—get pleasant, get rid of unpleasant, maybe just space out around neutral. Given this tendency to lean towards, this kind of idea of "Ooh, I need that," craving becomes this whole movement of picking up an intention or momentum to go towards something.

The next link is clinging. With craving as a condition, clinging tends to arise. I think of clinging almost as an intensification. There's a kind of gradient from craving to clinging. Craving is the leaning towards, the reaching out for something. Clinging is when we actually pick it up.

This might be craving and clinging around some particular sense pleasure—food, a sight—that leaning towards. It might shift. For instance, you might notice a kind of pleasantness seeing particular flowers or a particular plant. "Oh, I've not seen that plant before." So maybe there's a sense of curiosity, something pleasant there. And yet there may be this feeling of "let me look a little closer." There's a craving, a wanting to see it or get a little closer. Then maybe it becomes, "Oh, I need to take a picture of this," and we kind of land on it. Or maybe we want to get out some pruning shears and take some of it back to our room, really actually physically possess it.

This happens a lot—craving, clinging, picking it up, holding onto it—around physical experience, but it also happens around mental experience. For example, we might be listening to the teachings or seeing somebody doing walking meditation really mindfully. There's a sense of "Ooh, maybe I could do that too," a little sense of what it might be like to have that kind of experience. So there's this idea born in the mind—a kind of fantasy of being the best yogi here.

That fantasy might have a pleasant feeling tone to it. The idea is, "If I was that, that would feel pretty good." So the feeling tone comes in. Then there's the desire, the wanting, to have that fantasy become what happens to us. That's the craving. Then there's the potential of picking up that idea—"Oh, I need that. That is what is going to make me happy." We've latched onto that belief that if I can become that good yogi that's in this fantasy in my mind, then I will be happy. That's where we've clung to that idea.

The next step from clinging is becoming. With clinging as condition, becoming tends to happen. Thanissaro Bhikkhu has a beautiful phrase around becoming that I like as a description. Becoming, he says, are the intentions and actions that arise in the service of clinging.

In this case, the idea of "I need to become a good yogi"—that's the clinging. This is what's going to make me happy. We've clung to that as being necessary. And so in that becoming necessary, there's this arising of "Okay, what do I have to do? How do I have to practice?" The intentions, what am I going to do to make this happen? This is becoming—this movement towards our goals that have come up through the clinging. The sense of "It's mine, I'm going to make this happen."

So becoming is the intentions and views that serve our clinging. We tend to like becoming. Becoming feels pretty good because when becoming happens, we're buying into the idea of "I'm in control, I've figured it out, I know what I'm going to do and I know how I'm going to do it and it's going to get me there and it's all going to be great when I get there." That's the feeling of becoming. We've picked up this belief in the controllability of experience. Sometimes we can control experience, but ultimately what tends to happen is that at some point we notice we can't.

So we tend to like becoming because it feels good. And then, following on from becoming, the next link is birth.

At times this is talked about as being an actual birth into a subsequent life, but it's also pointed to as the birth into an identity. Certain teachers have really emphasized this—Bhikkhu Buddhadasa in particular pointed to this understanding. Birth can be looked at as a birth into an identity. Like, "Oh, I am a good yogi." So it's no longer just the wish; there's some sense of having gratified that.

There's a kind of gradation between becoming and birth in a way—the movement towards an identity. At some point it may feel like we've landed there. Or maybe it feels like we don't land there and we experience suffering immediately: "I failed. I haven't figured out how to do this. I can't do this."

I've experienced this around the idea of being a good yogi—the sense of the fantasy of what it means to be a good yogi. The whole project of "I could be continuously mindful." That's what the good yogi identification thinks.

On one retreat, I almost flipped back and forth between these identities on a regular basis. I'd take a step and think, "Oh, I can really feel that step. I'm a good yogi"—birth right into that. "Yeah, I'm a good yogi." And then the mind wandered. "Oh, I'm a bad yogi." Split second, one to the other, and believing both of them. This is becoming and birth. Seeing that process—it's really useful to begin to see this happen.

I found for myself, in terms of exploring this particular dynamic, that sometimes strong identities have a kind of grip. The good yogi identity was pretty strong for me. I was pretty identified with that—like, "Yeah, I'd better be a good yogi. If I'm not a good yogi, it's a problem." But then, proof: I couldn't be a good yogi. With my idea of what a good yogi was, I couldn't be that all the time. I didn't have control over the mind wandering, and that was evidence that I was a bad yogi.

Instead of actually exploring the process of picking something up—picking up the identity—I began to see, as I looked at this, "Okay, I'm just going to notice these identities happening. Good yogi, bad yogi, good yogi, bad yogi." Watching that back and forth, I saw something: the bad yogi actually depends on the good yogi. The bad yogi doesn't even exist if the good yogi is not an issue.

At first I thought what I needed to do was get rid of the bad yogi and just be the good yogi—that if I could just not have the bad yogi, there wouldn't be a problem. But I began to see that the bad yogi identification depended on, was intimately connected with, the good yogi. These two identities were locked together.

So the exploration of these processes at work can begin to help us weaken the identification.

The next step from birth is aging and death. As I just pointed to in that example, you take birth into some kind of identity, and the inevitable, impermanent, unreliable nature of experience will shatter that identity—will shatter that sense of "I have that thing." If it's having a physical possession, the impermanence of physical things means they break, they get lost, and we can suffer with that.

But I think much of the time we're suffering around the identities that we hold on to, feeling like we need to control those identities. Yet the uncontrollable nature of the arising and passing of experience means that we don't have control. We can't always be the identity we want to be. And so we will suffer. When it's proved to us—in my case, "You can't always be the good yogi"—there was a lot of suffering around that.

So this cycle of dependent origination, this is as far as I'm going to go today—kind of the middle of the chain: sixth sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, identification.

aging and death—or the entire mass of suffering. The aging and death of that identity, the impermanent nature of it, means it will fall apart. And therein lies the suffering that results.

I'll save the rest of it—the early links of ignorance, mental formation, and consciousness—for my next talk. But there's plenty in this part to reflect on, in what we've explored a little bit tonight.

One piece I want to point to is how strong this pattern is, and partly why it's so powerful for us, why we tend to get caught in it over and over again. Part of this has to do with the feeling tone of each of these links. Because each of these links is some arising experience—craving, clinging, becoming, birth, identification, the taking up of a sense of self. It's all mental formations at work. And so if we think about what the feeling tones of those are, because they are mental formations, they have a feeling tone.

Craving—that desire when we have a pleasant feeling and we want to hold on to that pleasant feeling. We may not notice this initially, but the craving itself... In fact, we might think that it's pleasant because we're so focused on the idea of getting that thing or getting rid of that thing. We might think that craving is pleasant. But if we look at the actual experience of craving, if we feel into the actual experience of craving, it's unpleasant. Craving as a mental formation tends to have an unpleasant feeling tone.

Becoming, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, tends to have a pleasant feeling tone because there's a sense of knowing where we're going, knowing where we're headed. And so with that craving and clinging and becoming, if we get what we want, if we have

that thing, that part feels good. The clinging, when we've gotten the thing that we want—the phrase is, we're "in association with the loved." That feels pretty good. We've gotten something that we want, so there's some pleasantness there too.

And we tend to go for pleasant. We tend to crave that pleasant. So we get something we want, and because of the inevitable process of impermanence, the pleasure of that fades over time. What happens is we think, "Well, the last time I felt pretty good was when I got something I wanted. So what do I want to want?" You could call this Google mind. Sometimes I find myself sitting in front of that Google screen thinking, "What do I want to know?" Not just wanting information, but that sense of wanting to have something to find, to get that hit of "Oh, I figured something out."

This cycle tends to reinforce itself. It also has a kind of power in that when we get the thing that we want, not only do we have the pleasantness of the association with what we want, but we also get the perhaps more hidden pleasure of the feeling of the dissatisfactoriness of the wanting going away. There's a double hit of pleasure when we get what we want—because wanting is actually really unpleasant. And we don't quite know how driven we are by that wanting, wanting to get rid of that feeling of unpleasant. The only way we know how to get rid of that feeling is to get something that we want.

But this practice, what we're doing here, helps us to recognize or see that there's another way toward ease or peace of mind, rather than having to get what I want to fill that gap, that hole of dissatisfactoriness. Craving itself is a mental formation that is impermanent. And so if we have some interest or curiosity about what the experience of craving is—this unpleasant feeling—and watch what happens, we'll see that craving can vanish without getting the thing that craving wants. The craving can vanish.

I watched this at one point in walking meditation. I was doing this back and forth, walking outside, and I wanted to be away from people. I had a lot of aversion when people were around, so I was kind of out by myself. But I began noticing that when somebody would walk into my field of vision—and I was doing a kind of secluded walking practice, so not looking up, but I would see somebody pop into my field of vision, in my peripheral vision—there was so much wanting to look at the person. So strong.

Initially I was really just like, "I am not going to look," putting the blinders on. There was aversion in the mind around looking, and I just forced myself not to look. It felt like I was feeling that craving and pushing it down, as opposed to really feeling the craving. I got to see this a lot.

This was a three-month retreat, so over the course of multiple weeks I got to look at this pattern a lot. And one day it finally occurred to me, well, craving is happening here. Maybe I should look at the craving.

So looking at the craving, I began to see that it arose—and this is the dependent origination piece—it arose when the person popped into the field of vision. There was the contact, contact of seeing. Then the idea arose: I'll be happy if I look. There was that process going on. As long as the person was in my field of vision, I felt the pull. It felt like wanting, like this tractor beam of *you are going to look*.

But instead of holding my mind with blinders on, I used mindfulness to not look and just watch the craving. Feeling the craving, feeling it, feeling it. It got really strong as the person walked right in front of me. All I would have to do was just briefly flip my eyes up to see who they were. So strong. But I just watched the craving.

And then the person went around the corner and vanished. When the person vanished, the craving vanished. That feeling of the craving vanishing felt like I was released from a vice grip. It was so much freedom.

Then for a little while I started getting interested—it was so much fun to watch the craving vanish. I was waiting for people to come around so I could watch the craving and then watch it vanish when they disappeared. And then I realized I was holding on to the craving in order to see it disappear. And then the craving just went away.

There's so much we can see by looking at what our minds are doing. In this case, sometimes people ask, "I've heard you can cut the chain of dependent origination at feeling. It doesn't have to go to craving." But in this case it had already gone to craving. That doesn't mean freedom can't happen. There's another teaching that points to every single link of dependent origination. It describes how freedom can be found by being aware, being mindful, noticing the arising of craving, noticing the ending of craving. Freedom can happen anywhere, whatever we are knowing in the moment.

I didn't have to go back and say, "Where was the pleasant feeling? Can I go back and cut it off at the pleasant?" Craving is arising. Mindfulness of the craving. Mindfulness of the clinging. Mindfulness of the becoming—that sense of "I'm in control." Mindfulness of that. Wherever we are, the teachings point to the mindfulness and wisdom that can essentially cut through the delusion, the ignorance around things being permanent, reliable, controllable, me. It's that ignorance arising with the craving that is seen through and cut through with mindfulness and wisdom. Wherever we are, whatever is arising, that is where mindfulness can open to wisdom and possibly to freedom in a moment—right in the midst of craving, right in the midst of self-hatred.

The last piece I'll say is this: this description is pretty complicated. All these different pieces, remembering all of them. Can I see each individual piece? Sometimes the mindfulness can get very strong and quite detailed, watching these things unfold moment to moment. But there's also a power to just understanding that something is conditioned without needing to know how it was conditioned.

For me, with the self-hatred piece—I talked about self-hatred last time I spoke—there was real power at one point in simply recognizing, "Oh, right. This is deeply conditioned based on past history." Not knowing all the details of that conditioning, but just knowing: yes, self-hatred is conditioned. It arises. Of course it arises. That understanding was supportive for being able to meet that pattern. Before I really understood it was conditioned, I felt like I was to blame for it.

You know, I should be able to control it. I should be able to stop it. But when I began to understand—oh, it's conditioned, it's a conditioned arising—everything shifted. That reflection, "it's conditioned, it's nature, of course it happens," created the conditions for me to have less struggle, to meet the pattern with mindfulness when it arose.

So just knowing that something is conditioned can be really powerful. If that's all you remember from this talk, that's enough.

Let's sit for a moment.

Thank you for your practice. The world needs it.

CHAPTER 163

Choiceless Attention

Andrea Fella · 56 min

In this dharma talk from a month-long insight meditation retreat, Andrea Fella introduces the practice of choiceless attention—a receptive form of awareness where practitioners let go of preference for any particular object and allow experience to naturally unfold. She carefully distinguishes between attention (the factor that selects what we attend to) and mindfulness (the quality of knowing what is happening), explaining how we can consciously direct attention or allow it to move naturally through the field of experience.

The instruction begins with deep relaxation, then opens through the field of hearing before expanding to receive all aspects of experience—body sensations, sounds, thoughts, emotions—without preferring one over another. Andrea addresses common challenges including confusion, discomfort with not directing attention, and the drifty quality that can arise. She suggests gentle noting practice and offers the option of "anchored open awareness" for those who find the transition challenging.

Andrea shares her personal journey with this practice, initially finding it chaotic before discovering it as deeply natural and easeful. She explains how attention can be both precise (noticing specific sensations) and broad (taking in spaciousness or calm), and how this practice particularly supports seeing the three characteristics of impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and not-self (anattā). The talk concludes with a discussion of momentary concentration—continuity of mindfulness on changing objects—as a valid and complete form of samādhi cultivation.

Over these last days, we've been offering progressive instructions that encourage us to open up to the entirety of our experience. While giving some preference to an anchor, we have still explored when the attention is drawn to other experience—attending to aspects of physical experience, breath, body sensations, sounds, aspects of mental experience, emotions, moods, feeling tones, thoughts, and the subtle impulse about to move, about to think, about to have an emotion: the intention. And in the in-between times we're also exploring the other physical senses—seeing, tasting. Nothing left out. We can be mindful of anything.

How we are mindful is crucial: curious about experience as experience, rather than as something about me or something to do something with. Just, what's this experience? How is this felt as a human being? What is it like to be a human being experiencing this? That kind of curiosity, with kindness—wise attention.

We've encouraged using an anchor for the attention, a place to settle the attention, and have given some preference to the anchor. Unless the attention is strongly pulled to something else, we've been giving some sense of preference to collecting the attention with the anchor, which can support a stability of mind and a continuity of mindfulness —to have that place to return to.

As the momentum of mindfulness strengthens, we might explore a less directed form of practice, one where we're not choosing anything in preference to anything else. A form of practice sometimes called choiceless attention, open awareness, receptive awareness, which opens more widely to the flow of our experience moment to moment, without preferring any particular aspect of experience, without giving preference to an anchor.

This shift—from giving preference to an anchor to letting go of that preference—highlights a factor of the mind called attention. Attention is different than mindfulness. Mindfulness is a receptive quality of the mind that knows what is happening in the present moment while it's happening. Attention is a factor of experience that happens in every moment, choosing something to attend to.

This factor of attention is interesting. It is amenable to conscious choice. We can consciously choose what we would like to pay attention to, and this is how the anchor practice works—we prefer attending to the breath, and we can choose. Right now perhaps I could suggest: attend to the sensations of your hands. A form of my words directing your attention perhaps. Or you might notice a breath in this moment. So the factor of attention is amenable to choice.

And yet, if we are not consciously choosing what to attend to, attention will naturally choose something out of the range of experience to attend to—a natural unfolding of attention, a conditioned unfolding of attention, but not our entering in with some sense of "I'm going to pay attention to this."

Attention and mindfulness are different. I used to think earlier in my practice, when I first learned the directed form of mindfulness practice, that if I wasn't choosing what to pay attention to it meant I wasn't being mindful. But mindfulness is more just that basic aware quality, that we-know quality, or self-reflective capacity of our minds to know that we know. Attention is pulling particular features or experiences out of the field to attend to.

So we can be mindful, be aware, settle back, relax, and simply let go of any preference for what to attend to, and see: what is attention interested in attending to?

It's often helpful to begin with relaxation, relaxing that part of the mind that has such a habit of doing and choosing. So let's start there: allowing the body to relax. You might explore this consciously, scanning through the body and relaxing various parts. And yet at times it can be interesting to explore just dropping in a request, an expression of wishing: maybe the body can relax. Or, body, can you show me how to relax? Rather than trying to do it, it's like an intention, dropping in a request. May the body relax. And see—how does that request land in your system?

Sometimes our system knows ways to relax that we don't consciously know how to do.

So arriving with yourself here in your body—may the body relax. See what happens. I even find sometimes, dropping in that request a few times, a deeper relaxation might happen. May the body relax. May the body relax. May the mind relax. We don't even have to actually know what that means—just dropping that request into the system and seeing what happens. May the mind relax.

We'll begin this exploration of a more open, receptive awareness by choosing a field: the field of hearing. Starting with hearing can sometimes remind us of how it feels to settle back and let experience come to us. Because we never know what the next sound will be. It's pretty clear we're not in charge of doing the sounds. So we can connect to the field of hearing and receiving. Perhaps the sound of my voice. The silence between the sound of my voice. Small rustlings, poppings in the room. Maybe receiving, hearing, noticing this quiet hum of some machine—relaxing and receiving the sounds.

Exploring the possibility of settling back. Not having the attention going out and looking or listening for sounds, but settling back to just hear what comes to the ear naturally, easefully, in this moment. And in this moment. If it doesn't seem that there's much in the way of sound, you can just recognize the silence. Receiving an alternation of sound and silence.

And now expanding, or allowing, the field of awareness to receive from all aspects of our experience. Perhaps body sensations—often a very obvious field of experience—and attention can gravitate towards what's most obvious in a moment. Perhaps there's a recognition of the pressure of the contact points, hardness, softness, coolness, heat, the breath—interwoven with hearing. Relaxing and not trying to control where the attention is, but rather just letting the attention naturally shift from experience to experience.

Attention may also receive thoughts, or emotions, or moods. Our practice here, in this form, is simply checking in: What's happening now? What's obvious now? And how about now? The breath, hearing, tingling, moisture, thinking, breathing—relaxing and allowing experience to come to you. Settling back.

It can be helpful to use the noting practice in this form. Gently acknowledging what is most obvious now. Maybe about once every second or two, naming that. Hearing. Contraction. Hearing. Thinking. Just a gentle, steady, relaxed connection, acknowledging what attention has already touched.

If you use the noting about once every second or two, it's pretty likely there'll be a lot of things you notice in between what you're actually noting. And that's okay. The noticing is the most important part.

Sometimes in a shift from the more directed practice to a more receptive practice, the mind can get a little confused or uncomfortable about not directing the attention. That can just be something else that we notice. Oh, uncomfortable—that's what's obvious right now. Confusion is happening. Or sometimes there's the experience of searching for something to notice. Searching is happening.

Relax. Allowing. Relaxation. Receiving what is obvious in this moment, and in this moment, and this moment.

The habit of directing the attention might arise, almost without you doing it. You could notice that too. Directing. Directing is happening. And then explore the possibility of receiving again.

Sometimes with this form of practice the mind can get a little drifty.

When you notice drifty mind, the first thing to explore is simply noticing: "Oh, drifty mind." If the mind continues to be very drifty, you could reconnect consciously with your anchor—refreshing, reminding yourself what it's like to be connecting and knowing experience in the present moment. Then, when attention naturally notices some other experience besides the anchor, let that be the place where you begin receiving again, letting go of the preference for the anchor at that point.

What's happening now? What's obvious? What's already here, already being known? How about now? And now?

You are welcome to explore this form of practice. You might play with it a few times during the day, or for some of you it may feel quite easeful and supportive for your mindfulness practice—you're welcome to do it as your main practice, just letting go of

the anchor. There are also times when it's supportive to come back to the anchor, allowing the mind to settle and collect, and then open again. Or if you're cultivating concentration, simply staying with the anchor.

There are many different conditions out here in your minds, and we offer these tools as a support for your practice. What supports you to be mindful, to be present with experience?

I would say that with open awareness practice, in shifting from directed attention to open or receptive awareness, it can feel uncomfortable at first. When I first received this instruction, it felt so chaotic—like objects just spinning around me. I thought, "How do I notice all of these things?" It was so uncomfortable.

So I began with what I described to my teacher as an "anchored open awareness practice." I stayed in touch with the anchor and yet noted or noticed a lot of other things: "Oh, there's breath... and hearing... and breath... and body sensation... and breath... and thought... and breath." Practicing with the anchor let me get more comfortable with the wide variety of experience. I felt like I needed to tether just a little bit.

What I would say is that I initially thought this open awareness practice was not my practice, but that was mostly because I had so much habit around directing attention. When I finally began to let go of that aiming—there was a little bit of control in there, wanting to be in charge of what I was paying attention to—when that began to soften, I found that this receptive awareness practice is very natural for this mind. Very easeful. And so it is now my primary practice.

Even if it doesn't feel natural, even if this is your first time exploring open awareness practice—for some of you it may be, while many of you are already familiar with it—give it a chance. Several times. Many times. Perhaps like me, there's a little bit of holding on to what's familiar. When we open into open awareness, sometimes we step into less familiar territory, and it can take some time to be relaxed and easeful there. So give yourself permission to play with it for a while, then perhaps go back to the anchor, then play with it again.

In sitting practice, a particular experience can happen as we shift to open or receptive awareness, where it feels like you know that you're aware, and you are aware of distant experiences—sounds, body sensations—but it almost feels like you're surrounded by cotton balls. None of those experiences really feels like what attention is paying attention to.

In that experience, there is always something that attention is attending to, but sometimes it's an object or experience that's a little less familiar to us. I have found at times that what the mind is attending to in that place is a sense of spaciousness. That's what attention is interested in—spaciousness itself, not the specific experiences happening within the spaciousness.

Attention can have this quality of being very precise, noticing very specific sensations like the pressure on your hand, a sight, a sound, a particular body sensation, the arising of a thought. And attention can also be very broad. Attention can take in spaciousness. Attention can take in calm, which also has a very diffuse quality at times. We don't know calm by looking for some particular part of experience—calm is a very diffuse kind of experience. Attention can meet diffuse experience as well as precise experience.

In opening to open awareness, the attention will naturally be drawn to some of these experiences we're not so familiar with being aware of. In that place where you may know that you're aware, but not really be clear about what awareness is aware of, or what attention is connecting with in that moment, it can be helpful simply to recognize: "Well, I know that I'm aware. Not clear what the object is. That's okay. Not clear what the object is."

Sometimes it can take time for the mind to begin to really understand certain kinds of experiences—like calm, like equanimity, like spaciousness. What is that experience? Attention can land there and know that other things are happening, but it feels like attention is not really going to those other experiences. There is a little bit of attention that meets those experiences, that they are being known even in the distance—there is a little bit of attention there. But it can be useful, rather than trying to make those be where the attention is more focused, to open to a kind of sense of being aware and knowing that you're aware. And there's something there that the attention is connected with.

At one point in Burma, I was practicing the Mahasi technique—what we've been instructing you in, in a kind of modified form over these days. I had shifted to the open awareness practice, which is the direction that this practice heads. The mind was just noticing all kinds of different things, and at some point it was like it was riveted. There was clear awareness. I knew that I was aware. I had no idea what the mind was so riveted to. There was a strong sense of interest—I could tell the mind was really interested—but I had no idea what it was interested in. I just noticed that there was awareness

and interest. And I recognized the recognition: "Don't know. Don't know what it's interested in." That was the experience. I didn't have to make it something else. We don't have to change our experience. Just notice what it is.

We have just a few minutes for questions.

Question: It was my understanding that choiceless awareness is one of the goals, per se. Is that not the case? And also, I find that it's not something that I make happen—it kind of happens on its own.

I would say there are many forms of practice. The kind of arc of what we've been exploring here heads in the direction of open awareness. I wouldn't say it's the goal of the practice. The goal, the aim—if we have to say an aim of the practice—is to meet our experience, to understand how greed, aversion, and delusion work in the mind so that wisdom can grow and release greed, aversion, and delusion. The Buddha points to ānāpānasati, mindfulness of breathing, as being a complete practice in and of itself.

And as you noticed, sometimes when we start with something like ānāpānasati, there can be a natural movement toward opening up to more and more experience. So I wouldn't say that choiceless awareness or choiceless attention is the goal of the practice. It is a useful meditative tool for understanding our minds, and it's particularly supportive for helping us see the impermanent and conditioned nature of experience. Because we're not controlling what we're attending to, the uncontrollable nature of experience becomes very obvious. The changing nature of experience, that we're not doing experience—this becomes very obvious. So it's a support for seeing the truths of impermanent, unreliable, not-self. And there are many, many meditation practices.

Question: I just wanted to say that my particular construct of a person has its share of anxiety, like I'm sure a lot of people have. And five years ago I lost the vision in my right eye, so that upped my anxiety. We all go through our day noticing things, and for my own protection, I notice more—I'm trying to notice more for myself.

For a variety of reasons—safety, embarrassment, whatever it might be—I notice more. And during this practice, I noticed what a relief it was to let the noticing come to me. I just felt, "Oh, I can let go. I can let go of some work." I've been looking for that, wanting to let go and not really knowing how. And what you said about anger—going back to that a little bit—that's probably where I'll be for a while because there's a certain comfort there. But it just feels like a relief, like I can let out a sigh.

Yes, it can feel that way. As I described from my own practice, it didn't initially feel that way, but definitely for me at this point, it's such a relief not to have to choose. I appreciate that—the sense of release. There's a release in knowing that it's okay not to control experience, to just let experience arise and be known.

I want to mention for some of you who may not be having that experience: that's okay. You can also simply recognize, "Oh, there's confusion," or "There's a sense of not knowing where to land, how to notice all this stuff." You can notice that too.

But if you are experiencing something like relief, this may be a practice that's a little more organic for you, a little more natural. You're welcome to continue playing with it and heading in this direction, because this too is a complete practice in and of itself.

The concentration in this practice develops through the continuity of mindfulness rather than through focus on a particular object. It's not that we develop concentration and then open up, and then the concentration dissipates in the opening, requiring us to return to one object and focus again. Concentration can continue developing in the moment-to-moment noticing.

We could say that a simple definition of concentration is moment-to-moment mindfulness. Focused or one-pointed concentration is moment-to-moment mindfulness on one object. This other kind of concentration—sometimes called momentary concentration or moment-to-moment concentration—is continuity of mindfulness on changing objects. So we're not letting go of cultivating concentration here. And it can be very restful this way.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 164

Dependent Co-Arising: Part 2 (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 1h02

In this continuation of her teaching on dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda), Andrea Fella explores the first links of the twelve-fold chain: how ignorance (avijjā) conditions mental formations (saṅkhāra), which in turn shape consciousness and the entire field of our experience. She illuminates how saṅkhāra function as fabricators that construct all five aggregates (khandha)—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness—moment by moment.

Fella draws on several key suttas to explain how ignorance is abandoned through direct knowing of impermanence, and how understanding that 'nothing is worth adhering to' leads to liberation. She explores the vipallāsa (perversions of perception) that cause us to see the impermanent as permanent, the unreliable as reliable, and not-self as self. The teaching becomes particularly powerful when applied to collective conditioning—how cultural beliefs and views around race, ethnicity, and identity perpetuate suffering through unseen ignorance.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with deeply held beliefs and views in meditation. Fella shares from her own experience with self-hatred, demonstrating how recognizing beliefs as beliefs—rather than facts—creates space for transformation. She introduces the parallel teaching of transcendent dependent origination, showing how suffering met with wisdom leads through faith, delight, joy, tranquility, and concentration toward liberation. The message is ultimately hopeful: freedom is possible wherever we wake up in the chain of conditions.

Last week in the talk I gave, I talked about the teaching of dependent origination. I got through many of the links but not all of them, so I wanted to continue with that teaching.

Just a little bit of a recap at the beginning. This teaching is a description of the habitual or usual processes of our bodies and minds that keep us caught in the cycle of suffering, keep us caught in the cycle of becoming, of selfing, of identification. It's a complex description with twelve links, and just to remind you, the traditional form begins with ignorance. With ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. With mental formation as condition, consciousness comes to be. With consciousness as con-

dition, mentality-materiality comes to be. With mentality-materiality as condition, the six sense bases. With the six sense bases as condition, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, aging and death. And the entire mass of suffering, the Buddha says.

This is understood as conditions that support and move us in the direction of being caught. I take some hope in the description of it as conditions as opposed to cause, because with it understood as conditionality, it points to the fact that if conditions change, the process can head in another direction.

In fact, I did mention last time that there's another form of dependent origination in the teachings that the Buddha offered, one that describes a set of conditions beginning from suffering. When suffering is met with some degree of wisdom—even if it's just an intellectual kind of curiosity—when we hear a teaching, when we hear something that says it's possible to be free of suffering, that there's a way we can do that, it might spark our attention and lead to some kind of confidence or faith or a sense of interest: let me hear that teaching. And this is a condition that leads us—that kind of confidence, that faith—leads us to engage with the teaching, perhaps leads us to taste some of the benefits of that teaching, which then reinforces the interest in continuing on that path. And so there is another form of dependent origination called transcendent dependent origination that also talks about the conditions that move us from suffering to freedom.

And yet there is still this strong tendency for suffering to kind of hook into our usual habitual patterns and habits. Our familiar ways of relating to experience, our familiar ways to navigate the world—thinking if I'm suffering, the best way out of this is if I get something I want, if I get rid of something I don't want. This kind of thought pattern, this kind of belief, this kind of view is essentially the ignorance that begins to propel this chain. And yet right at the very beginning of this, from suffering, when suffering is met with curiosity, with interest, with wisdom, it can head away from ignorance. I find this very inspiring and promising, a hopeful message in what the Buddha taught.

And yet he did want us to understand how we get caught. This is why he spent so much time to really describe this process. It amazes me how detailed this process he described—how we get caught in suffering—how detailed it is, how clear it is, how clear it can be.

This teaching on how we get caught in suffering can be understood in two ways in the suttas and in the commentaries. In one form it can be understood as conditions from our past lives propelling us forward into the next life. We tumble forward in this life and pick up these same habits and patterns and then potentially get born into a next life. So one way of understanding this teaching of dependent origination is how the cycle of rebirths comes to be.

Another way it is understood in the teachings, in the suttas and in the commentaries, is as something that happens in a moment. In a split second, when ignorance arises in the mind at the very beginning of that chain, it's already shaping our choices, our habits, our direction, what we choose to do, how we choose to engage. It's already shaping feeling leading to craving, leading to clinging, leading to becoming. In a moment, when ignorance is arising, it's like the entire suffering is picked up with ignorance. And if there can be a seeing through the ignorance—many of the teachings that Buddha pointed to in his teachings talked about how one uproots ignorance.

A couple of key pieces. A certain bhikkhu approached the Blessed One and said to him, "Is there one thing through the abandoning of which ignorance is abandoned and true knowledge arises?" The Buddha replied, "Ignorance is the one thing through abandoning of which ignorance is abandoned." That sounds a little recursive. So the person goes on to ask, "But Venerable Sir, how should a bhikkhu see for ignorance to be abandoned?" And the Buddha says, "When one knows and sees the 'I' as impermanent, ignorance is abandoned. When one knows and sees form as impermanent, when one knows and sees whatever feeling is impermanent, mental formation is impermanent"—basically the five aggregates of clinging as impermanent—"then ignorance will be abandoned."

In another place he offers a different perspective on abandoning ignorance. He says, "When one has heard nothing is worth adhering to, one directly knows everything." And I think it's more than just hearing—it's hearing and understanding directly. Nothing is worth clinging to, because it is impermanent. So over and over again the Buddha pointed to ignorance as being a key for us.

I'd like to review these first few links in the chain. Last time, we really started where it's easy to see these links clearly. We have our sense bases, and we can know that we've got contact. We have a sight, we notice the feeling tone of that sight, and then we might notice how we tend to like pleasant feeling, how we tend to want to get rid of unpleasant feeling—the craving that tends to arise based on feeling.

That's where we began last time, and we went through those links up through suffering. We explored how the process from the point of contact with the "I" and the habitual tendency of craving, clinging, becoming, identification, and birth will ultimately lead to a sense of struggle and stress. Why? Because we cannot hold on to something that is impermanent. It will fade. It will fall apart.

The whole project of trying to hold on to something—or actually, the motivation through which that craving and clinging happens—is believing that holding on to it will bring some lasting happiness. And then it's proved over and over again that it doesn't.

This belief that holding on to something will bring lasting happiness, holding on to the pleasant, getting rid of the unpleasant—this is one way to understand the beliefs shaped by ignorance.

It is ignorance—not understanding the nature of experience as impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable, not understanding the nature of suffering—that leads us to think having what I want will make me happy, getting rid of what I don't want will make me happy.

This ignorance, this first link in the chain in the description of dependent origination, is also conditioned. It is conditioned by suffering. Sometimes suffering, if it's met with some wisdom, or if it's met with a kind of questioning—is there someone who can tell me a thing or two about why we suffer?—can lead somewhere different. The Buddha said ignorance and suffering will lead to either bewilderment, confusion of mind, or it will lead to search: Does someone know a way or two out of this suffering?

If that search happens to come upon teachings that offer a way out of suffering, then faith can arise. That whole process of wholesome qualities can arise and lead us towards the letting go of the habits and patterns that lead to suffering. But much of the time, suffering leads to bewilderment, to confusion. We just stay stuck in our traditional familiar habits and patterns, trying to get what we want, trying to get rid of what we don't want.

The greed or the aversion, the wanting or the not wanting, is the action or the tumbling forward of the mind that believes that action will be somehow beneficial to us. So it really is the beliefs or views that underpin greed and aversion. Those beliefs or views are delusion. They're rooted in ignorance. They're rooted in not understanding that experiences are impermanent, unreliable, not self.

This is the kind of flipping on its head that our minds typically do, what Bhante talked about the other night—the *vipallāsa*, the perversions. We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. We tend to take what is unreliable to be reliable. We tend to take what is not self to be self. We tend to take what is not beautiful to be beautiful.

In another place, the Buddha describes meeting somebody who was saying things like, "Oh, I found the permanent, blissful, eternal state." And the Buddha responded, "Alas, sir, Brahmabhaka is immersed in ignorance, insofar as he will say of what is actually impermanent that it is permanent, and will say of what is actually unstable that it is stable, and will say of what is actually non-eternal that it is eternal. He is immersed in ignorance."

This perversion, this standing on its head of the way we tend to meet experience—this is where the ignorance is rooted. We have talked some about how to see through this. But what we're going to explore tonight is what happens when we don't see through it—the kind of mess we get ourselves in, what happens there.

Suffering tends to condition ignorance, this not seeing things as they are. Not seeing that the nature of experience is impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. Not seeing the truth of suffering, the truth of the arising of suffering, the truth of the ending of suffering, and that there is a way to the ending of suffering.

With ignorance as condition, the next link in this process of our being caught in this cycle arises: mental formations. *Saṅkhāra*, as Anushka spoke about the other night in the teaching on the five aggregates. Mental formations are the mental processes that tend to shape our choices, our actions, how we engage in the world. There are many of them. This is a really big category. In the Buddha's division of our experience into these five aggregates of body, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness, mental formations is huge.

It contains all of our emotional life. It includes mind states—sleepiness would be one of those. Actually, love and mindfulness are also mental formations. So mental formations can be both wholesome and unwholesome. Mindfulness, concentration, wisdom—all mental formations.

And essentially our project here, what we're doing here, is to explore with mindfulness the mental formations that arise. We begin to see that the wholesome mental formations tend to move us in the direction of more happiness, ease, and peace. Essentially, this puts us on that alternative dependent origination chain—transcendent dependent origination. And we see that as we engage with unhelpful, unskillful habits of mind, unskillful mental formations, it tends to create more suffering.

And it's not a mistake to see that. In seeing that with mindfulness, it's very different to see unhelpful mental formations with mindfulness than it is to simply be caught in unhelpful mental formations, which tends to reinforce them—just dig that groove deeper. "Whatever one frequently ponders becomes the inclination of the mind." I believe Bhante mentioned that earlier today.

When we are pondering unhelpful mental formations, the pondering is a kind of picking up the belief inside of them and following it: "Yep, that's what's going to make me happy." But the mindfulness of it is a different thing. We may feel the suffering that

comes with those unhelpful mental formations, but we're seeing it with wisdom instead of believing it—believing that this is the way I need to act or engage in order for happiness to follow.

So mental formations includes much of our emotional life—both wholesome and unwholesome emotions, both wholesome and unwholesome mind states. It includes thoughts. It includes beliefs. It includes agendas—things that we wouldn't think of as emotions. It includes intention and motivation. It's a big category. These are the kinds of things that arise in our mind that impel us. Anushka used the word "drive" the other day. I like the word "shape." Mental formations tend to shape our experience. They tend to shape the rest of our experience. They tumble forward and shape our experiences.

In the chain of dependent origination, with ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. In this particular chain, the mental formations that are described are already informed by ignorance, already shaped by confusion—the belief that having something will make me happy because I think it's permanent, reliable, that there's something out there that will be permanent and reliable. So in this chain, the mental formations that arise tend to be unhelpful. They're already shaped by ignorance.

Out of ignorance, because of the ignorance arising, we take the most obvious move to get rid of the unpleasant, to hold on to the pleasant, based on what we've believed in the past—all that we've known. And that's all that we've known: that getting something I want is going to make me feel better.

We talked about this the other day, noticing the feeling tones of the links. When we get what we want, the having brings us some happiness. But also, the momentary alleviation from the wanting feels good because the mind is released from its association with the unpleasantness of wanting for a few moments. That feels good. And that's all that we tend to know: if I get something I want, I'll feel better. We don't think about or understand the possibility of a different way.

We've been talking about that in probably almost every talk—that if we look at the craving with mindfulness instead of acting on it, being curious about it, we may see the craving fall away without having gotten what it wants. And we experience the release from the suffering of that wanting without ever getting what the wanting wants. I described that experience of feeling like, when the wanting to look at people who were walking with me fell away, it felt like being released from a vice grip.

But based on ignorance, the ideas, the habits, the patterns of "I've got to do this"—it's just assumed. We take those misperceptions to be truth, and we tumble forward into these mental formations.

So I want to explore mental formations a little bit from a perspective slightly different than what Anushka offered—similar, but with different teachings. In the teaching on the five aggregates around mental formations, the Buddha offered a definition of mental formations different from the one I just offered you, where I described emotions, mind states, thoughts, beliefs, views, agendas, motivations—these are all mental formations.

But the Buddha describes it in a different way in one place. He describes it as a process instead. What do sankharas do? What do mental formations do? Somebody asked him, why do you call them mental formations?

In this particular translation I'm going to read, the translator rendered the word sankhara not as mental formation but as fabrication. And it makes the translation work to translate it as fabrication, so I'm going to use this translation for now.

Someone asked the Buddha, "Why do you call them fabrications?" The Buddha responds, "Because they fabricate fabricated things. Thus they are called fabrications. What do they fabricate? They fabricate form as a fabricated thing. They fabricate feeling as a fabricated thing." So here he's going through the aggregates. "They fabricate perception as a fabricated thing. They fabricate fabrications as a fabricated thing. And they fabricate consciousness as a fabricated thing."

When I first read this, my jaw dropped. I could see that the word "driver" is good. This is the engine of creation of the aggregates—mental formations, fabrication. The process nature of these mental formations is to fabricate the aggregates over and over again.

So how does this work? Let me give two examples, starting with an unhelpful fabrication: anger.

How does anger shape—again, I like that word—how does anger shape our form? Well, when anger arises, often there is an experience of pressure, of heat. There's bodily sensation that arises. Anger can actually distort our face, physically changing the shape of our face when it's arising. So anger shapes our body.

When anger is arising, feelings often become unpleasant. So it shapes the feeling. Occasionally I've noticed at the very beginning of anger, just as it's arising, a little bit of the sense of becoming and a sense of pleasantness, like, "Oh yeah, I'm in control here." There's a little hit of pleasant sometimes at the beginning of anger, and then quickly it can go right into unpleasant. So the anger shapes the feeling tone.

It shapes our perception, how we recognize things. When we're angry, we tend to be perceiving things through a lens of anger. We may interpret—you know, maybe somebody is looking at us with an expression on their face, and we interpret it as them having some kind of judgment about us. We don't know what's going on in their mind. Maybe they had some gas! But we may be seeing through that lens of anger. So our perception takes in, "That person is judging me. That person is angry at me." Anger shapes how we perceive experience.

When anger is arising, our consciousness tends to be shaped by this. We will tend to land on things that confirm what makes us angry, not to see things that disconfirm it. So it actually creates these gaps in what we experience, what we become conscious of. It shapes our consciousness. And it tends to construct or shape more anger.

A wholesome mental formation—love—may shape the face, shape the body to have pleasant feeling. It may shape the body to feel light, create a softness of the face. Often it creates a feeling of pleasantness. Our perceptions are shaped by the quality of kindness. We're more connected to other people. It creates conditions for more connectedness.

So this description of the sankharas, the mental formations, as being what shapes the aggregates—fabricates form, fabricates feeling, fabricates perception, fabricates fabrications, fabricates consciousness.

The next two links in the chain of dependent origination are consciousness and mentality-materiality. I'll explore this more deeply later, but essentially those two links serve as shorthand for the five aggregates. This definition of mental formations as the shapers or constructors of the aggregates can be understood as an elaboration of these links: mental formations condition consciousness and nāma-rūpa, mentality-materiality.

Not only are emotions and mind states mental formations, but also views, beliefs, and ideas. All of our mental formations not only tend to shape our lives forward, tumbling on, but they have been shaped by our past, by our conditioning. This is how the cycle becomes circular. What arises as a mental formation doesn't simply arise out of nowhere—the ignorance that shapes mental formations has a long history in our lives, in our own personal experience. It actually has a long history through our cultures, through our family dynamics.

Views, opinions, and beliefs also belong to this realm of mental formations. This is an important area to explore with curiosity. What is the mind believing? When we're caught in some kind of trap or struggle, there is always some view operating within it. According to this teaching, all such views trace back to some form of ignorance at the

deepest level—some belief in something being permanent, reliable, controllable, some sense of self. But there are countless flavors of beliefs that each of us holds based on our own lives, our personal conditioning, and our cultures.

When we start to get curious, we can investigate what's being believed when we feel caught or stuck. This has been tremendously useful in my own practice. When there's a pattern or habit of being really stuck in something, I'll sometimes drop in the question: what's being believed right now? Because beliefs, when they're not seen, function as if they are simply fact. We're not aware that they're beliefs—we take them to be truth. If we can be curious about what's being believed and actually see it as a belief, something shifts.

In my own practice of working with anger and self-hatred, one of the beliefs operating was "I'm unworthy." When I could see that—oh, that's the belief that's happening, there's a believing of unworthiness—something became possible. I find that often in such places we might think we're supposed to counter the belief. I certainly did plenty of this: "Oh, I think I'm unworthy? Well, I'm worthy." Trying to convince myself I was worthy, trying to convince myself I was doing good.

Sometimes that approach can be supportive. As Bhante was discussing the other day, we can remind ourselves: I'm on the path, I've got right view, I'm looking at things in a wholesome way, I'm following the precepts, I'm not failing. Sometimes that kind of reflection helps. But when there's a deeply entrenched view—like this "I'm unworthy" feeling in my experience, this sense that somehow I'm inherently unworthy—trying to convince myself I wasn't unworthy just didn't work. That part of my mind that believed I was unworthy would simply respond: "You can't fool me. I know I'm unworthy."

What I began to recognize was far more helpful: seeing it as a belief. I didn't have to stop believing it, but I needed to see that it was a belief. And that was possible. I could see that "I am unworthy" was a belief. I still believed it, but I saw that it was a belief. This recognition creates a small crack in the mind, opening the possibility that as a belief, it may or may not be true.

This exploration of beliefs can be extraordinarily powerful when we're suffering, when we're struggling.

Some of our views come from personal conditioning—how we grew up, our own lived experiences, the circumstances that shaped us. And some of our views come from our collective or cultural backgrounds: family culture, workplace culture, school cul-

ture, the broader society, what we absorb through television, through what we watch, through the internet. We are shaped by the mental formations of the world. Those fabrications are not just our own—they come in and start shaping us.

Often these mental formations from family and culture arrive at such a young age that we never question them. These kinds of views can be even more difficult to recognize as views, as beliefs, precisely because we tend to share them with people around us.

There may be, for instance, mental formations related to the concept of race. Beliefs, ideas, views that we have all been shaped by through our own upbringing. What our beliefs are around race—they're all ideas. And yet the shaping of that, when it's not seen... those beliefs, those views around race can lead to racism. So much suffering has come from this kind of unseen ignorance. Unseen beliefs, just taking the fabrications, the mental formations that we were swimming in, that we were stewing in as children in our cultures, taking those to be the way it is. So much suffering generated by this.

One scholar has a beautiful way of framing this, of speaking to this, tying it back to the vipallāsa, the distorted perception. The professor is a professor of Sanskrit at a university in Sri Lanka. His name is Professor Mahinda Palihawadana. And I got this from a paper that he wrote, which is a great paper. I recommend you read it after the retreat. It's called "Theravada Perspective on Causation and Resolution of Conflicts."

He says, "This process of distorted perception, of placing every bare perception into a framework of emotions and beliefs that have come out of our past, our history, our conditioning, robs the freshness out of our experience. But we are not aware of this constant interference of the past. Because of this unawareness, which is our ignorance and our delusion, we see humanity as fragmented—as me and others, us and them—and in various other stereotypes: skin color, ethnicity, language, ideology included."

This is where wars come from. This is where hatred comes from. This ignorance.

And so we are shaped by our mental formations and we begin to see our world through this. As Professor Palihawadana says, we don't see the interference of the past. We are receiving information, but it's like we've got these lenses on with our beliefs and our views. We tend to take in information that confirms those beliefs and views, and we tend to not take in information that disconfirms them. This is a fairly well-studied phenomenon in psychology in recent years.

So with mental formation as condition, consciousness comes to be. Based on our views, our ideas, our beliefs, our perceptions, our emotions, we will take in certain information and not take in other information. This filtering mechanism does seem to be

pretty deeply built into our psyche. There's a process in psychological terms called selective attention, which if you have some kind of agenda, a thing you need to do, that agenda is supported by a process of mind that will select information useful for that purpose and screen out information that is not useful.

There's a famous study—many of you may have heard about this—about selective attention. I'll describe it anyway because it's such a great example of this filtering mechanism and how even something as simple as an agenda can have us see certain things and not see other things.

In this study, they had people watch a video of people passing a basketball between other people. Two teams of people, people in one color shirt and people in another color shirt. They were asked to count the number of times a basketball passed between the hands of people with one particular color shirt. So a pretty focused kind of agenda. You have to track it—they're passing the basketball pretty fast—you have to track it pretty closely. At the end of the video, they were asked, "Okay, how many times did you see the basketball pass between the people?" And most of them could answer correctly.

And then, occasionally, somebody would say something like, "Was there like a gorilla in that video?" And indeed, while this had been happening, a person in a gorilla suit had walked right into the middle of the people passing the basketball, danced around a little bit, beat its chest, did gorilla-like things, and then walked off. Very obviously—I mean, if you are looking at the video without an agenda, you are not going to miss the gorilla. And yet the vast majority of people do not see the gorilla.

And what's even a little more scary: sometimes they would play the video back after somebody asked, "Was there like a gorilla in there?" They'd play it back, and yep, there's a gorilla there. Some people would say, "You switched the video on us. That has to be a different video because I would have seen the gorilla."

That is ignorance. There's a kind of ignorance in the not seeing, but the deeper ignorance is believing our own sense perception is reliable. We can see with this kind of example that mental formations do shape what we see. We do not see everything that's out there. We tend to think our minds are like video cameras and our eyes are like video cameras and our ears are like tape recorders, and that we see and hear everything that's here. But that is not the way our minds work. Believing that is the way our minds work is ignorance, because we are definitely shaped by these agendas. Even something as simple as an agenda can shape what we see and what we don't see.

And then think about something more than agenda. Think about a whole view or pattern around

around race and how that shapes what we see and what we don't see and how we see it.

It's humbling. It is humbling to see this and to recognize this as the way our minds work. And yet knowing that it is the way our minds work can be helpful, because then we wouldn't be like that person who says it has to be a different video. We would say, "Oh, I didn't see that. I missed that." And we can perhaps learn from something that we didn't see.

So our consciousness is shaped by mental formations, and the mental formations shape not only our consciousness but also the next link: mentality-materiality. Mentality-materiality is essentially defined as the other four aggregates—form, and the other mental aggregates: feeling, perception, and mental formations. There's such a close dependence between consciousness and these other aspects. They inform each other. Fabrications shape our consciousness. What we take in tends to shape what we feel and perceive and think—how we feel our emotions.

And so at this point we're kind of back at the place where we started last week. We've got a body and a mind—a conscious mind in a physical body that perceives and feels. And we're receiving input, contact: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. But you can see at this point, it is not a neutral experience. It's already shaped by past conditioning.

The unawareness of that past conditioning is—as the quote from Professor Paliha Wadana says—our ignorance. The unawareness that we are placing every sense contact, every bare perception, into a framework of emotion and belief that have come out of our past, our history, our conditioning. That's what's happening.

So it's very humbling to see this. And yet the teaching here that the Buddha is offering is ultimately hopeful. It's a very humbling teaching to hear how much we miss and how much our conditioning shapes what we're even seeing and hearing and perceiving. And yet to know this information is a way that we can begin to move in a different direction.

The wisdom that can come from being curious about—well, what is human experience? How is this experience shaped? How is it shaping my next experience? The seeing of that with mindfulness begins to uproot and undermine that ignorance. So this is our exploration here.

Last time in the talk I said that there's a teaching pointing to any of the links—a way the Buddha said, "See that, wherever you are, whatever you're noticing." If it's the arising of confusion, know that. There can be freedom right there in meeting that with curiosity, with mindfulness, with a sense of allowing it to show itself—not to follow it or believe its story, but to be curious about it. See what happens as you notice it.

You have all talked about in your meetings seeing something like this. Seeing how being mindful of something creates a different perspective. More space, a little more ease. When we can see, "Oh, what's happening? Oh, it's anger that's happening. It's just anger. I can be with that." Or sadness: "Oh, it's sadness that's happening." Sometimes it feels like a relief to actually acknowledge, "This is what's happening."

And so we begin to taste the benefit of mindfulness and wisdom. We feel in the moment—we can feel this does lead in a different direction. We gain some sense of faith and confidence, maybe even joy and delight. Some of you have talked about that, a sense of, "It's so delightful to see this in such a different way." Even if it's frustration or something that we think of as unpleasant, to see it—"Oh, it's frustration that's arising." Several of you, many of you, have talked about laughing upon seeing these habits and patterns come up. That's the delight and joy that arise in connection with this mindfulness.

And those are some of the steps on the path of transcendent dependent origination. From faith, the engagement with confidence—and that faith is a kind of motivator that gets us to act on the teachings.

With faith as condition, delight arises. With delight as condition, joy arises. With joy as condition, tranquility arises. I may be missing a few steps here. With tranquility as condition, happiness arises. With happiness as condition, concentration arises.

That was not what I thought! Happiness is a supporting condition for concentration? I thought concentration was about holding on to something.

With concentration as condition comes knowing and seeing things as they are—beginning to see impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. And that leads to a kind of disenchantment with our familiar beliefs, our familiar habits and patterns. We get disenchanted with our idea that having something will make us happy. It's a good kind of disenchantment.

And then the mind begins to let go—a sense of not being bound up with all of our greed and aversion. The word is *virāga*, dispassion. The word may not have a flavor that sounds appealing, but it's very much a sense of release and letting go. And then release, freedom.

Right in the middle of looking at some pattern or habit—I talked about being with self-hatred and seeing something so clearly, seeing the belief, noticing the self-hatred coming up, seeing a thought and seeing the thought conditioning a belief being believed. And then recognizing: this is all just a constructed thought in the mind. It's nothing. It's just a construction. And it fell apart. Such a deep seeing, right in the midst of looking at something so challenging. The mind shifting and moving towards letting go. Bliss, ease, peace.

And I'll tell you—if I can do it, you can do it. There was a lot of self-hatred, a lot of miserableness. I was such a miserable person. This practice has transformed this mind and this body. It is possible. It takes confidence and commitment and willingness to be with wherever we wake up in this process of arising conditions of suffering.

We don't have to find the end of suffering. We don't have to find some kind of place of not having suffering in order to then see some insight into *nibbāna*. Suffering is the condition—when met with wisdom and mindfulness, suffering is a condition that leads to freedom.

So let's sit for a moment. Freedom is possible. The Buddha said, if it wasn't possible, I wouldn't ask you to do it.

CHAPTER 165

Disenchantment and Dispassion (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 1h04

> *In this retreat talk from the one-month insight meditation retreat at Spirit Rock, Andrea Fella offers an in-depth exploration of two crucial stages on the path to liberation: disenchantment (nibbidā) and dispassion (virāga). Drawing from the Khandha Saṃyutta and teachings on transcendent dependent arising, she explains how seeing the five khandhas as impermanent naturally leads the mind toward release, much like water flowing downhill.*
>
> *Fella illuminates how nibbidā—literally meaning "finding out"—arises when we truly see that clinging to impermanent phenomena makes no sense. She honestly addresses the challenging emotional terrain practitioners may encounter at this stage: fear, terror, revulsion, homesickness for familiar ways of being, and profound disinterest. Rather than forcing attention on difficult experiences, she guides practitioners to notice these relationships themselves as arising phenomena. The talk includes the powerful teaching to Māluṅkyāputta, where the Buddha points to the natural absence of passion for things never experienced as a taste of virāga.*
>
> *Practical wisdom pervades this teaching, including how insight itself is impermanent yet leaves traces that allow us to recognize delusion when it returns. Fella offers the accessible analogy of outgrowing a childhood toy to help practitioners understand the natural fading of attachment. She concludes with Bhikkhu Bodhi's reminder that liberation comes not through escapism but through direct understanding of the conditioned—meeting our experience "in all its darkness."*

Over these days and weeks, we've been exploring our experience, getting to know our experience as human experience.

When we first start looking at our experience, noticing what's happening, most often we notice what might be called the specific characteristics of experience as we attune and attend to our human experience. We notice that body sensation is pressure and pulsing and tingling and vibration. We begin to drop underneath the ideas of experience and touch into what the experience actually feels like.

And then as we keep exploring, as mindfulness gains momentum, as there's a little more continuity, it seems that the wisdom that grows as we explore experience begins to get interested in what we've called the more general characteristics of experience.

Bhante used this phrase the other day when he talked about anicca, dukkha, anatta. They're sometimes called the three general characteristics of experience—that all experience, whatever is happening, whether it's body sensations or emotions, moods, thoughts, sight, or sound, has these characteristics of impermanence, unreliability (not a reliable place for the mind to find lasting happiness), and not-self.

So our practice tends to head in this direction, towards curiosity about impermanent experience, and from that recognition we see it is unreliable. Also, the impermanent nature of experience—all experience, including what we think of as I, me, mine—we see that too comes and goes.

Impermanence, the seeing of impermanence, is pointed to over and over again in the suttas as how our mind begins to let go of its habits and patterns. The meeting of our direct experience, human body and mind, begins to point out to us that every single arising experience is impermanent. It will pass away, including this sense of self. And so the impermanent nature of experience is really highlighted as onward leading to the release of the mind from its craving, clinging, stress, and suffering.

There's a quote from the suttas. The Buddha says, in relation to the aggregates (sometimes the Buddha will point to impermanence through various aspects of experience, and in this case he's pointing to it through the five aggregates): "Form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception is impermanent, volitional formations are impermanent, consciousness is impermanent. Seeing thus"—so actually experiencing form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness as impermanent, not just hearing about it and thinking about it, but actually seeing the impermanent nature of our experience—he says, "Seeing thus, one experiences disenchantment towards form, disenchantment towards feeling, disenchantment towards perception, disenchantment towards volitional formations, disenchantment towards consciousness. Experiencing disenchantment, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, the mind is liberated. When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge: it is liberated. One understands: done is what had to be done, destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, done is what had to be done, and there is no more for this state of being."

It is liberated—the mind liberated from craving, liberated from clinging, liberated from greed, aversion, and delusion. And it points to the seeing of impermanence as the slanting, sloping, inclining towards—I think Diana used that phrase the other day—inclining towards freedom. Slanting, sloping, inclining towards freedom. As we see impermanence, our mind heads in that direction.

Here it says, "seeing thus"—seeing the impermanence of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness—one experiences disenchantment. So it's a kind of natural occurrence, a natural arising.

There's another sutta that talks about this place in practice. It actually connects with the teaching I spoke about last time at the end of my talk, the teaching on transcendent dependent origination. And these two qualities, disenchantment and dispassion, are found in that list. I did mention them in my talk, and I'd like to land with these two words a little more today, to explore them with you—how the path of practice may unfold in this terrain as the mind begins to let go.

In one sutta, the path of the movement towards freedom is described as a very natural unfolding. It says, "When one has faith, there's no need for an act of will: may joy arise." As there is this kind of confidence—oh, there's a way, there's a path, there's something I can do—a delight leaps up in the heart that there's a possibility for freedom. So it says there's no need for an act of will to try to make delight arise. And it goes on, saying that when there is delight in the mind, there's no need for an act of will: may joy arise. And it goes through these steps of the movement in the direction of freedom. There's no need for an act of will.

It's natural that in one with delight, happiness arises. In one with delight, tranquility arises. And then the sutta describes how happiness leads to concentration, concentration leads to seeing things as they are. This includes seeing the three characteristics—seeing the nature of experience, the very nature of every single thing that happens as impermanent, unreliable, not self. Concentration is a supportive condition for seeing that nature of experience.

Then it says, when one sees things as they are—sees things as impermanent, unreliable, not self—there's no need for an act of will: may disenchantment arise. It is natural that disenchantment will arise in one who sees things as they are. And it says the same about dispassion arising from disenchantment.

This is understood at a certain point as being like water running downstream, water running down hills and rivers. The nature of water is to run downhill. At a certain point in practice, instead of the hindrances and our habits of mind having the upper hand—where it feels like when we relax and don't do anything, we get swept away in thought—there develops a kind of momentum in the direction of freedom. Gil Fronsdal sometimes says there's a biological movement in that direction, a biological imperative towards freedom when we begin to touch into experience as it actually is. That biological or natural inclination of mind towards freedom begins to lead, instead of our hindrances leading.

Let me explore these two words: disenchantment and dispassion.

Disenchantment is Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Pali word *nibbidā*. I particularly appreciate this translation because it does feel like what happens at this point in practice. When we begin to really see things as deeply impermanent at a very moment-to-moment level, our system begins to understand and feel that it does not make any sense to cling to something that is slipping away. The habits, the patterns of greed, of wanting to hold on to something, of wanting to get rid of something—those habits and patterns are seen as relying on the delusion, or the enchantment, that things are permanent, that there is something reliable out there.

These are very deeply conditioned habits, though. It's not like seeing impermanence even at a really deep level once or twice completely uproots that tendency. It begins to wear away at it. This seeing of the impermanent nature—even as it is wearing away in this gradual way—this seeing of the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience begins to show us that we have been confused. Those *vipallāsa*: taking what is impermanent to be permanent, taking what is unreliable to be reliable, taking what is not self to be self. The habits and patterns of mind have enchanted us to believe that they're helping us.

It's amazing to me sometimes when I look at what's happening in the mind. When I was really caught by self-hatred, it was hard to understand why my mind would choose to do this. But just watching it over and over again, I began to see the kind of security it found in a familiar pattern. There was something in there, something that it thought it was doing for me. Enchanted—we can be enchanted by self-hatred. It's not typically what we would think of being enchanted by, but whatever habits and patterns we have, there's some part of the momentum of that habit or pattern that thinks it is making us safe somehow, making us feel grounded or loved in some fashion, making us feel like things are a little less vulnerable.

As we begin to really see the impermanent nature of experience, looking at what's happening in our minds, looking at clinging, looking at craving, looking at suffering—whatever's coming up—we don't have to wait for the hindrances to go away in order to see the impermanent, unreliable nature of even those things.

At one point on a retreat, I had this amazing recognition around some of these patterns and habits. The mind was really reaching out to try to find some place to land, to hold on. The first recognition was that this craving and clinging was a habit of mind, and that sometimes when something was going on, the mind would go for that habit and it would suffer. When we see the clinging, when we see the craving with mindfulness, we feel the suffering of it. That's not a mistake. It's actually how the mind begins

to get an education, how it begins to educate itself: "Oh, this is not so helpful." We begin to see, too, that it's optional. It's not like the thing is making us crave it—our mind is constructing the craving.

Seeing that, seeing "the mind is doing this, the mind is constructing this idea that it needs this thing"—the mind is making stuff up there. There's a bit of enchantment: the craving, the clinging thinks it needs to get something.

Then I began to see, looking more at the experience, that what the mind was craving—I thought it was craving something out there, whether a good meal, pleasant sense experience, or getting rid of unpleasant sense experience, which tended to be my go-to thing. I felt like if I could get rid of the unpleasant experience, then I'd be okay. The mind thought it was trying to reach out and do something with something out there. But as I looked at this, I began to see: what the mind is craving is also something in the mind.

It's an idea. It was an idea that there was something unpleasant that was actually there, lasting and permanent. And so not only is the craving and the clinging a product of our mental activity, our mental creation, but the thing we think we're craving and clinging to is also a creation of our minds. We cannot actually cling to something that is impermanent. And so our mind makes up an idea and clings to an idea.

Check it out for yourself. What is it that you are actually craving? What are you actually craving when the mind is reaching out? So not only is that a construction of mind, it's also an impermanent, unreliable phenomenon. And then the "me" that I think needs to do this—that's also something made up by the mind.

Seeing all of this construction in the mind is another way that we become disenchanted. We begin to see that this whole project is like the mind just looking at itself and doing stuff inside. It's kind of crazy. And yet it is a craziness that we all share. We are not alone in this habit and pattern of wanting to get something, wanting to get rid of something. This is very deeply conditioned enchantment—an enchantment we share as human beings. It's the rare person that can see through this on their own, as the Buddha is said to have done. The rest of us need some help.

Bhikkhu Bodhi pointed out in an article he wrote about this topic that the word *nibbidā*, which he translates as disenchantment, literally means "finding out." Essentially, seeing the impermanent nature of experience helps us find out that we've been going about our project of finding happiness in a completely mistaken way.

Bhikkhu Bodhi describes the experience of disenchantment like this: "*Nibbidā* signifies the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which supervenes when the illusion of their permanence, pleasure, and selfhood has been shattered by the light of correct knowledge and vision of things as they are."

With disenchantment, there's this recognition that there's no point in clinging or craving to something. There's a kind of natural withdrawal from wanting to crave, wanting to cling, from that whole pattern.

And yet, in my experience of this process, this time in practice of seeing the impermanent nature and beginning to recognize that the mind has been confused, that it has been enchanted and is no longer quite able to hold up its ideas and beliefs as strongly—it is a bumpy place in practice. It is a hard place in practice to begin to really deeply see that what we relied on for our whole way of being and living and finding happiness is completely mistaken.

Our minds don't just go, "Oh yeah, I'll serenely withdraw from that." They kick and scream and fight and say, "No, there's got to be someplace. Maybe that thing isn't worth clinging to, but there's got to be something. There's got to be." So deeply conditioned is this habit of trying to find something to land on, to hold on to, to permanently find a place to find happiness.

The experience at this point, when we're really seeing into the impermanent nature of experience—particularly seeing how things fall away—can be difficult. When we're seeing the arising of things, the arising side of impermanence, it can be quite delightful. Even seeing the arising and passing of things can be quite delightful. But when we start to see that things are just always vanishing, slipping away, it feels really unstable. It feels like really shaky ground.

There are some emotional responses to this time in practice. I think these are like resistance—different flavors of resistance to becoming disenchanted.

Nibbidā is sometimes translated as disgust or revulsion. I don't usually like to use that as the translation, but I have experienced at times that quality in really seeing the impermanent nature of experience, seeing things just slipping away—just kind of like, "Oh, enough." Or feeling like I'm being impinged on by sense experience incessantly, like, "Enough already, enough. Give me a break." There can be that place of revulsion or disgust, like, "Won't this ever stop?"

One of the reasons for naming some of these relationships—I'm going to name several different flavors—is because the way through this bumpy time of practice is not by trying to force yourself to be with that impermanent, slipping-away experience when

there's so much resistance to it. Sometimes it feels like fear and terror, even. It can get that strong—like there's nowhere to land, nothing to hold on to. The mind just does not like these truths. At a very deep level, it doesn't like these truths. And so it relates to them in these ways: with disgust, with revulsion, with fear, with terror.

And the way through this is not by trying to force yourself to stay with the impermanent experience, but to notice the relationship. The path deepens at this time of practice by recognizing the fear, the terror, and noticing the relationship to this truth of impermanence. Because basically what's happening is that the system is sending up its flares: "No, it can't be this way." It's just an arising experience of "No, it can't be this way." And sometimes that comes out as fear or terror.

Sometimes the flavor of the relationship is—one of my teachers in Burma, Sayadaw U Janaka, used this description—homesickness. At times the feeling can be that, and I related to it. It's like the feeling of losing our familiar ways of landing in this world to find some comfort. Those are gone. It feels like you've lost a home, lost some place to snuggle in and say, "I'll be safe here." Sometimes it can have that quality of homesickness.

Sometimes it can have the flavor of just a kind of disinterest. At one point I was watching this incessant nature of experience, and at first it was like, "Enough already! Can't you stop?" So noticing that, noticing the fear, noticing all of that, watching the fear dissipate—there's this incessant nature of experience and the mind just sort of goes, "Oh, it's just not interesting."

So disinterest then. The mind isn't interested. This is an interesting place to recognize. And I think that the knowing of disinterest can be useful at many places in practice. Even if it's at a time when you're not actually seeing the depth of impermanence, sometimes we get bored or disinterested. That's a time when the mind will tend to wander if you don't notice it.

In this particular situation, noticing the impermanent nature, disinterest was happening. And I did notice that the mind would kind of slip out with the disinterest. It got so disinterested that it's like, "Yeah, let's just not pay attention." And I would wake up a second later, lost in some thought. "Wow, how did that happen? I was right there." Okay, there's disinterest. Disinterest slipped out. Just keep noticing that relationship.

To explore the quality of disinterest in general: earlier in my practice, I noticed a kind of state of mind of boredom. "Done with this, I don't want to practice anymore." That would arise in my mind. Not wanting to practice would arise. And at first when this was happening, I felt betrayed by my mind. I was telling myself, "I do want to prac-

tice," trying to shut down that belief. "I do want to practice. Not wanting to practice, not wanting to practice." I felt like either I had to believe that thought and stop practicing, or I had to get rid of the thought. It was not okay for that thought to simply be an arising. I didn't see it as just an arising.

And then I had the great fortune one day in Burma—we all listened to everybody else's interviews, everybody else's meetings. We all got in there at the same time, and the first person who described their experience got to report and then leave, but the rest of us heard everybody else's descriptions. I got to follow one person who was so clearly in a really continuous state of mindfulness. I thought, "Wow, she's really right in there." And she reported very matter-of-factly, "Not wanting to practice arose. And I noted: not wanting to practice."

I was like, "You can do that?" It was a revelation to me. When the mind is not interested, disinterest is arising. Boredom is arising. And it can be a flavor at this particular point in practice—the seeing of the impermanent nature of experience. And the practice deepens. The mind begins to let go of those wishes that it weren't so, that it weren't impermanent.

You know, we have this deep wish—so deep—that it weren't so, that things weren't impermanent. But the letting go of that wish happens through the seeing of these relationships. Wishing it weren't so, wishing it were otherwise—that's what's happening. Fear that there's no place to land—that's what's happening.

As the mind begins to align with the truths instead of resisting them, it more naturally moves in this direction of dispassion, of a deeper letting go. The mind begins to deeply understand that holding on to something that is slipping away just does not make sense. And so the movement toward clinging begins to release.

The word for this in Pali is *virāga*, often translated as dispassion. I mentioned the other day that the word dispassion can potentially have a negative feeling for us. We want to have some passion—like compassion. We like compassion. *With* passion. Compassion. Dispassion sounds dry, sounds like not caring, sounds disconnected. That's part of the reason I want to explore this word and this terrain a little bit, just to perhaps reorient the mind to what happens at this point in practice.

The word itself—*virāga*—the *rāga* part literally translates as a dye, a hue, a color, a deep color. And *virāga* means the fading of a dye, the fading of that intensity. Sometimes the analogy for sense desire among the hindrances is the colors, the swirl of colors in a bowl of water, how we just get enchanted by that swirl of colors, the *rāga* there. And so *virāga* is the fading of interest in the colors of experience.

This term—fading, the dye fading—when we think about how that happens, you might put a cloth in the sun for a long time and gradually it will fade. It will begin to bleach out as a natural process. And so the word itself possibly indicates a gradual process of letting go.

There are some descriptions of how this gradual letting go might happen. The Buddha describes in one place how the attachment to sensual pleasures faded for him. He said, "I abandoned the craving for sensual pleasures, removed the fever for sensual pleasures, and I abide without thirst, with the mind inwardly at peace. I see other beings who are not free from the lust for sensual pleasures, being devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, burning with fever for sensual pleasures, indulging in sensual pleasures, and I do not envy them, nor do I delight therein. Why is that? Because there is a delight apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, which surpasses even divine bliss. Since I take delight in that, I do not envy what is inferior, nor do I delight therein."

This points to different levels of what can fade, different levels of attachment that can release. The craving for sensual pleasures is a first level that might fade. At first as we meditate, we might begin to taste some of the ease and peace of wholesome states—perhaps a little bit of concentration that arises. These wholesome states give us a contrast to the pleasure of sensual experience. We begin to see that the mind, by relying on these wholesome states, can begin to abandon and let go of its reliance on sense pleasure.

And yet the Buddha says there is a delight apart from even unwholesome states. In another place he says that we should not even cling to wholesome states. He talks about the simile of the raft, where he says that if you've crossed over a flood—and in this case, the flood is a simile for greed, aversion, and delusion—you've used a raft to cross over. While crossing the flood, you probably had to hold on to the raft. The raft is an analogy for the Eightfold Path. You have to make effort. You need to hold on to the raft while you're in the midst of the flood. So there is some sense of using the wholesome states of the Eightfold Path while crossing over. They allow you to abandon, to let go of, to transcend the flood.

And yet he says, once you get to the other side, would you pick up the raft and carry it around on your head saying, "This has been useful to me to cross the flood, so I'll take it with me"? You wouldn't do that because it's no longer useful. And so, he says, we should abandon even wholesome states. How much more so should we abandon unwholesome states? By relying on wholesome states we can begin to abandon unwholesome states.

And then by relying on understanding the impermanent nature of wholesome states, we can begin to abandon wholesome states—by seeing that they too are just phenomena.

So there are different levels of attachment. We may get attached to the practice. I certainly have, and still am at times. And then I see, "Oh right, clinging to investigation—that's what's happening right now." So there may be different levels of fading away: by relying on this, abandon that. We can begin to let go. I mean, if I had tried to let go of the wholesome states while self-hatred was running amok, it would not have been very pretty.

So the relying on, the kind of holding to—"Yes, I need to be mindful of this, I need to direct my attention, I need to know what's happening here"—that began to allow the mind to let go, for that attachment to fade. And then the whole attachment to those ideas and beliefs of "I'm no good"—those don't have much traction in the mind anymore. The habits and patterns fade. But then there are still others. It's not like one big searing insight that transforms everything. There's a gradual unfolding, a gradual nature to this. And the Buddha talked about that over and over again—the gradual path.

So there is this fading aspect of dispassion, the fading away of our attachment to things. The Dalai Lama has famously said, "Look at the trajectory of your practice over the course of five or ten years. Look at what's changed." You will notice that things are no longer quite so sticky over a long course of practice. There may still be some sticky things, but you can take some appreciation, some delight and joy, in what has been released.

And there are times in our practice, especially on a long retreat, where we see into something so clearly that the mind lets go of a clinging. We feel like it's so obvious why picking anything up is not a good idea. It's so obvious that craving causes suffering, that craving and suffering arise together. It's so obvious that the mind just stops doing it. And it seems so natural, so clear. Like, "How can I not see this?"

And then, ten minutes later, the mind is caught again wanting something, feeling like it's got to have that thing.

Seeing that multiple times, I began to recognize, "Well, I guess it is actually not that obvious." Yes, it seems so obvious when greed, aversion, and delusion are not active in the mind. The clarity of non-clinging and the value of non-clinging is really obvious. But as soon as greed re-arises, the belief of greed that "I need something"—it just obscures that understanding.

And yet, having seen something so clearly, I did begin to recognize over time: that experience wasn't me fooling myself. For the first few times looking back, I thought, "I must not have really seen that. If it was so clear then, it would still be clear now." I thought I had deluded myself into thinking I was seeing clearly. But that was delusion talking.

So this understanding, insight itself, is impermanent. It comes and goes too. And yet once we've seen through something, once we've understood something, then when the delusion comes back, the understanding isn't completely gone. It may not be active—the wisdom may not be shattering that delusion in the moment—but we can know in that moment, "Oh, the mind is confused. The mind is deluded. The mind has been enchanted again."

We can know that because we've seen it without that enchantment. This is how we can actually start to see delusion working in the mind. It's not a problem, actually, that the delusion comes back. It's just the momentum of that habit re-arising. And yet now we can see, "Oh, there's that habit re-arising." We can see, "This is the mind caught by thinking it's useful to cling again." And seeing that, there can be a little more space to hold it just as another arising, not to get all caught in it again. We can know delusion.

There's an aspect of dispassion that's also connected to letting go. There's a passage about freedom, about nibbāna, that basically equates dispassion and nibbāna—this quality of mind that is just not moving to pick up craving, not moving to pick up anything. This is the definition of freedom. This is peaceful.

This is the sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna. The relinquishment of all attachments. Dispassion.

Another definition for nibbāna, for freedom, is the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. We could also say the non-arising of greed, aversion, and delusion. This came up in response to a question Bhante responded to the other day. Somebody asked if the Buddha, after his awakening, experienced any stressful qualities in the mind. His description of that state—I'll read the whole paragraph, which describes the opposite of freedom:

"Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up"—and the word translated as "lust" here is *rāga*, that same word that *virāga* is the opposite of—"if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, at

the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbāna, immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise."

No mental pain or grief, experienceable in this life. The absence of greed, the non-arising of greed, aversion, and delusion. So dispassion, *virāga*, is the absence of the arising of that *rāga*, that movement, that craving, that wanting.

Another way to understand dispassion is the not picking up of something. Typically greed, aversion, and delusion will pick up and try to hold onto something. So let me offer two ways to feel into this.

One is to think back to something that you loved as a child, some toy. What was your favorite toy when you were five years old? Have you even thought about that recently? What was that toy? And remembering perhaps your relationship to that toy over time. There might have been a period where you just loved that toy and it went with you everywhere. You would not put it down. And then as you aged, as you grew, that toy began to lose some of its interest for you. Very naturally. Just the aging process, the maturation process—that particular toy began to lose some of its appeal. And yet you might go back to it every now and then, find some pleasure in it, some comfort in it, and then lose interest again. And now, here as an adult, where is that toy? Is there any attachment or interest in it at all?

In that process of thinking about losing interest in a toy, disenchantment is the process of realizing it's not so interesting anymore. Perhaps going back to it occasionally—is there anything still there? And then losing interest again. So there's that back and forth. Until one finally lets go at a certain point. That's the letting go, the experience of just not being interested anymore. That perhaps is the beginning of dispassion.

But at a certain point, even interest and disinterest become irrelevant. Thinking back on that toy now, is there any sense of interest or disinterest? It's just like, "Yeah, it's a thing." We don't even think of picking it up. It's not relevant to pick it up. It has no value in our lives to pick up that toy and play with it as an adult. That's kind of what dispassion is like. Not picking it up. It's just not relevant. It's not that we hate it—there's no aversion. The relationship simply isn't relevant anymore. It's just an old relationship that no longer makes sense. And that's what dispassion is like.

As I was preparing for this talk today, one thing I do is read through the suttas. I was looking for where the word *virāga* appears, and I found one that I hadn't remembered in a while. It's an interesting sutta.

It's very similar to the Bahiya Sutta. There's a portion of the sutta that gives that same teaching the Buddha offers to Bahiya—about how in the seen there is only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed. That's how you should train yourself, he says.

But to this person, Malunkyaputta, he starts from a little different place before giving that teaching. He says, "What do you think? The forms cognizable via the eye that are unseen by you, that have never before been seen, that you don't see, that are not there to be seen by you—do you have any desire or passion for those?" And Malunkyaputta says, "No."

Just let this in. Sounds cognizable by the ear that have never been heard, that you don't hear, that are not to be heard by you—do you have any desire or passion for those?

For me, as I reflected on this, it gave me a taste. I felt into that. Sights not seen. There is that quality of dispassion that can be tasted in the reflection on how there are many things I know nothing about. No passion one way or the other. No interest or disinterest about things unseen. A little taste of that quality of dispassion.

Smells cognizable by the nose that are not smelled by you, that have never before been smelled, that you don't smell, and that are not there to be smelled by you—is there any desire or passion in that?

And then the Buddha goes on to offer the teaching for things that are heard, seen, sensed, cognized. In reference to the seen, let there be only the seen.

I think he gave Malunkyaputta this kind of pointing, almost a pointing-out instruction for what dispassion might feel like. And then it's like, okay, for things that are seen, that's also possible. In the seen is only the seen. In the heard is only the heard. In the sensed is only the sensed. In the cognized is only the cognized. That's how you should train yourself.

When for you in the seen there will be only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized, then there is no "you" in connection with that. Just seeing, just smelling, just sensing, just cognizing. A thought arising being known, no "you" in terms of that. When there is no "you" in terms of that, there is no "you" there. When there is no "you" there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This is the end of suffering.

I'll end with another quote from Bhikkhu Bodhi about this process of moving in the direction of freedom, of disenchantment, of dispassion, of realizing nibbana, of realizing the unconditioned as it is sometimes called.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says, "Though the realization of the unconditioned requires a turning away from the conditioned—we could say the withdrawal from, the dispassion from, requires the dispassion for the conditioned—it must be emphasized that this realization is achieved precisely through the understanding of the conditioned. Nibbana cannot be reached by backing off from a direct confrontation with samsara, with suffering, to lose oneself in a blissful oblivion to the world. The path to liberation is a path of understanding, of comprehension and transcendence, not of escapism or emotional self-indulgence. Nibbana can only be attained by turning one's gaze towards samsara, towards the conditioned, towards suffering, and scrutinizing it in all its darkness. The understanding of the conditioned is the way to the unconditioned."

Let's sit for a moment.

Thank you for your attention and for your commitment to meeting your experience in all its darkness.

CHAPTER 166

Equanimity Practice

Andrea Fella · 29 min

> *In this guided meditation from the March Insight Meditation One Month Retreat, Andrea Fella leads practitioners through a systematic equanimity (upekkhā) practice, the fourth of the brahmavihārās or divine abodes. She explains the traditional progression of directing equanimity toward different categories of beings: beginning with a neutral person where balance is easiest, then moving to a benefactor, dear friend, difficult person, and finally oneself—noted in the commentaries as the most challenging.*
>
> *The practice centers on wisdom phrases that acknowledge the truth of kamma (karma): "You are the owner of your karma. Your happiness or unhappiness depends upon your actions and choices, not upon my wishes for you." Andrea emphasizes that this is not merely a mental exercise but an embodied exploration, inviting practitioners to feel with mindfulness how each expression lands in the heart. She notes how resistance, clinging, or disconnection that arises reveals where we are in a "rub" with wisdom—valuable information rather than something to judge.*
>
> *Andrea highlights the interconnection between equanimity and the other brahmavihārās, observing how the heart may naturally shade toward mettā, karuṇā (compassion), or muditā (sympathetic joy) as we connect with different beings. She connects this formal practice to vipassanā meditation itself, noting that mindfulness practice is fundamentally an equanimity practice—cultivating the capacity to meet whatever arises with balanced awareness. The session concludes by extending equanimity to all beings everywhere, dedicating the merit of this wholesome intention toward the happiness and freedom of all.*

In this formal equanimity practice that we'll be doing, which Bhante introduced yesterday, we typically start with a neutral person—someone for whom there's not a lot of relationship, someone we don't know much about. That's the place where it's easiest to hold that balance of mind. Then we move to a benefactor, a dear friend, and then a difficult person. It is said in the commentaries, my understanding is, that the self is the hardest to wish that balance of mind for, to have that sense of equanimity for.

And I would say that what we are doing in our Vipassana practice, our mindfulness practice, is an equanimity practice. We are cultivating that capacity to have equanimity for whatever arises in our hearts and minds.

So allowing yourself to find a posture that feels easeful, comfortable. And the attention—allowing the attention to just take in how you are in this moment. Can there be a sense of allowing how you are to be just as you are? What we've been doing in the mindfulness practice.

Perhaps begin by recollecting or reflecting on how helpful it is, what the benefit of a mind that is balanced and non-reactive is for the world, is for relationship, is for the planet. Maybe appreciating the capacity or the possibility of that, even if we're not really feeling it. Just bringing to mind the value of that non-reactivity, of that balance of mind. Perhaps sensing into what a gift it would be, what a gift it can be, to bring a peaceful heart into our relationships, into the world.

And perhaps you can touch into even just a little bit from that reflection of the value. Maybe you can taste just a little bit, a sense of okayness.

We'll begin with bringing a person to mind, a neutral person, perhaps a person you've been working with over these weeks as a neutral person. Bringing that person into mind and expressing or connecting to these phrases of wisdom. I'll offer a few different ones, much as Bhante did yesterday.

"You're the owner of your karma. Your happiness or unhappiness depends upon your actions and choices, not upon my wishes for you."

Or another flavor: "I care for you but cannot make your choices for you."

Or another flavor: "I wish you happiness and ease and understand that your journey is your own."

In connecting with these expressions of wisdom, these thoughts of wisdom, and holding this person in mind—this is not simply a mental exercise. Expressing that phrase of wisdom in connection with that person, take some time to feel with mindfulness how it lands in your heart, in your system, to express that wisdom. "I care for you, but I cannot make your choices for you."

At times there may be an okayness with the neutral person, perhaps a sense that it feels resonant, feels like there's an alignment with that. That may be just the beginning flavor of equanimity in relationship to that being, that person.

With the neutral person there also might be a little bit of a sense of, well, do I really care about this person? And so maybe a tiny bit of disconnection. Noticing that, not to judge ourselves for what our relationship is to this wisdom. The job of the wisdom is to draw out its opposite, where we are in a rub with it. And so if you feel any kind of resistance or clinging or holding or pushing, that too, that too can be there.

Connect with the being. Express the wisdom phrase and feel how it lands with mindfulness—to make that wish.

Allowing yourself to bring a benefactor, someone for whom it's easy to connect with without a complicated relationship but with a deep sense of care. And connecting to the expression of wisdom: "You're the owner of your karma. Your happiness and unhappiness depend upon your actions and choices, not upon my wishes for you."

And again, reflecting, touching into how it feels to express that in relationship to this being. Holding this being in your mind and this expression of wisdom. It may feel different than with the neutral person. Feeling into how it is. Connect to the being.

Express the wisdom and feel how it lands. Perhaps bowing to your benefactor internally, then letting go and bringing a dear friend into your heart.

Really in this period, we're just going to get a flavor with each being of perhaps some of the differences, some of the places of stickiness that happen as we explore expressing this wish for different beings.

Bringing a dear friend into mind, bringing the relationship into mind here really, where there's closer connection. I sometimes would just envision as if I was really sitting right in front of that person, the feeling of that.

And then: *I wish you happiness, but I can't make your choices for you.* How does that feel, to express that wish for this dear friend? Or dear one, perhaps. A dear one in your life—maybe a relation rather than a friend.

If there's a struggle or difficulty, a strong kind of difficulty that comes up, sometimes additional wisdom reflections around just the vastness of change and the uncontrollable nature of experience and the conditioned nature of experience for all of us might support a little more space to hold what arises in relationship to the dear one.

Sometimes in this exploration, especially with those we are closer to, the realities of the relationship, what's actually going on in their lives, can kind of bubble up. It may be that there's particular suffering or particular happiness that's happening for somebody.

And so sometimes the flavor of the heart in making this wish can begin to shade towards compassion, metta, or sympathetic joy. That's okay. All four of these Brahma Viharas really connect as the heart opens with this equanimity.

Connecting with the dear one: *I care for you, and I understand you have your own journey.* Perhaps acknowledging, bowing internally to your dear one. Thanking them for this participation.

And letting your mind connect with someone for whom there's a little bit of rub—a being with whom there's a challenge or difficulty. Seeing if there can be a sense of connection and an expression of the wish: *You are the owner of your karma. Your happiness or unhappiness depends upon your choices and actions, not upon my wishes for you.*

Again, feeling into how it feels internally in your heart to express this wish. Sometimes there can be, with a difficult person, a little bit of a tone in offering this phrase—a little bit of blame or judgment. Just noticing that if it happens. Exploring the possibility of a little more neutrality there, expressing it as wisdom. And as with other Brahma Vihara practices, if one particular being is too triggering, let go of that being. Connect again to a place where it's a little easier.

Letting go of this person or being, and letting yourself connect with yourself. Perhaps just in the experience of sitting here. Being with yourself. And connecting with this expression of wisdom in relationship to yourself: *I too am the owner of my karma. My choices and actions shape the unfolding of my journey. My happiness or unhappiness depends upon my choices and actions.* Feeling into how that lands, to make that wish.

And for the last minute together, connecting to the wider world: *All beings are the owners of their karma. Their happiness or unhappiness depends upon their choices and actions, not upon my wishes.*

May the goodness of our intention towards wisdom be a condition for the happiness, well-being, and freedom of all beings everywhere. May our wholesome actions, wholesome movements of heart and mind, ripple out and touch all in the world. May all beings know peace.

Thank you for your willingness to explore this equanimity practice for this entire month—or two months, having been here for a month or two—really exploring this possibility of a heart of peace. As was said last night, the fact that you're even in this room is an amazing thing. The heart of goodness. There's so much goodness in this room. So much. Let yourself soak it in. Soak in your own goodness and the goodness of this field.

May it serve the planet.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 167

The Story of Aṅgulimāla (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 1h00

In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella shares the complete story of Aṅgulimāla from the Aṅgulimāla Sutta (MN 86), weaving together both the canonical account and the rich backstory from the commentaries. The tale begins with a promising student named Ahiṃsaka (meaning "non-harmer") whose fellow students' jealousy leads them to plant false rumors with their teacher. Through this narrative, Fella illuminates how the three unwholesome roots—greed, aversion, and delusion—create ripple effects of harm, and how confirmation bias and the power of repeated falsehood can corrupt even wise minds.

Fella draws compelling parallels to modern psychological research, including the Milgram experiments on obedience to authority, demonstrating how these ancient teachings about the human mind remain remarkably relevant. She explores how power dynamics can lead people to abandon their ethical principles, and how the Buddha's teaching that "you are the owner of your actions" serves as a crucial reminder of personal responsibility.

The talk culminates in Aṅgulimāla's encounter with the Buddha, his transformation, and his eventual full awakening—despite having killed 999 people. Fella emphasizes how sīla (ethical conduct) serves as both a protective boundary and a foundation for meditation practice. The story offers profound hope: if Aṅgulimāla could find liberation, transformation remains possible for anyone willing to commit to the Noble Eightfold Path.

This evening I thought to tell a story from the time of the Buddha. It's a story that I think really speaks to just how the confusion of our minds can affect not only ourselves but others—the ripple effects—and yet the possibility of transformation even right in the midst of deep confusion.

In reflecting on this story, it feels to me that there are many parallels between things that happen in this story and things that happen today in the world. It's a reflection that the human mind—the greed, the aversion, the delusion that the Buddha spoke about—creates so much stress and suffering both internally and externally. That part of our minds hasn't changed much in the last 2,600 years. And so the teachings of the Buddha, as we all have found, have real value. I think there's a deep appreciation for the value and the transformative power of these teachings to help turn the mind away from greed, aversion, and delusion towards wholesomeness, towards wisdom, towards compassion, towards equanimity.

The story is the story of Aṅgulimāla. Many of you, or at least some of you, I'm sure have heard of this story. Aṅgulimāla was a mass murderer at the time of the Buddha. Certain parts of this story are pretty familiar to those who have studied the suttas. There's a whole sutta in the middle-length discourses, in the Majjhima Nikāya, titled the Aṅgulimāla Sutta that tells his story of the time he met the Buddha and the transformation that happened for him. There's also a whole backstory that the commentaries provide about how Aṅgulimāla became a mass murderer. That's the piece I really want to fill in because, to me, it has so much richness of teaching—this exploration of what the conditioning was that led someone in that direction. So it's very much a story of conditioning.

Some aspects of this story are magical or mythological, and I don't know how much of it has been shaped and sculpted over the years, how much of it is actual fact. And yet there does seem to have been a person who was a criminal. The Vinaya, the Buddha's teachings on the monastic rules, does speak about Aṅgulimāla and some rules that came out of the situation with him. So in all likelihood he was an actual person at the time of the Buddha.

I'm going to tell some of this story by reading from a compilation. Hellmuth Hecker created this version based on a combination of the backstory from the commentaries and the sutta. So I'll read some of it from Hellmuth Hecker's version and some of it I'll tell myself. But I'll start with Hellmuth Hecker's version:

At the time of the Buddha, at the court of King Pasenadi of Kosala, there was a learned Brahmin called Bhagavagaga who held the office of royal chaplain and was thus one of the kingdom's highest dignitaries. One night his wife, Mantāni, gave birth to a son. Soon afterwards, the father cast the boy's horoscope and to his consternation found that his son was born under the robber constellation of the planets. This indicated that the boy would have within him a tendency to commit robbery.

On the day of the child's birth there was another disquieting event. All the weapons in the armory of the city of Sāvatthī had suddenly begun to sparkle. In the morning, the Brahmin went to the palace as usual and asked the king how he had slept.

"How could I have slept well?" replied the king. "I woke up in the night and saw that my auspicious weapons lying at the end of my bed were in a bright sparkle. So I was afraid and perturbed. Should this mean danger to the kingdom or to my life?"

The Brahmin said, "Do not have any fear, oh king. The same strange thing happened in the entire city, and it does not concern you. Last night my wife bore me a son, and unfortunately his horoscope had the robber constellation. This must have been the cause for the weapons sparkling."

The king asked, "Will he be a lone robber or the chief of a gang?"

"He will do it alone, your majesty."

And the man whose son was just born then says to the king, "What if we were to kill him now to prevent any future misdeeds?" He was willing to sacrifice his own son out of concern for the kingdom.

But the king says, "As he would be a loner, let him be raised and properly educated. Then perhaps he may lose these tendencies."

So the Brahmin and his wife named their son Ahiṃsaka, which in Pāli means "non-harming." They gave him a name that would support his movement away from harm. And they raised him to be intelligent and studious. He grew up well-behaved, studious, intelligent, and very strong in his body. The parents had good reason to feel that his tendencies—they didn't see any tendencies as a child toward becoming a bad person.

When Ahimsaka reached the age for formal education, his father sent him to study in Taxila, an ancient and renowned place of learning in India. There he was accepted as a student by the institution's main teacher.

Ahimsaka proved to be exceptionally studious and deeply engaged with his teacher. They developed a very good relationship. He surpassed all of his fellow students and became the teacher's favorite.

The other students grew jealous. "Since that young Ahimsaka came, we are almost forgotten," they said among themselves. "We must put a stop to this and cause a break between him and the teacher."

They began by slandering Ahimsaka, but this approach gained no traction because his behavior was utterly impeccable. So these jealous students decided on another route—they would plant seeds of doubt in the teacher's mind.

In three separate groups, seemingly unrelated, they approached the teacher. The first group said, "We have the sense, we believe there is talk being heard, and we think Ahimsaka is plotting against you." The teacher dismissed them: "Don't tell me this non-sense."

The second group, appearing unconnected to the first, came with the same message: "We've heard this; we think Ahimsaka is plotting against you." Again the teacher rejected their claims: "This is ridiculous. He is like my son. I know him so well."

Then a third group came, repeating the same accusation, but adding: "Well, if our teacher does not trust us, then examine it for yourself. See for yourself. Find out for yourself if Ahimsaka is plotting against you."

The story tells us: "Once suspicion is roused, finally the poisonous seed of suspicion took root in the teacher's heart, and he came to believe the possibility that Ahimsaka wanted to push him out. Once suspicion is roused, one can always find something that seems to confirm it."

The teacher's suspicion grew into conviction. "I must kill him or get him killed," he thought. But then he continued reasoning: "It will not be easy to kill such a strong man. Besides, if he is slain while living here as my pupil, it will harm my reputation, and students may no longer come to me. I must think of some other device to get rid of him as well as to punish him."

Let me pause here and reflect on what has just transpired in this story.

We have the jealousy of students. Ahimsaka, simply being who he is, is a delight to be around. The teacher genuinely loves him. He is doing nothing wrong. The story makes clear that the seeds of doubt the students are planting are complete falsehoods—they are fake news.

Jealousy contains probably an equal mixture of greed, aversion, and delusion. There is the greed of wanting something someone else possesses—in this case, the close relationship with the teacher. There is the aversion arising from not having it, and aversion toward the person who seems to be supplanting you. And there is the delusion that acting on these impulses would bring actual happiness—the deluded belief that getting rid of Ahimsaka, creating a split between teacher and student, would create lasting happiness for them.

So jealousy, this unwholesome motivation, prompted the students to lie, prompted them to act unskillfully, prompted them to be unethical in order to get what they wanted. We see the condition of unwholesome mind states creating unskillful, unethical behaviors.

And then we have this propaganda dynamic at work in the story—the repeated hearing of something. Over time, we begin to take in as truth what we hear repeatedly. We become more likely to believe something we've encountered again and again. Then we

might see the world from that perspective, or if we're investigating whether something is true, we might look for evidence that supports it while ignoring evidence that disconfirms it.

This is the well-known tendency of confirmation bias that we discussed a week or two ago. This is a teaching about how our minds work, captured in that sentence: "Once suspicion is roused, one can always find something that seems to confirm it."

This is such a tendency of our minds. It's a frightening aspect of our minds in some ways. We talked about this the other day—how our minds will tend to not see something when we have a particular perspective. Actually not see it.

And yet, recognizing that this is how our minds work, knowing this information is so useful, because it does begin to help us to potentially question what we take as our views, what we take as true, what we take as what we believe.

There have been some studies done on how quickly views form. There's an article called "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds," and in it they discuss a study about how quickly a view was formed. In this study, students were handed packets of information about a pair of firefighters, Frank K. and George H. Frank's bio noted that, among other things, he had a baby daughter and liked to scuba dive. George had a small son and played golf. The packets also included the men's responses on what the researchers called the Risky-Conservative Choice Test.

According to one version of the packet, Frank was a successful firefighter who, on the test, almost always went with the safest option. In the other version, Frank also chose the safest option, but he was a lousy firefighter who'd been put on report by his supervisors several times.

Midway through the study, the students were informed that they'd been misled and that the information they'd received was entirely fictitious. The students were then asked to describe their own beliefs. What sort of attitude toward risk did they think a successful firefighter would have? The students who'd received the first packet said they thought he would avoid it. The students in the second group thought he'd embrace it.

The researchers noted, "Even after the evidence for their beliefs has been totally refuted, people fail to make appropriate revisions in their beliefs." They observed that in this case, the failure was particularly impressive since two data points—Frank and George—would never have been enough information to generalize from. So one expos-

ure to information, told almost immediately it was fake news, and still that first impression shaped their views. The researchers noted, "Once formed, impressions are remarkably perseverant."

This is humbling. This is humbling, to see this, to recognize just how quickly views can form. And often we don't even know they're views. So knowing something about this can help us.

There are other places in this article that talk about ways we can begin to correct for this confirmation bias. There was a study where they asked people their views, and then asked them to explain in detail what they thought about particular political policies. People had very strong views about these policies, but when asked to describe in detail how those policies would actually work, they realized that they didn't really know how they would work, and they backed off a little bit on the intensity of their beliefs.

So this is a bit of a clue. Can we reflect a little more carefully on the ramifications of what we think?

The story continues. The teacher has decided, based on fake news, based on information that was not true—he did not know that he was being lied to. So he didn't get that extra bit of information. You know, "by the way, this was false." Still might have gotten in there, because just as this example shows, how quickly views can form. But the teacher had been told things that weren't true, yet he believes they were true. And in his own exploration, he confirmed they were true. So the teacher is acting out of what he thinks of as true.

Here's where I feel like there's a thread of how sīla, ethical conduct, really plays out in our lives in the world. The students, out of jealousy, told lies. Just think about the ripple effects here that are happening based on these actions, and how potent our actions can be, especially when they're rooted in unethical conduct. I mean, this is a piece of this story—how potent unethical conduct is.

So the students told these lies out of jealousy. The teacher, believing them—so the teacher is now acting out of what he thinks of as true. His response is: I need to have him killed, or somehow get rid of him. That's coming out of what he thinks of as true. And yet again, the action that his mind is pointing him toward, out of anger, out of fear, out of aversion, out of fear that he's going to somehow be supplanted—he's contemplating taking life.

the movement towards unethical conduct in this story.

I think another piece of this that's useful to reflect on is the teacher taking action, believing that the beliefs he's basing his actions on are true. It's delusional, it's not true, and yet we see the power of belief to shape action—especially someone who holds power. In this case the teacher holds some power, and that will come out in just a moment in terms of what unfolds between the teacher and Angulimala to come.

So the story continues. It happened that soon afterwards, Ahimsaka's course of studies had come to an end and he was preparing to go home. The teacher called him and said, "My dear Ahimsaka, for one who has completed his studies, it is a duty to give a gift of honor to his teacher. So give it to me."

Ahimsaka replies, "Certainly master, what shall I give?"

The teacher replies, "You must bring me a thousand human little fingers of the right hand. This will be your concluding ceremonial homage to the science you have learned."

Ahimsaka's immediate response is, "I can't do that. How can I do that? My family has never engaged in violence. They're harmless people."

The teacher says, "Well, if the science does not receive its due ceremonial homage, it will yield no fruit for you."

Then Ahimsaka consented, and after worshipping his teacher, he left.

The commentaries kind of question this—there's a wondering why Ahimsaka went ahead with this. They speculate that some of it might have to do with the predisposition that was foretold in his horoscope when he was born, that he was born with these propensities for violence. But the other piece that is considered is the unquestioning devotion to a teacher. The teacher seemed to understand this. He understood that Ahimsaka, being a dutiful student—even the language here is, "Well, if the science does not receive its due ceremonial homage, it will yield no fruit for you"—so there's this devotional movement to do what the teacher asks.

This is a power differential here. Ahimsaka trusted the teacher and took up his suggestion.

Again, there are some studies that point to this being not just a dynamic that played out in ancient India in this story. The dynamic around power and people who will do things that they know are unethical when asked to do so by someone in power and control—this has played out over history.

After World War II there was a lot of questioning. Researchers took up the question of how this could have happened, that ordinary human beings would do this kind of thing to the Jewish community. And so there were studies about whether power was a significant factor. One of the researchers at Stanford—some of you may have heard about the Milgram studies—Milgram speculated that power was a big piece of this. Someone in authority telling you to do something. He wondered how willing people would be to go against what they know is ethically wrong, given someone in authority telling them they should do it.

So he created a study where two people came in: one was a confederate, a participant in the whole experiment, while the other was the person being experimented on. These two people arrived at the lab and were both told this was an experiment about learning, looking at how much negative reinforcement would support or diminish learning. One person drew a straw indicating they would be the learner, the other would be the person who administered the punishment—the negative reinforcement.

The person who was unknowing about this experiment was always the one who ended up delivering the punishment. The setting was that somebody was in a room, hooked up to a machine that would deliver shocks. Questions were asked, and if they got them wrong, they were given shocks. The participant who didn't know about the experiment was the one giving the shocks.

This machine had a dial that went from 15 volts to 450 volts. At 15 volts, it said "mild shock." At 450 volts, it said "danger." As the experiment progressed, the learner was answering many questions wrong, and so the experimenter would tell the person giving the shocks, "Okay, you need to turn up the dial, make the shock more painful."

As the voltage increased, the confederate would start screaming. They weren't actually being shocked—they were acting—but they would scream, and the person giving the shocks would look at the experimenter. Often there was this sense of, "Should we keep going with this?" And the experimenter would say things like, "The experiment requires that you continue. Please continue. Keep going." In a neutral way, but with that prompting.

The experiment requires that you continue. Two-thirds of the participants—two-thirds—delivered the highest level of shock, which would have been very dangerous. I don't know, it could have even caused death. Two-thirds of the people. And everyone in the study went to a significant level. Everyone went to a very significant level of delivering shocks.

Milgram wrote: "I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person, simply because he was ordered to do so by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the participant's strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and with the participant's ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact that most urgently demands explanation."

There were some additional studies they did to moderate or check what aspects might change whether somebody would be willing to do this. Something as simple as taking the lab coat off the scientist reduced participation. But the thing that almost completely eliminated it was when the people were reminded that they carry the responsibility for their actions in the experiment. They were reminded that if harm comes to that person, it's your responsibility. Almost no one was prepared to obey in that case.

This is really the teaching on karma. The Buddha says—and we talked about this in the equanimity phrases—you are the owner of your actions. The responsibility for your actions lies with you. So again, this is pointing to a teaching on ethics: that we are the owner of our actions, that whether we act ethically or unethically has an effect not only on others but on us.

I think there's a humbleness in seeing how little power it takes for people to forego their own sense of ethics when they're not reminded of it. Maybe we should remind ourselves daily of this. The Buddha encouraged us to remind ourselves daily: I am the owner of my karma, the owner of my actions. My happiness and unhappiness depend upon those actions.

So ethics supports us. Commitment to ethics can help us counter some of the powerful forces of ignorance and craving in our minds. If the students had thought about not lying because that action would be a breach of sila, a breach of ethics, they might have looked at their minds and seen the aversion and the greed in there and chosen not to act on it. Sometimes just the not acting—the ethics—can be a kind of warning bell for us. Are we getting ready to act unethically? There's some ignorance and delusion there. So it's a really useful guideline for us.

So Ahimsaka goes off to get the thousand fingers, and he chooses to do so not by going to a charnel ground and chopping off fingers of corpses, but by killing victims and cutting off their fingers. He basically terrorized the neighborhood. People in that area went to the king and said, "You've got to do something. This guy is killing everybody. This is a problem."

And at this point, the Buddha enters the story.

At this point, Ahimsaka has killed 999 people, so he has one more person to kill to fulfill his obligation to the teacher. The news is getting out, the whole neighborhood is talking to the king, and Angulimala's mother—oh, and I forgot to tell you how he got the name Angulimala. The name literally means "garland of fingers." Mala of fingers. Angulimala. That's how he got the name, because he strung the fingers that he cut off into a garland and wore them around his neck.

His mother was in the neighborhood, and she had an intuition. Nobody knew who Angulimala was, but his mother had the intuition that it was him, because he had never come home from school. She just had that sense that it might be him, and so she decided to go find out—to put herself in the way of this person who was killing all these people.

At the same time, the Buddha, with his kind of magical power, surveys the world and understands that Angulimala is getting ready to kill his mother. There's a connection discussed in the suttas, a deep connection between Angulimala and the Buddha over many lifetimes. The Buddha saw that in killing your mother, according to Buddhist cosmology, you are taking an action that would prevent you from being awakened in this lifetime. But the Buddha also saw that Angulimala had actually developed so many wholesome qualities that he had the capacity to become fully awakened in this very lifetime. If he killed his mother, however, that would nullify the possibility.

And so the Buddha decides to put himself in the way of Angulimala, to go search out Angulimala.

At this point, the story becomes a little bit mystical. The Buddha finds Angulimala, and Angulimala sees both his mother coming and the Buddha coming at the same time. He sees his mother, recognizes her, and thinks, "Well, it's my mother, but I need this thousandth finger." The compassion in his heart is so dead at that moment that he is even contemplating killing his mother.

The Buddha comes into the picture, and Angulimala sees him. He doesn't know this is the Buddha—he thinks he's just some random ascetic wandering through the forest. And so he says, "I'll kill him instead. Why kill my mother?" He didn't understand that the consequences would be equally severe for killing a Buddha.

Angulimala sees the Buddha and starts to chase him, to follow him. But the Buddha used some of his supernormal powers to make it impossible for Angulimala to catch him. The Buddha was walking at a normal walking meditation pace, and Angulimala was running as fast as he could, yet he couldn't catch up.

Angulimala thought, "This is amazing. Formerly I caught up even with a galloping elephant and seized it. And I can't catch up with this monk who's walking at his normal pace. What's going on?" He stopped running and yelled out to the Buddha, "Stop! Stop, monk! Stop!"

The Buddha kept walking and said, "I have stopped, Angulimala. It is time for you to stop."

This jarred his mind, because in that moment Angulimala was standing still and the Buddha was walking. Angulimala said to himself, "These monks tell the truth, but here I am standing still, and this monk is walking, yet he tells me he's stopped and I haven't. What does he mean?"

The Buddha knew this would jar his mind a little. And so Angulimala asked him, "What do you mean? While you're walking, you tell me you've stopped. But now when I've stopped, you say I've not stopped. What is the meaning of this?"

The Buddha replies, "Angulimala, I have stopped forever, forswearing violence to every living being. But you have no restraint towards things that breathe. That is why I have stopped and you have not."

So again, he's pointing to ethics here. He's pointing to stopping the violence—that the Buddha has forsworn violence. And yet I think there's also a pointing, in a way, to something deeper. The freedom of the Buddha, the mind of the Buddha, the freedom the Buddha points to, is the stopping of greed, aversion, and delusion, the stopping of ignorance. That's another way the Buddha has stopped: ignorance, greed, aversion, delusion no longer arising, no longer functioning in the mind. And when ignorance arises in the mind, when delusion arises in the mind, this is where unethical behavior springs from.

So I think this is another pointing—not only the ethical teaching but a pointing to the deep stopping that's possible. Although perhaps the Buddha knew in that moment Angulimala wasn't quite ready for that part of the teaching. But maybe he was ready for the teaching on ethics.

Angulimala had a very radical change of heart in that moment, a really strong sense of having met a teacher who could help him. And so he asked the Buddha for ordination, and the Buddha ordained him.

Meanwhile, the king is still looking for Angulimala. The villagers do not know of this transformation. The king is out looking for Angulimala to kill him. On his way, he's in the neighborhood of where the Buddha resides, and so the king, passing by, stops where the Buddha is and pays respects to him.

The Buddha sees the king with his army and says, "Where are you going with this army? Is there a war?"

The king says, "No, there's not a war, but there is this single man, Angulimala. We need to put him down. But I don't have much hope in that."

The Buddha, with Angulimala sitting next to him—now with his shaved head and robes, unrecognizable to the king—says, "But great king, if you were to see Angulimala with shaven head and beard, clad in the yellow robe, gone forth from the home life into homelessness, and that he was abstaining from killing living beings, from taking that which was not given, and from false speech, eating only at one time a day, living the life of purity and virtue and noble conduct—if you saw him thus, how would you treat him?"

"Venerable sir, we would pay homage to him, invite him to accept the four requisites of a monk, and arrange for his protection. But how could such an unvirtuous person of evil character have such virtue and restraint?"

Then the Buddha gestured: "This, great king, is Angulimala."

The text says the king's hair stood on end. He lost his composure. But the Buddha said, "Do not fear. There's nothing to fear."

This is interesting to me because at this point in the story, the Buddha is telling the king not to fear. He's saying, essentially, trust me. And the king does trust him. With that phrase from the Buddha, the king kind of relaxes and offers the requisites to Angulimala, offers him protection.

It's a counterpoint in the story to the teacher telling Angulimala, "Trust me, you have to do this thing." In this case, the Buddha is saying, "Trust me, there's nothing to fear." So what's the difference here?

And again, I think it comes to ethics. Because what the teacher was asking Angulimala to do was something unethical. He was asking him to kill beings, to take life. And so that perhaps should be something to examine, even in a position of trust and power—when somebody is asking you to do something unethical, there's a pause there.

In the case of the Buddha, the Buddha is pointing to the ethical action. He's pointing to not harming, not killing Angulimala. So ethics may be a support for us in terms of deciding how to act. Maybe something about who to trust.

At this point, Angulimala is a monk, and we've been talking a lot about the external dimension of the story—the interactions between people and how ethics plays out. Now the story turns to the inward dimension of Angulimala as a monk, practicing, trying to meditate.

Can you imagine trying to meditate after killing 999 people? What would be coming up in your mind? The story gives us a hint:

"Angulimala had not been able to focus his mind on the basic meditation subject which he'd received, though he'd tried day and night. Before his mind's eye had appeared the place in the jungle where he had slain so many people. He heard their plaintive voices imploring him, 'Let me live, my lord. I'm a poor man and have many children.' He saw the frantic movements of their arms and legs when in fear of death. When faced with such memories, deep remorse gripped him and made him get up from his seat and leave."

This is what happens. This is the inner consequence of unethical conduct. And likely, he hadn't really felt the impact of it until he sat down and looked at his mind.

So he struggled. He struggled meditating. But he stayed. He committed to staying in the community. He didn't get much support from the community—they knew who he was at that point. They didn't give him much in the way of alms. In fact, they'd throw things at him. But he kept going. He kept going. Committed to the sīla. Really committed to the sīla at that point.

At one point on one of his alms rounds, he heard the wails of a woman having difficulty giving birth, and his heart broke open in compassion for her. To me this is another beautiful piece of the story—contrasted with his lack of compassion for the people he was killing, now his heart breaks open in compassion for someone giving birth. His heart broke with that suffering.

Then he went and talked to the Buddha about it. And the Buddha suggested that Angulimala go to that woman and say, "Since I was born, I have never purposely deprived a living being of life. By that truth, may you and the infant be safe."

And Angulimala says, "I can't say that."

I wonder about this one—why did the Buddha do that? Why did the Buddha tell him to say that? I'll tell you what he said next.

He said, "Then Angulimala, say to that woman: Sister, since I was born with the noble birth, I have never purposely deprived a being of life. By this truth, may you and the infant be safe."

That, Angulimala said, that I can say. Since I became a monk, I have never purposely deprived another being of life.

The kind of magical piece here is that this truth statement apparently created an easeful birth for the woman, and Angulimala has actually become a kind of patron saint for women in childbirth through that kind of statement, that acknowledgement: since I became a monk, since I was born with the noble birth, I've never purposely deprived a living being of life.

I thought about this a little bit. There's not a lot of explanation for why the Buddha told him to do this. It seems uncharacteristic of the Buddha to ask somebody to say something that's not true. I wonder a little bit if it's a test for Angulimala. Again, the Buddha's saying, go to this woman and say I've never purposely deprived a being of life since I was born. He's asking him to say something that's not true. Again, the power dynamic—a teacher asking him to say something that's unethical, that's not true. Is he willing to do it just because of that power dynamic? And he wasn't. He wasn't willing to do that.

The other piece of this that the commentaries point to is that it was really encouraging Angulimala to reflect on his sīla since he became a monk. He had had a kind of rebirth there into a life of non-harming. He had fulfilled his name, Ahimsaka.

It is said that this shift, when he went to the woman and said this statement—this true statement: since I became a monk, I've never killed another being, I've never purposefully deprived another being of life—after that point, his mind could settle in meditation. And the story ends as happy-ending Buddhist stories do: Angulimala became fully awakened. The transformative power of the practice. And it didn't stop people from throwing things at him when he went on alms round. And yet his mind could be at ease with that.

For myself, this story really points to how sīla supports us. And for ourselves too, this way of reflecting on our sīla. Several of us have mentioned this—that we can reflect on our ethical conduct as a support to help settle the mind. Our lives here on retreat: we are living the Eightfold Path. Anushka spoke about this last night. We're living the Eightfold Path. Bhante pointing to this in his own story. Following the Eightfold Path. Right action—yes, I'm doing that here and now. Right speech—yes, doing that. Taking some kind of support from that.

And also, for myself, I have this feeling, a kind of inspiration, in the depths of some of my retreats when I was really struggling, having such a hard time. Sometimes I would remember this story and think: if Angulimala could do it, maybe I can too.

Let's just sit for a moment.

A verse from Angulimala's enlightenment poem:

Non-harmer is the name I bear who was a harmer in the past.
The name I bear is true today. I hurt not anyone at all.
I stayed in forests, at the roots of a tree, in mountain caves, but with an agitated heart.
But now I rest and rise in happiness. And happily I spend my life.
For now I am free of Māra's snares.
Oh, for the compassion shown me by the Buddha.

May we all live with ethical conduct, following the Eightfold Path to freedom from craving and clinging. May all beings know ease and peace.

Thank you for your practice.

CHAPTER 168

Mettā Practice: Self and Benefactor (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 47 min

In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella introduces the practice of mettā (loving-kindness) meditation within the context of the brahmavihāras, the four divine abodes of the heart. She explains how these practices support the Buddha's central teaching of understanding suffering and its cessation, noting that while the structured mettā practice we use today may predate the Buddha, the suttas clearly describe the cultivation of a heart "pervading all quarters" with boundless loving-kindness, without hostility or ill will.

Fella offers the helpful metaphor of running a "mettā magnet" over the heart—the phrases we use are designed not only to cultivate wholesome qualities but also to reveal what obstructs them. This honest approach acknowledges that for many Western practitioners, offering kindness to oneself can be surprisingly difficult. She encourages starting where it's genuinely easy, whether with a beloved pet, a benefactor, or any being that naturally evokes a smile, rather than forcing connection where resistance exists.

The guided meditation demonstrates a contemplative approach: connecting with the being, offering a phrase such as "May you be happy," and then mindfully noticing how the wish lands in the heart. This integration of mettā with vipassanā allows practitioners to observe whatever arises—warmth, constriction, confusion—with acceptance. Fella shares her own journey with the practice, acknowledging that for years she avoided these sessions because they "tied her up in knots," until eventually the mindfulness practice itself had cultivated enough mettā for the formal practice to become accessible and beloved.

Our path of practice is about cultivating qualities of heart and mind that support our capacity to meet our experience as it is, to see and understand suffering, and to move in the direction of the ending of suffering. The whole of the Buddhist practice, the Buddha said, is encapsulated as, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." All of the tools, all of the practices that he taught can come at that in different ways. And so he taught the mindfulness practices, he taught concentration practices, and he taught these loving-kindness practices that we'll be offering in these afternoons.

Actually, the version of the loving-kindness practice that we'll be offering—it's possible that it predates the Buddha. We don't exactly know when this particular frame of the mettā practice came. But we do know that the Buddha taught the imbuing of the

heart with the quality of loving-kindness. In the suttas it's expressed something like: "One abides pervading one quarter with a mind filled with loving-kindness. Likewise the second quarter, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. So above, below, around and everywhere, one imbues the whole world with loving-kindness—abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will."

So that's kind of where we're headed with the loving-kindness practice. But there were some very wise people who realized that just imbuing the world with loving-kindness in all directions may not be so easy, and they came up with some ways to support our capacity to see both where we can offer kindness to people and where we get stuck.

This practice of mettā is one of the Brahmavihāra practices, and during this retreat we'll be offering some exploration of mettā in the first few weeks, and then we'll also offer some exploration of the compassion practice. We're not going to try to go through all four Brahmavihāras in the February portion of this retreat; we'll cover the mettā practice and the compassion practice.

Practicing these qualities is part of wise effort. The Buddha pointed us to cultivating the skillful qualities that support the opening of the heart, that support wisdom. And this is a direct cultivation of wholesome qualities—to explore opening the heart in loving-kindness.

The quality of mettā, as the description in the suttas points to, is a boundless quality that has no restrictions. It's not dependent on conditions. The quality of the heart that feels that is one that feels open, connected, caring, not resistant to what's here, friendly.

And as James said in his talk last night, when that quality—kind of the way these Brahmavihāras fit or work together—when that quality of the open heart is in the field where someone or some experience is having suffering or struggle, the heart that is open, that is caring, that is connected, that's not resistant, that heart will feel that suffering and resonate with it. A kind of quivering in the heart. And that meeting of this heart of kindness with suffering is compassion.

And if that heart that is open, connected, and caring is in the field of someone or a situation that is joyful, where someone is experiencing goodness or joy in their lives, then that open heart resonates in empathy with that, with the quality of muditā, empathetic joy.

So these qualities, these first three Brahmavihāras, are intimately connected. The open heart is the open heart, and then it is open to whatever is here. It doesn't try to convert sadness into joy. It meets whatever is here.

And the fourth Brahmavihāra, the Brahmavihāra of equanimity, creates conditions, supports the mind to have that balance—to not be overwhelmed by the sorrow or swept away by the joy, but to understand: it's like this in this situation. There can be joy here. There can be sorrow here.

The practice that we offer, that we teach as mettā practice, as I said, provides a way for us to see where we can meet and share and offer that quality of well-wishing and where we struggle with it. The people who put this practice together—I think they really are quite smart to see that we can kind of delude ourselves in a way. We might say, "Oh yes, may all beings be happy," this boundless wishing of loving-kindness, until we think of that particular person. And then there's a constriction. "Well, maybe everybody but that person I wish boundless loving-kindness for."

And so the practice here is to bring—we structure the exploration in categories. The encouragement is to start where it's a little easier to cultivate the kindness, the love. And classically, interestingly, classically that's said to be with ourselves as the easiest place to cultivate that feeling of well-wishing. Well, here in the West, often for many of us, that is not the easiest place to start. And so for some of us, an easier place—we start with what we call an easy being. And we could call that being a benefactor, someone who has supported you or helped you or served you. Someone who you have no question cares for you.

And for me, even that I was struggling with a little bit. And then at one point, sitting in this very hall, Joseph Goldstein was offering the mettā practice, and he said, "For this category of being, just think of a being that makes you smile." And my cat popped into my head.

And I thought, yeah, I can wish my cat that kind of love. No barriers to that with my cat. So that was a place for me to start.

So we start where it's easy to wish well. And that's maybe a little different than we sometimes think when we want to cultivate something. We may think we need to lean into where it's hard. But in this particular practice, leaning into where it's easy creates the conditions and supports the heart's capacity to stretch and to feel that quality of loving-kindness—really beginning to touch into that, the embodied feeling of that quality in our hearts.

So starting where it's easy with this easy being or benefactor, then over the time in this retreat, we'll gradually open to offer the suggestion to include different groups of beings. Moving to a dear friend as the next group. We generally suggest you just pick one person, almost as a representative of that category. So you pick a person, a dear friend, and then you explore the possibility of well-wishing for that person.

Now, with a dear friend, we often do have a sense of care and concern, but we often also have the feeling of, "Oh, but yeah, they did that thing." And so we start to feel where it's hard, that our well-wishing may be conditional. We explore this in our practice.

One of my colleagues—at that point when I was exploring this in one long retreat, a February month-long entirely doing metta practice—Guy Armstrong said, "Think of the metta practice like you're running a metta magnet over your heart." A magnet, its job is to pull its opposite to it. And so every time you're expressing these wishes of kindness, it's like you're running this magnet over your heart. What it can do is evoke or pull into consciousness what is not metta, the opposite of metta.

As we explore this practice with these various groups of beings, we may see we don't feel happiness and joy and love and connectivity. We feel that clench, that "Oh, but they did that thing and I wish they hadn't done that thing." When that happens, you can think of the metta magnet as doing its job. It's not a failing of the practice or a failing of how you're doing the practice. It's designed to pull out the things that get in the way. And then we work with that. We'll talk about all of this over these sessions—how to work with this.

Each subsequent category can add a little more difficulty or different kinds of difficulty. The dear friend can evoke the sense of betrayal sometimes when things come up. Then we shift to a neutral person, someone we don't know very well at all. That being may evoke different kinds of things, like just a sense of disconnection. A sense like, "Well, how can I care about somebody I don't know?" So we explore that feeling of disconnection. Or maybe sometimes for some people the neutral person is actually easier because there isn't anything specific getting in the way. We see these things as we explore these very specific beings.

I think this is the brilliance of this practice—that we are bringing particular people into our minds and exploring how that connection feels. How does it feel to try to connect and wish them well?

After the neutral person, we open to a difficult person, someone with whom we have active struggle, and try to explore well-wishing in that context. There it can get quite challenging. And so we explore ways to meet that. Again, we'll talk about each of these over the subsequent days. I'm just laying out the arc of the practice right now, what we'll be doing over the month.

The practice has this form of bringing a particular being into mind from one of these categories. Today we'll start with easy being and self. We bring a particular being into mind and then offer or express wishes for them, saying phrases in our mind. These phrases are expressions of the wish that they be happy, healthy, safe, and at ease. It's essentially a wish for their well-being. What we're exploring is seeing how it feels to make that wish.

The wish is an expression of an intention. "May you be happy." Feeling that genuinely expressed is an expression of metta, an expression of love and care and connection and concern in the heart. May you be happy.

So the phrase is an expression of an intention. We may or may not feel the quality of love there. Again, that may be what the metta magnet is drawing out—"Well, I can connect kind of with that intention, but I don't really feel it." That's okay.

You simply notice how it is.

The phrases that are often offered as a standard set in English are: May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you be safe. May you live with ease. These phrases are offered while bringing a particular being into the mind, and the phrase is directed toward that being.

For me, the practice began to become more alive and resonant when I really started exploring with each phrase. Language is actually quite powerful. Saying a phrase like this, if we're attuned and mindful and paying attention—being attentive to how we are after having made that wish, particularly in the area of the heart—we may notice that the phrase evokes something. It may be constriction. It may be a feeling of connection. It may be a feeling of confusion.

When I started connecting with the person before every phrase, saying "May you be happy," and then taking a few moments to feel how it felt in the area of the heart to have made that wish, the practice transformed. Essentially, I was using mindfulness during this practice. At first it had felt like just a lot of words, trying to connect through language. But when I started to touch into the feeling—whatever it was, maybe just a little bit of a shift, not even sure what that shift was, but simply touching into the area

of the heart and asking, "How does it feel to have made that wish?"—and then moving on to the next phrase, touching in again, "How does it feel to have made that wish?"—that's when something opened.

So we're inclining the mind toward a quality of well-wishing through using these phrases, but being very honest with ourselves about what is actually here.

I think that's enough for the basics. Let's practice. Let's do some practice together.

Starting by finding a posture that feels relatively comfortable—as comfortable as you can be. It can be helpful to remind yourself about relaxation. Bring your attention to the area around your heart. For some of you, it may be helpful to put your hand on your heart as a way to connect with that area. You're welcome to keep it there for the whole sitting or just when it feels helpful to connect.

Simply touch in, being aware of the experience or the sensations here in this area. How is the heart right now? Just feel what's here, honestly opening to that. No judgment around it—just, "Oh, it's like this." Maybe it feels a little tired or tender or tense or tight. That's okay. It's okay however it is.

Now bring to mind a being that makes you smile. Maybe a dear teacher, or a child in your life, or someone for whom the relationship does not feel too complicated. It might be a pet. Spend a minute or two reflecting on what you appreciate about this being. This reflection on appreciation of the good, what we appreciate, is said to be a support for metta. What do you appreciate? Ways they've supported you. Notice how it feels to make this reflection. It's possible to think and feel into the heart at the same time, remembering what you appreciate about this being.

Find a way to connect with this being in some way—to imagine them here with you perhaps, or hold an image of them. I sometimes would, just sitting with my eyes closed, pretend they were sitting next to me or in front of me. I didn't have a lot of imagery available, but I could have the sense of them being with me. That may be possible for you too—a kind of felt sense of them, connecting with their energy in some way, their being. For some it can be useful to include the name of the being in offering these phrases.

So with a connection, an image or feeling of being with this being, begin to quietly in your mind offer them these wishes.

May you be happy.

Offer that phrase, and then check in.

Almost, perhaps, think about not only offering the phrases to the other person but dropping them into your own heart. May you be happy—and how does it resonate? What happens in your heart with that wish?

May you be happy.

And no demand for any particular feeling or experience. Honestly noticing how it is.

May you be healthy.

May you be safe.

May you live with ease.

Connecting with the being, expressing the wish, and noticing how it affects your heart to make that wish.

May you be happy.

May you be safe.

May you live with ease.

Now I'll give some time for silence for you to explore this on your own. Connect with the being, say the phrase, and then touch into the felt experience in the heart. How does it land to make that wish?

Whatever is arising with this, can there be a sense of it's okay that this is arising? That is also an expression of metta for yourself.

And now I'll encourage you, or invite you, to explore the possibility of opening to metta for yourself. Let your easy being stay present. Just kind of connect with yourself. This may be as an image of yourself, or just the felt sense of you sitting here in this moment.

Take a moment to reflect on something you appreciate—things you appreciate about yourself, kind things you've done. And if that feels challenging, I will offer you that you are here, at a retreat where you have the intention to open your heart and connect. That's a rare and amazing thing. Let yourself appreciate that about yourself. If you can't feel it, borrow my appreciation for you. Because it's amazing that you're here.

Connecting with yourself, beginning to express these same wishes for yourself.

May I be happy.

Again, noticing how it lands. How does it feel, dropping that wish into your own heart? How does it feel to make that wish?

May I be healthy.

May I be safe.

May I live with ease.

And if this is challenging for you, it's okay that it's challenging. One way in might be to envision the easy being you were just offering wishes to, and imagine that they are offering you well wishes. That your easy being is standing in front of you, with you, wishing: May you be happy. Sometimes we can receive it more easily that way.

Exploring this possibility of receiving metta for yourself.

May I be happy.

May I be healthy.

May I be safe.

May I live with ease.

Continuing in silence for another few minutes.

And to close the sitting, I like to sometimes bring back all the beings I've been exploring in this session. So today, the self and your easy being. Envisioning yourselves together, wishing together:

May we be happy.

May we both be healthy.

May we be safe.

May we be at ease.

And then allowing that well-wishing to expand, as best you can imagine, to all beings. The two of you together, wishing: May all beings be happy.

Again, remembering to check: how does it land to feel, to make that wish? May all beings be healthy. May all beings be safe. May all beings live with ease.

You are welcome to explore this practice. In fact, we encourage you to explore this practice. You could explore it at a particular time—perhaps this sitting could be a time when you explore this practice. Or you could play with it in the walking period. Sometimes it can feel easier to do it outside or with a little more space. I would often do it with walking, imagining the being was walking next to me. So you are welcome to play with exploring this practice in sitting or in walking. Maybe a sitting or a walking a day, two, if that feels good to you—exploring this cultivation, this softening of the heart.

It will support your mindfulness practice to have this softening. Sometimes in the midst of our vipassana practice, the mindfulness practice, we may find challenges arising. And for some people, it can be helpful to remember the metta practice at those times. Look at what supports you.

For me, I will let you know that this practice was very challenging for a long time. In fact, I did not come to this sitting for several years because it just tied me up in knots. And for me, the metta was being cultivated through the mindfulness practice. I could feel it more in the "oh, it's like this"—so much stuff happening, and it's okay that it's happening. That is cultivating metta too. The mindfulness practice cultivates metta for ourselves. It is a metta practice for ourselves. The allowing that we encourage—that is metta.

And yet for some, the metta practice provides an easier doorway. For me, it took a while. At one point during one long retreat in Burma, I discovered—my teacher there said, "Try some metta practice before your sitting. It will help you." And I thought, well, you don't know me, but I'll give it a try. And I found, to my surprise, that enough metta had been cultivated through the mindfulness that it was right there. Yes, I do wish myself to be happy and healthy and at ease. It was very powerful. And yet I needed that time.

So if you struggle with the metta practice, talk to your teachers in the interviews about it. There are supports that can happen, and it may or may not be something that is serving you at this time. We have to be aligned with our own system in this practice. In the metta practice, we start where it is easiest. And for myself, in the entirety of the practice, it was easiest to start with mindfulness practice and not do the metta. But at this point, I love the metta practice. I have a strong connection with it. Just touch into what is supportive for you and check in with your teachers about it.

If you struggle with it—I mean, I tried for a while before I finally realized it was not working for me. If it is a little uncomfortable, or if it feels like, "I'm not feeling boundless love," that may just be the mental practice working for you. The rough guideline

would be: if it feels like the metta practice is tying you up in knots, it may not be the right practice for you at this point. At this point. And that is what it was doing to me at the beginning.

If it feels like sometimes you can touch into the quality of openheartedness and caring, and sometimes it feels like a struggle, then drop back to where it is easier. That is the instruction with the metta practice. If you shift to a being where it is more challenging—if you are doing yourself and it is hard, but you found you could connect with the easy being—just drop back and do it for the easy being. You do not have to push with where it is more challenging.

You can find a place where you can connect with the easy being, where the practice flows naturally.

So thank you for your practice, remembering just how amazing it is that you're here. It is a rare thing in this world, what you're doing. Thank you for your practice.

CHAPTER 169

Mindfulness of the Body and Exploring the Elements (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 58 min

In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of mindfulness of the body as taught in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). She begins by contextualizing the four foundations of mindfulness—body, feeling tone, mind states, and dhammas—explaining how the Buddha's framework supports wise mindfulness that leads to liberation. The talk emphasizes the importance of "abiding, observing" with qualities of relaxation, receptivity, ardency, and clear comprehension while setting aside greed and distress.

The heart of the teaching focuses on the six body contemplations found in the sutta: breath, posture, clear comprehension of activities, body parts, elements, and death contemplation (maraṇasati). Fella devotes particular attention to the four elements practice—earth (solidity, hardness, weight), water (fluidity, cohesion, moisture), fire (temperature), and air (movement, vibration, pressure)—offering practical guidance for experiencing these qualities directly in the body.

This elemental exploration serves as a method for dropping beneath concepts to the actual felt sense of bodily experience. Fella explains how this practice helps distinguish between body and mind, revealing how physical sensations trigger mental reactions and how much of what we call "pain" lies in our reactivity rather than the actual sensation. Through this investigation, practitioners begin to understand experience as impermanent, unreliable, and impersonal—insights that paradoxically bring relief rather than despair.

This evening the topic is mindfulness of the body. This is one of the teachings found in the texts, the Buddhist texts, the suttas, and in particular in a text called the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. The Buddha talked about mindfulness of the body in many places in the suttas, but a kind of collection of meditation instructions is offered in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. This is really the basis for what we're offering in our instructions, this teaching.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, just as a little overview, is a collection of practices and directions for how to be attentive to our direct experience. At the very beginning of the sutta, the words say, "This is the direct path to the overcoming of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, to the realization of freedom, the realization of nibbāna." And what is this path? The four foundations of mindfulness, or the four establishments of mind-

fulness. Satipaṭṭhāna is the word translated either as foundation or establishment. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as a frame of reference. We can think of these teachings as being four grounds or ways, four areas of experience perhaps, that are useful to connect with—and connect with in a particular way.

To be aware of the guidance is wise mindfulness, how to be aware in a skillful way. Mindfulness itself, at least in the suttas, points to a kind of neutral quality. There can be wrong mindfulness guided by wrong intention and wrong view, and right mindfulness guided by right intention and right view. Right view is basically laid out in the sutta—how to be mindful in a way that is conducive to liberation, to freedom. I would say the basic piece of that is that we attend to experience, curious about experience in and of itself. What is this experience? How is it appearing?

If you think about someone who has broken into a house and is wanting to steal things, they may be very aware of what they're doing—very clear of each step and each movement, very careful about how they move through the house so that they're not making noise or generating anything that would lead to their discovery. They are not, in that process, exploring their experience as: what does it feel like to be reaching and touching? What is the experience of stepping? They are aware of their experience with the intention to steal. It's a wrong intention.

I don't think we need to worry about our intention here for mindfulness. We are all exploring our experience with this basic curiosity: what is it like to be aware? What is it like to be a human being?

So these four establishments of mindfulness, the four that are in this sutta, are: body, the physicality of our experience; feeling tone, the aspect of our experience that shows up as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant; mind states; and mental phenomena.

Now feeling tone isn't exactly separate from body or separate from mind, because the teaching is that every experience of body and mind is also pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is, I think, why Thanissaro Bhikkhu uses this translation of frame of reference. We may choose to observe our experience through the frame of reference of the body, noticing the physicality of experience. What's happening in our minds can affect our bodies, but we're choosing to observe from this frame of reference through the body. Or we may choose to observe experience through this frame of reference of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. That doesn't mean that mental and physical experiences aren't happening. It's just this curiosity about that aspect of experience.

So the frame of reference of body, the frame of reference of feeling tone, and the frame of reference of mind states—mental experience. Whether the mind is contracted, distracted, whether there's greed, aversion, delusion present or absent in the mind, whether there's concentration present in the mind or not.

These first three foundations are really—mostly the instructions in those are about just noticing what's here. The instructions in the first foundation on the body, for instance, around the breath, are: when breathing in, you know that you're breathing in; when breathing out, you know you're breathing out. Just notice what's happening there. In the second foundation around feeling tone, it says: when feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands one's feeling a pleasant feeling; when feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands one's feeling an unpleasant feeling. There's not much in the way of what to do about it other than know that it's happening. This really basic instruction: be aware of experience as it is in the present moment—bodily experience, feeling tone. And in the mental experience, even there, the instructions say something like: one understands a mind affected by greed as a mind affected by greed; one understands a mind not affected by greed as a mind not affected by greed.

It's not saying to get rid of the greed. It's saying to understand it, to know it's present.

So in these first three foundations or frames of reference, these establishments of mindfulness, it really is this encouragement to get to know just experience as experience.

Right here, the instructions for mindfulness are pointing to this way of being aware, being attentive, being mindful.

The fourth foundation of mindfulness has a little different quality to it. We could say the fourth foundation of mindfulness—the name of it is the Dhamma, the Satipaṭṭhāna of Dhamma. Small-d dhamma. Large-D Dhamma usually refers to the teachings of the Buddha or this nature of experience, the truth of experience. Small-d dhamma usually is translated simply as phenomenon—just phenomena of experience.

And yet the instructions in this section of the teachings are pointing to ways we understand the small-d dhamma through the framework of the Buddhist teachings, the large-D Dhamma. So there's an instruction about looking at the hindrances, noticing the presence and absence of the hindrances, noticing the presence and absence of the seven awakening factors, noticing the five aggregates and the six sense spheres, and the clinging that happens in dependence on the six sense spheres, and noticing the arising of the aspects of the Four Noble Truths: This is suffering. This is the arising of suffering. This is the ending of suffering. This is the way leading to the ending of suffering.

We could say in this one there's more of an encouragement to be attuned to what processes of mind and body lead to suffering, and what processes of mind and body lead away from suffering. So this is the encouragement in this teaching—to be attuned to the experience of suffering and non-suffering. When we get caught, when we get stuck: the stress and the release from stress, the release from suffering.

There's also, at the beginning of the sutta, a definition or a framing of what supports this wise mindfulness, what supports this establishment of mindfulness. I'll read this with respect to the body because it's repeated for each of the four foundations:

"How does one establish mindfulness of the body? One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, mindful, clearly comprehending, setting aside greed and distress for the world."

This phrase really points to some of the attitudes and skillful means, some of the supports. James talked about some supports for mindfulness the first evening. It's really a succinct description of what supports mindfulness.

"Abide observing." Abide—just that word really points to relaxation and receptivity. You're not usually running around doing stuff when you're abiding. Settle back, receiving. So abide, relax, receive, and observe. Connect with experience. Abide, observing. Relaxed, receptive, and attentive.

So here, right in these first two words, it points to relaxed and alert. These are not opposites. That may be a bit of a paradox for us, but we can be relaxed and alert at the same time.

Another quality: ardent. I think of this as connected to curiosity—the heart engaged. Interest in what is happening. Interested in the body as a body. Observing the body as a body with interest and curiosity.

Clearly comprehending. This piece, "clearly comprehending," points in one place in the teachings to being aware in all activities of your life, so it points to continuity—doing this continuously, as continuously as possible. And in other places in the suttas, it defines clearly comprehending as understanding the impermanent nature of experience.

So: abide relaxed, receptive, and attentive to the body as a body with interest, understanding the impermanent nature of experience.

And "setting aside greed and distress for the world." This one points to a word we've also been using a lot in the last few days: allowing. We often, as experience arises, have greed or distress around it. And one of the ways to explore that is not to push away this greed and distress, but to open a little more broadly and allow what's here to be here—even the greed and distress.

Bhikkhu Anālayo points to maybe a little bit of the paradox in this phrase. In some ways it's translated as "having set aside greed and distress for the world." And that feels like a bit of an impossibility when we start.

If I've already set aside greed and distress for the world, I'm already there. And so Bhikkhu Anālayo, in looking at the language here, translated it more as "setting aside"—that this process of setting aside greed and distress for the world is what happens as we do the practice, through this inclination towards allowing.

So this is the framework of our practice of mindfulness, of wise mindfulness: abide observing the body as a body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, setting aside greed and distress for the world.

The Buddha starts with the body, and it makes sense to me that he started there. As I've explored all of these in my own practice, the body is the most obvious when we sit down and try to be mindful, aware of our experience for the first time. Usually the body is one of the first things that's obvious. There are other things, mental processes that are obvious like thinking, but it's harder to be mindful of those. Thinking is usually what pulls us out. And so I think it was brilliant that the Buddha said, let's start with the body. Attend to the body. That will help you to connect and be able to then start to meet more subtle kinds of experience with mindfulness, like thinking, like mind states and feeling tone.

The body is a good place to settle deeply, to allow the mindfulness to connect with present moment experience. Getting familiar with being aware of the body also begins to support our understanding of the mind. There's a strong connection between body and mind. Things happen in the body and it affects what happens in the mind. There are conditioned responses—when something happens in the body, we start thinking about it or there are emotional reactions. Things happen in the mind, a thought happens, a memory of an argument we had with a friend, and we feel it in our body.

So there's a strong connection between body and mind. And at times we actually are not so clear about what body is and what mind is. It sounds like we should be able to know that difference easily, but through this practice I've really seen how often there's been a confusion. I've interpreted something as being body when it was really some-

thing happening in the mind. So the more clear we are about what the body actually is, what the experience of body actually is, the more clear we can be about what our mental experience is.

And the mental experience is really where suffering and non-suffering happen. The body is just physicality. The mind is where the clinging happens, the wanting, the aversion, the confusion—all of the things that make us spin out and struggle happen in the mind. And so the more clear we can be about the body, the more we can begin to understand how the mind works. This is, I think, another reason the Buddha pointed to the body first.

Some other benefits of mindfulness of the body: the body is always in the present moment. If you are aware of some aspect of your body, you are in the present moment. The mindfulness, the awareness is in the present moment. Mindfulness of the body, because it can be so grounding, connected to this physicality, also helps us to recognize when the mind goes off. I think we see this a lot with paying attention to the anchor. If we're paying attention to the breath, the body sensations, or hearing—which is also within the field of body, bodily sensation, contact with the ear door—if we're paying attention to bodily experience, we begin to recognize when the mind gets disconnected from bodily experience because the bodily experience is more obvious.

It's also an important part of our understanding of our physical experience, of our being. There's a lot of information in this physical body. Craving and clinging show up in our physical body. For me, this experience in the body, in the area of the heart, has become like one of my touchstones. Is this area soft and relaxed, or is it clenched and tight? I don't judge it. It's just, oh, there's clinging or craving when there's tension here. When it feels soft, there's more of a sense of ease and connection. So in the body, there is this kind of non-verbal feedback about the state of our mind.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, there are six separate mindfulness practices around working with the body. The breath in the body.

We've been working with that a little bit—some of you using the breath as your anchor. There's also exploring posture, which we've been doing with the different postures we've worked with: the sitting posture, the walking posture, some of you practicing lying postures, standing posture. When you're standing in line, you can stand and know you're standing. That instruction in the Satipatthana Sutta—stand and know you're standing, walk and know you're walking. Just that simple exercise is encouraged in this teaching.

And there's clear comprehension of all activities. I don't have it all memorized, but it includes when going and coming, when reaching, when bending and extending the limbs, when talking and remaining silent, when eating, when urinating and defecating—that's actually in there. Let my having said that help you remember that going to the restroom is an opportunity for mindfulness too. All through the day, all activities—this clear comprehension.

There's awareness of parts of the body: just being aware of hair, skin, nails, teeth, sinews, muscles, bones. Going through these parts of the body serves almost as a way to help us recognize the impersonal nature of our bodies. One teacher, when somebody was experiencing aversion toward another person, encouraged them to do this kind of practice with them. It's like, well, is it their head hairs that I'm angry at? Is it their body hairs? Is it their teeth I'm angry at? You just break the body apart in this way, and it becomes clear—yes, it's just a collection of parts.

Then there's the elemental nature of the body, which is primarily where I'm going to spend time this evening. I'll explore that particular practice exercise in the suttas at length. And the sixth contemplation is death contemplation, *maranasati*, contemplation of the decomposition of the body. The encouragement at the time of the Buddha was to go to the charnel grounds and notice the different decaying stages of corpses and to remind oneself: this is what will become of me. I am not immune from this. This is the nature of the body—to decay, to die. This awaits all of us.

Paradoxically, this *maranasati*, this contemplation of death, at least in my own experience, does not feel depressing when done within the framework of the Dharma. What it does for me is remind me—like one day I was doing my dishes and thought, wow, this might be the last time I get to do dishes. How do I want to be here for this? This might be my last day on the planet. How do I want to show up? Do I want to have these petty arguments going in my mind? No.

So that reminder that we don't know when we're going to die can be both a spur to the practice, encouraging us to wake up, and an encouragement to drop—to drop pettiness, to drop little resentments. If I knew I was going to die tomorrow, how do I want to be right now? If I knew I wasn't going to wake up tomorrow, how do I want to live the rest of this day?

So the elements—this is really what I'd like to take time to explore. This has been a very foundational practice for me, one that has really supported my getting familiar with the actual experience of the body, what we might call the felt sense of our bodies.

We often think of our bodies in terms of concepts. I'll sometimes sit with somebody and ask them to describe what they're experiencing. What are they feeling? And they might say, "Well, I'm feeling my hand," or "I'm feeling my shoulder." But those are parts of the body. They are concepts. We don't actually feel shoulder. We don't even know what a shoulder is when we're born. A baby would never say, "I feel my shoulder"—well, they can't speak anyway—but they're just experiencing sensations. Tension, tightness, moisture, heat, vibration, pulsing, tingling. That's what the experience of the body is.

When we say we're experiencing hand, we're experiencing some sensation in that area of bodily experience that we call hand, that we have assigned the label or concept of "hand" to. So this practice around the elemental nature of the body, the elemental nature of experience, begins to point to the direct felt sense of what the actual sensation level of experience is—the terrain, the texture, the feeling of our bodily experience.

The language of the suttas is a little odd in a way, given how our minds typically think about experience. But the language says, "One reviews this body, however it is placed, however it is disposed."

And so in any posture, one notices that it consists of elements. In this body are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element.

Now in India at the time of the Buddha—and I did a little bit of looking this up—it looks like pretty much in many cultures at about this time, 500 to 600 BCE, in Greece, India, and China, there was this understanding or general sense that matter, the physical world, is composed of smaller parts. And those parts, they thought the smallest elements were earth, air, fire, and water. So that was breaking down experience as far as they could, as far as their understanding went. Now we've broken it down further to atomic and subatomic particles.

But what the commentaries did with this, when exploring what this means in terms of meditation experience, is describe these as experiences in the body that relate to the qualities of those elements. So the earth element has a quality of solidity. The water element has the quality of liquidity, fluidity. The air element has the quality of movement. And the fire element has the quality of temperature—heat or coolness. The commentaries point to what is the experience of these, and that's how we connect with the elemental nature of the body.

I'm going to go through each of these almost, not quite as a guided meditation, but you could close your eyes as you listen to this part of the talk and see if you can take in this frame of reference of exploring bodily experience.

The earth element would be aspects of the body that are solid. For some people, it can be felt as simply this sense of this body being earth sitting on earth—this matter, this solidity. Sensations like heaviness, hardness, softness, density, weight. For instance, you might notice the contact where your hips are meeting your chair, cushion, or bench. You might notice some hardness there, particularly at the sit bones, or the uprightness of the body. For those of you who are sitting upright, the structure of the skeleton is holding you up. You might have a sense of the solidity of that structure of the body—the hardness, solidity, weight. The weight of earth on earth.

The air element is experience connected with movement. In sitting in stillness, one of the most obvious kinds of movements can be the breath, the movement of air through the body. You might feel a kind of pulsing or tingling or vibrating in your nose and throat as the air passes. That's a sensation related to movement. You might notice the expansion and contraction around your ribcage, that movement of the body, or the rising and falling around the abdomen.

There may also be, if you settle back in the body and explore with a receptive quality—not directing the attention or looking for any particular sensations, just sitting with the body in quiet, receiving what's available—there may be some obvious sensations of pressure where feet or hands are touching. But touch into the whole body. Some of you may have a sense of a vibratory energy quality in the body. You may not all feel this, but some of you may notice that vibration, tingling, pulsing. These are also part of air element, movement. This continual feeling of movement, even in stillness. Not only the movement of the breath, but this vibrating energy, the energy of life in the body. That's air element, that vibratory energy. Other aspects—there are many flavors of air element: pulling, pushing, pressure, expansion, tingling, pulsing.

And fire element, the element of temperature. Now this one may be a little less obvious at times. There are some ways to explore it. I find sometimes it's very apparent—when you go outside, you really feel the coolness on the skin. Or at times, I find my hands are cold but my body is warm. And so if you touch, say, the inside of your arm with your hand, often there's a temperature difference.

So you might have the temperature sensation highlighted if you explore that. The breath, sometimes behind your mask, may be very warm—in that area, the breath kind of collecting behind the mask. There can be warmth in that area. That's fire element. You may notice when you go outside and take off your mask, the feeling of coolness in the breath as the cold air comes into your throat, feeling the temperature there.

And then water element. This is perhaps the most obvious when there's perspiration, or can be very obvious, I find, behind the mask sometimes. There can be a lot of moisture behind the mask. Tears. But this also is understood as the element of cohesion—what glues things together.

Think about this. If you look at flour, a pile of flour, which could be earth, right? Earth element. It's just grains. But when you add water to it and knead it and push the water through the pile of flour, you get a ball and it becomes very elastic. The water element has turned the flour into this cohesive thing. That's the understanding around the water element too—this cohesion quality. It can be experienced as stickiness, slipperiness.

The commentaries say the water element is experienced mostly in dependence on some of the other elements. We will know the water element in relationship to other elements.

So an example of that—I'll do a little exploration here. You can go along with me if you like. Using your tongue, I'll go through some of the elements here in the mouth. Using your tongue, pushing against your teeth, you can really highlight the hardness of the teeth with that movement of pressure. That's earth. But that hardness is highlighted because of the pushing there. That's air element—the pushing, the movement. The movement is kind of highlighting the hardness when you push your tongue against your teeth and feel that solidity. You can notice the hardness more, or the pushing, the movement.

And then take your tongue and run it across your teeth. The movement of your tongue across your teeth, the saliva in your mouth, the moisture, will create a quality of slipperiness. That's the water element being revealed in dependence on both movement and the hardness of your teeth. You can get more of a sense of the liquidity in your mouth in dependence on those other elements.

In my practice with this teaching, I have just stuck with exploring experience from this more immediate language—vibration, pulsing, tingling, moisture, stickiness, cohesion, pressure, hardness, softness, heat, coolness. That language is more immediate for me than trying to translate that vibratory energy of the body to "air element" or the hardness I'm feeling in my hips to "earth element."

That's me. That's just me. For you, it may be very natural to notice earth element or water element or air element. I had a friend who was talking about doing walking meditation, just noticing the earth element and the air element in the walking. For me that just added a layer of idea, of concept, that made it hard. But the direct experience in

walking—the pressure, the lifting, which was kind of a lightness, and then the movement, a feeling of pushing and lightness, and then the landing, the hardness on the ground—that kind of feeling was what I worked with. I wasn't trying to name in my mind all of the different elements. But that was the feeling. The lightness. It almost felt like my foot was a balloon lifting up into the air. And then moving forward like somebody had pushed it. And then hitting the ground—hardness. And then the softness of the pads of my toes, like, "Ooh, that feels really soft." Just touching into that feeling, the feeling in the body through these elemental experiences.

I look at this as learning the language of the body. How does the body communicate with us? Through these sensations—this sensation level of experience.

I'll be offering the instructions in the morning, and we'll continue this exploration in the morning instruction sitting—applying this kind of practice to our sitting practice and our walking practice. We'll talk more about how to explore this practice. You may already have a little taste of it now.

I'll give you one small piece to play with perhaps for the rest of the evening. You can explore these sensations in your anchor, primarily body or breath as anchor. Notice, for instance, on the in-breath, the movement and any vibratory sensations. Wherever you're noticing the breath, what are the sensations you're experiencing? Breathing in—perhaps a kind of vibration in the nostrils and throat, the movement in the chest, and then the rising pressure in the abdomen into a point of hardness. Then the release, the collapse of the pressure.

You can play with this if you're using a more broad, whole-body kind of anchor, touching into what the bodily sensations are in that anchor. What is being noticed? Or you can let your anchor be as it is, but then there will be times when attention is drawn to other sensations, other body sensations. You're paying attention to the breath and a pain in the knee arises, or the back gets tense, and the attention gets drawn there.

We can turn toward that. When attention gets drawn to something, we can be curious about it. We don't have to let it go and return to the breath. We're going to be expanding the instructions in mindfulness to include more and more aspects of our experience, as per these instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta—exploring more and more. When we find attention drawn to another physical sensation, we can be curious about it. What is the experience? The attention gets drawn to tension in the shoulder. What is that experience? Oh, there's pressure, hardness, burning. Touching into the elemental nature of the experience.

This exploration helps in a way to shift our perspective on our experience, dropping beneath the concepts of the body to the experience itself. In that shoulder, rather than thinking, "Oh, the shoulder's so tight," it becomes, "Oh, well, there's hardness, there's tension." It begins to pull apart the concepts. It may even begin to pull apart the concept of pain.

Pain is a concept. Often there's unpleasantness associated with it, and we'll get into talking about pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral in a few days. But right now, just exploring—oh, there's hardness or tension or burning or pressure. What is the actual experience of that? Because so much of what we actually call pain lies in our reactivity to the experience, not in the actual physical experience.

This is one of the great gifts of this practice: to begin to tease apart what is body and what is mind. There is a very tight interconnection between the two, especially around the realm of pain. The idea that it's a problem, the idea that this is going to last for the rest of the sitting—this creates more tension, which turns into a feedback loop, adding more physical tension in the body.

So there's this exploration around the elements as an encouragement to discover: what is the actual physical experience? And then also the encouragement to be curious about what's going on in the mind. There's aversion happening. There's fear happening. We can begin to tease those apart and perhaps see through this exploration that when fear gets stronger, the whole experience of tension and pulling and pressure is exacerbated. And when fear weakens, it's much less intense. Again, this teasing apart of body and mind—a very interesting and valuable exploration that this elements practice can really support.

Through this process of seeing the elemental nature of experience and noticing how body and mind are connected, we begin to see that these sensations of the body often trigger a reaction in the mind. We can start to see this as conditioned. We see that there are processes going on in the body. Sitting for a long time in stillness tends to create sore backs. It's just part of the body, just part of what happens. That then leads to reactivity, which often feeds back into the body.

So we see processes of body leading to conditions in the mind. This idea: *This is going to last forever. This is a problem. I hate this. When is the bell going to ring? They've fallen asleep up there. When are they going to ring the bell?* All of that is adding suffering. Not only does it feed back into the body and add physical tension, but the tension in the mind around that is painful itself. It just multiplies. It multiplies the painfulness and the suffering of it.

And we can see these as processes, as feedback loops. We start to understand our system as processes of body and processes of mind that are interweaving and interplaying. We begin to understand these processes as impersonal. I'm not doing them. I mean, if we had a choice, if we think, "Oh, I'm the one making myself miserable," well, are we actually deciding to do that, or is it habits that are doing that? Processes that have been so deeply conditioned. Reactivity that's been deeply conditioned. These processes of body, processes of mind, are not self. They are tumbling on—tumbling on of these body-mind processes.

And we see this with clarity. As we begin to clearly see the nature of our bodies, highlighting what body is and what mind is, the impermanent, impersonal nature of our experience and the unreliable nature of our body-mind experience is revealed to us.

That doesn't sound like good news, but actually it's really good news to see it, because it's the not understanding it that creates the mind's reactivity around it. When we align with that understanding—understand experience as impermanent, unreliable, and impersonal—what a relief. Just mental and physical phenomenon tumbling on. That's all it is.

Thank you for your practice. And I'll offer this from Bhikkhu Bodhi, who says there are really only two instructions: start and continue. So carry on.

CHAPTER 170

Mindfulness of Feeling Tone (Vedanā)

Andrea Fella · 1h02

In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of vedanā (feeling tone), the second foundation of mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). She explains how every experience—whether physical or mental—carries a quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and how this feeling tone serves as the launching point for reactivity. Drawing from the teaching of dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda), she illuminates the crucial link between feeling and craving, showing how ignorance leads us to habitually grasp at pleasant experiences and push away unpleasant ones.

Fella references the Buddha's teaching on the two darts, explaining how an untaught person experiences both physical pain and the additional mental suffering of reactivity, while a well-taught practitioner experiences only the bodily sensation. She shares research demonstrating that feeling tone is indeed a mental construction shaped by conditions and expectations, not an inherent property of sensory experience. The Abhidhamma teaching that sight, sound, smell, and taste are inherently neutral—with pleasantness or unpleasantness arising from our mental interpretations—offers a powerful framework for investigation.

Practical guidance includes exploring feeling tone through physical sensations, eating meditation, and investigating where reactivity actually arises. Fella shares personal examples of discovering that aversion often springs from thoughts and beliefs rather than direct sensory experience. She encourages a playful, curious approach rather than making feeling tone into a project, suggesting that simply receiving these teachings can naturally inform practice.

We've been here for more than a week now. For those of you for whom this is a first month-long or two-month retreat, there's a somewhat different arc, as you may be noticing—a somewhat different arc of practice on a retreat of this length than on a week-long retreat, by which today you would be packing up and leaving.

In my own experience, during the first three-month course I did at IMS, ten days in I was feeling like I was just battered. My mind hadn't really settled. There was a lot of physical unpleasantness, a lot of pain in the body. I raised my hand in the hall and said, "You know, by this point in another retreat, I would have been really settled. I'm not

settled—what's going on?" The teacher said there just seems to be something about the mind understanding the length of a retreat, and so it can take about a third of the length of the retreat to really settle in.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but since I was doing a six-week retreat, it meant I still had another week or so of settling in. But it actually relaxed me because I thought I was doing something wrong. So just taking in what's happening, everything that we've been pointing to—just keep going.

Tonight, the topic is a little more elaboration on vedanā, or feeling tone. Tara brought this into the morning instructions yesterday. The Buddha talked about this aspect of experience a great deal and pointed to the power of noticing feeling tone with mindfulness.

Every single experience has this quality of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. The Buddha really highlighted the value of noticing that with mindfulness, and it being the place where—essentially—feeling tone is the point. It's the point, the basis of reactivity. When we are reacting, when we are experiencing some kind of greed or aversion or confusion or mental agitation, the basis of that is usually not clearly seeing feeling tone, or the views underlying feeling tone. So the Buddha really highlighted this as an important aspect, and we wanted to take a little more time to land with this teaching.

This feeling tone is a part of every single experience of body or mind. Every sense experience has a feeling tone associated with it. Every mental experience has a feeling tone associated with it. There's the understanding that with the contact at the sense base—whether sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or the sense base of the mind—with that contact comes feelings. With that contact also comes consciousness and perception. We'll talk more about those as we go.

These three mental aspects—perception, feeling, consciousness—connect with every single sense impression we have. With this arising of consciousness, feeling, and perception, consciousness, feeling, and perception are all mental qualities, mental aspects, mental functions we could say. With every single experience we have, whether it's a physical experience or a mental experience, a large part of what is experienced in that moment is our mind doing its work.

There was actually a question that touched on this: "When I'm experiencing something that's materiality, like hardness in the kneecap, I see that as materiality. But pain in the knee seems more mental, and a lot of experience feels like it's mental, even if it's something physical like the breath. A lot of it feels like mentality."

It is. Every experience, every physical experience, has both physicality and mentality. Sometimes our mindfulness lands more to recognize the physical side of it—the hardness or vibration or pulsing or tingling, or pitch and tone in hearing, or form and color in sight. And sometimes the mindfulness, the awareness, is more interested in some of the processes by which the mind actually experiences these physical sensations.

The feeling tone—whether the experience is physical or mental, the physicality of hardness or pulsing or tingling or vibration, the contact with the eye door, contact with the ear door—the feeling tone associated with that, they come together. It's not like one happens and then the next thing and the next thing. They arise together. Feeling tone arises with the physicality. Consciousness arises with the physicality. The feeling tone is actually a mental experience. It's an aspect of the mind. Even in the physical touch sense, when we experience pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral in our physical realm, it's still understood in Buddhist psychology to be a mental experience. I'll talk about that more in a moment.

This feeling tone arises in dependence on the contact with our sense bases. They arise together; they're co-arising. But it's conditioned.

If the sense impression is not arising, there's no feeling arising with the sense impression. They come together. It's a basic aspect of our human experience, and yet we seem to miss it. When things are really pleasant, we can notice they're pleasant—but actually, not so much.

In my own experience, I discovered this in a funny way. One time I was driving a car and noticing that my mind was just tumbling forward into the future, completely tumbling forward. I was trying to bring it back: "Okay, come back, hands on the steering wheel, just be here." And it would just leap out into the future. It felt like anxiety. It felt like the mind was trying to figure something out.

After this happened a bunch of times—coming back, hands on the steering wheel, mind launching out again—I finally decided to ask, "Well, what else is happening here? What else is going on?" What I discovered was that I was really happy. I had not noticed the happiness, that pleasant quality. I had not noticed it. And I think sometimes what my mind did with that happiness was something like, "Oh, how can I keep this happiness? I've got to make sure this person knows this thing and that person knows that thing so that I can have this happiness stay for longer."

The mind can miss pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant because it's so busy responding and reacting to it. Some part of our system knows it's there, but we just leap onto it and start thinking and planning and remembering and fantasizing and judging. So we often actually miss the experience itself of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The Buddha pointed to this as a key place. The habit around pleasant experience—the very human habit—is that we want more of it. We like it. We want to hold on to it. So we lean into it. There's a kind of greed associated with it. We're not really noticing the pleasant so much as wanting more of the pleasant in the future, missing that we're experiencing pleasant now. This is the habit of mind. It just wants more. It grabs on. With pleasant, we tend to want more of it, leaning into the future.

With unpleasant, we tend to not like it and want to get rid of it—different strategies for how we might do that. And with neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience, or what we sometimes call neutral experience, we often don't even notice it at all. We kind of space out about it.

In one teaching that many of you have probably heard, the Buddha is talking about this aspect of feeling tone and says that someone who has never met the teachings—described as an untaught worldling—experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant feelings. And a well-taught disciple, someone who's heard the teachings and has practiced well with them, also experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant feelings. So he asks, what's the difference between the two? It's a kind of rhetorical question, and then he goes on to answer it.

He says when an untaught worldling is touched by a painful bodily feeling, they worry and grieve. They lament, beat their breast, weeping and distraught. They thus experience two kinds of feelings: a bodily feeling and a mental feeling. He offers an analogy: it's like if somebody were hit by an arrow or a dart, and then immediately hit by a second dart. The feeling becomes much more painful if you're hit by two darts.

He goes on to say that a well-taught noble disciple, when touched by a painful bodily feeling, will not worry or grieve or lament, will not beat their breast and weep nor become distraught. Only one kind of feeling is experienced—a bodily one, not a mental one. It's as if they had been struck by just one dart.

This points to the truth that painful feeling is going to happen. Painful bodily feeling will happen. But the well-taught noble disciple doesn't have reactivity to that painful bodily feeling. They simply notice it as painful.

The reactivity to feeling tone—you know, the analogy of the two darts. I've never been struck by two darts, but I can imagine that the second dart would be far worse than the first. And it's like that with the mental reactivity to physical unpleasantness. It multiplies the painfulness. It multiplies—it's not simply additive. Our minds get really tied up when there's that mental reactivity to physical pain.

So the Buddha points to feeling tone as a kind of springboard from which reactivity arises. This is also explored in the teaching of dependent origination—an investigation of how feeling fits into the process by which suffering arises for us. I'm not going to give a full dependent origination talk this evening. That teaching goes through twelve links that condition each other, basically moving from ignorance to suffering—how we move from ignorance to suffering. But in the middle of that chain, there's a series of links very relevant to our topic this evening.

The teaching points to this: when we have a body and mind, we have our six sense bases. And with those six sense bases, we have contact. The eye receives sight, the ear receives sound, the body receives physical contact, the mind receives mind objects. With that contact, the next link is feeling arises. And again, this is a co-arising. The teaching is often called *paṭiccasamuppāda*, dependent co-arising, as one translation has it. So with the six sense bases having contact, contact and feeling come together. We have contact and feeling.

Conditioned on that is craving. This craving arises—it's a strong human tendency for craving to arise when feeling arises. With pleasant, we want more, the craving to have more. With unpleasant, we want less, the craving to get rid of. With neutral or neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience, we may just crave something. Sometimes when there's neutral experience, we just want something to happen. Or it may be that the mind just kind of detaches and goes into a sort of delusion, a place of not connecting.

With this craving, then there's clinging that follows—we want something and then we hold on to it. And with that clinging, there arise all of these views and ideas and patterns and habits in service of that clinging, to keep it, to have it be mine. This is becoming—a kind of identity gets born around that clinging, in service of maintaining it. And then suffering follows. Again, I'm being very watercolorish around this teaching right now.

So this teaching points to the link where we have a habitual tendency to leap off of feeling into craving. And that happens when ignorance is present. Ignorance is at the head of the chain in the teaching of dependent origination—it's the thing from which the whole sequence follows. When ignorance is present, and we could offer one simple definition of ignorance: the view or belief that having pleasant and getting rid of un-

pleasant will make me happy. That's a very deeply conditioned view in our system. We don't think about it. It's not like we have to think, "I want pleasant, I think that's going to make me happy." It's so deeply embedded. It's embedded in our whole being—embedded in evolution, we could say. Even single-celled creatures move towards nourishment and away from noxious chemicals. So there's this movement towards pleasant and away from unpleasant built into the whole of our evolutionary system.

It's not to say that supporting our bodies with nourishment isn't helpful, or that we should sit outside in the cold and freeze. But what the Buddha points to is that it's not necessary to have craving in order to come inside if you're freezing outside. It just becomes natural: this would support this being, this is helpful for the support of this being.

In the days before he sat down under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha had emaciated himself, thinking that depriving the body of food was a way to freedom. At some point he realized, "I'm going to die and I'm not going to find freedom. This is not the way to freedom. Maybe food would be good." And so this was not craving. It was more the understanding that the mind wanting to move in the direction of letting go of craving, of freedom, needs to nourish itself. There's a nuanced understanding about what craving is.

But we feel it. We know craving exists in a visceral kind of way. In my own experience, when there's craving happening, there's some kind of constriction going on. We feel that.

When ignorance is present and the mind has this view—"getting the pleasant will make me happy, getting rid of the unpleasant will make me happy"—when that view is operating in the mind, feeling leads to craving. When pleasant arises, that view responds, "Yes, hold on to it. It'll make me happy. Ultimately make me happy." When unpleasant arises, the view motivates, "Yes, get rid of it. It's going to make me happy to get rid of that."

When that ignorance is operating, feeling leads to craving. That's why it's so habitual. It's so hard to see that view. We often miss the feeling tone itself. The Buddha actually pointed to seeing the feeling tone—then you might be able to see this whole process unfolding. He pointed to this over and over again.

We can see the feeling tone. And when we see the feeling tone with wise mindfulness, when we're actually present for that, it can short-circuit that habitual tendency because wisdom may be present instead of ignorance. "What is this feeling tone?

What's going on here?" And maybe seeing that leaning towards, "Ooh, I need to hold on to that. I need to get that thing or get rid of that thing." Maybe seeing that happen as the mind opens to, "Oh, this is pleasant," or "This is unpleasant."

This really highlights the importance of meeting feeling tone with mindfulness and wisdom, with this kind of perspective we've been offering for mindfulness—curiosity. What is this experience? What is the experience of pleasant? Can I know that? What is the experience of unpleasant? Can I know that?

The Satipatthana Sutta, which I talked about last week with respect to the body, has a whole foundation on feeling tone. It's pretty simple. Here are the instructions—I'm only going to read the first part right now.

"How does one abide observing feelings as feelings?" This observing feelings as feelings is looking at them not as something to get rid of or to hold on to, but just to get to know, to understand them. The Buddha pointed to understanding our experience. That's this instruction: abide observing feelings as feelings. Just know pleasant feeling as pleasant.

"And how does one abide observing feelings as feelings? When feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel an unpleasant feeling.' When feeling a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands..."

I feel a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling.

That's it. Know it as it is. Very simple sounding, but not so easy to do.

It can be helpful to explore and get familiar with feeling tones—perhaps taking some time to specifically investigate this quality of feeling itself. I know that Tara mentioned we don't have to go looking for it, but sometimes with something so subtle, it can be useful not necessarily to look for it, but to hold a space for it. Perhaps in this sitting, you might think, "I'll be available to seeing feeling tone." And then we can explore. There are some particular avenues of exploration that can be easier places to begin recognizing feeling tone, so it can be helpful to get familiar with it a little bit.

I'll speak about the nature of feeling tone itself. I mentioned earlier that it's a mental process. This may be easier to understand around feeling tones associated with mental activity—an emotion or a thought. That the feeling tone connected to mental experience is also mental made sense to me. Happiness, for instance, has a pleasant feeling tone. Anger often carries unpleasantness with it. Understanding those as mental felt natural.

But it was harder for me to really understand that physical experience—the feeling tone associated with physical sensation—is also a mental creation. Let me give an example that might help illustrate this.

Suppose you're standing on a busy street corner, waiting for a friend. People are walking by, people you don't know, and you're just standing there in the spot where you'd agreed to meet. Then you feel a hand on your shoulder. Someone has come up from behind you. That might be experienced as pleasant—the experience of the hand on your shoulder—because you're expecting your friend.

But if you're on that same street corner and not expecting anyone, and you feel somebody touching your shoulder, it might be experienced as unpleasant. Same street corner, same contact, but the conditions around it are different. You may startle because you're not expecting to be touched in that situation, and so it's experienced as unpleasant.

The conditions surrounding physical experience create different experiences of pleasant or unpleasant.

There are actually some recent studies that agree with this. Science agrees with the Buddha that feeling tone is mental. There was a study examining how people perceived pain. It had two parts. In the first, participants experienced either a moderately painful stimulus or no pain, and they were asked to rate how unpleasant and painful it was. In the second setup, participants experienced either moderate or more intense pain. On a screen, they could see beforehand whether it was going to be moderate pain or intense pain.

In the first scenario, people said that moderate pain was unpleasant—it was painful for them. In the second scenario, not only did they say that the moderate sensation was pleasant, but the MRI of their brains also showed they were experiencing pleasantness with that moderately painful sensation, when they saw it was not going to be the intense one.

Again, the moderate stimulus was the same in both parts, but the conditions around it were different. The researchers were surprised by this. They thought participants would probably find the moderate pain less painful, but they did not expect them to find it pleasant. They concluded that the likely explanation is that subjects were prepared for the worst and thus felt relieved when they realized the pain was not going to be as bad as they feared. In other words, a sense of relief can be powerful enough to turn an obviously negative experience like pain into a sensation that is enjoyable.

So the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—the mind makes it, and it's very dependent on conditions.

Getting familiar with feeling tone, getting to know it: the easiest place to start is with the touch sense, the physical touch sense. These receptors of our physical body are very much designed to recognize pleasant and unpleasant. So the first place to be curious about pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral is in the physical realm, the physical touch realm. Those elemental sensations we were exploring—the hardness, the vibration, the pulsing, the tingling—there's the material aspect, and along with it is some quality of whether it feels pleasant or unpleasant to you in the moment.

At different times, I've seen that because of a view in my mind, sometimes a sensation—where I could tell it was the same level of intensity—

Sometimes it felt unpleasant, and sometimes it felt neutral.

One of the best places to explore this quality of feeling tone is with an itch—partly because itches have so much to reveal about what the mind does with experience. It's not just the itch itself; there's also the mind that wants to leap away from it. Itches drive us nuts.

So bring curiosity to the experience of an itch at the sensation level. For me, the sensation of an itch is almost like a little buzz. It appears, it's intense, and then it vanishes. It appears, it's intense, and then it vanishes. That intense sensation is unpleasant. What we often do, though, is fail to see the changing nature of the experience—that the unpleasantness is actually coming and going. With our minds, we pull it along, creating a kind of permanence to that sensation. We don't really see that it's there with a buzz and then vanishes, there with a buzz and then vanishes.

So we explore that quality of unpleasantness. Oh, there's unpleasantness. And then when the sensation vanishes, the unpleasantness vanishes. And my experience of that unpleasantness vanishing is itself a pleasant experience. There's a kind of fun way we can see pleasant and unpleasant following on from each other.

Explore the unpleasantness of experience, the pleasantness of experience. There may be times in the breathing, for example, when it feels smooth and easy. Or there may be a touching into a vibratory, light energy in the body that's experienced as pleasant. As a way to get familiar with this quality, you could take some part of a sitting—or a whole sitting—and just be curious: here's what's happening in the body, and can there be a recognition of whether there's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral around that experience?

Another prime place to explore this is in eating. Notice the pleasantness and unpleasantness around the flavors, the tastes. Notice the pleasantness and unpleasantness when you walk into the dining hall. The seeing of particular food—you might think, "Ooh, that food I like"—and so there's a pleasant quality. Now, that pleasantness is more a rising in dependence on the idea that we like it than on the seeing itself. I'll talk about that in just a moment. But just being curious: when you go into the dining hall, there's a stream of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences. You put food in your mouth, there's a stream of pleasant and unpleasant experience. And then neutral, as the food gets chewed up.

That first bite. I love playing with vedanā with chocolate. I don't think I ever knew before I started practicing just how pleasant chocolate is. Good chocolate is just—wow—the whole body goes into this kind of delight.

So yes, noticing the pleasantness. And what I've discovered with chocolate, for me at least—I don't know, my body may be particularly attuned to chocolate—but the flavor itself can be very intense. There's that initial hit of it, and then there's a kind of flood through the system around, I don't know, probably endorphins or something. There's just a flood through the system of pleasant experience. The pleasure of chocolate can last for several minutes. It's impermanent—it is impermanent—but it's quite amazing to watch how long the pleasantness lasts. And then what happens as it ends? The immediate, "Oh, can I have another one?"

I had one interesting experience with raisins. Raisins are kind of fun to play with this, because for the first ten seconds or so of chewing, I don't taste hardly anything. And then suddenly there's this burst of flavor. And then after a little while, still chewing the raisins, the flavor gets weaker, not so strong anymore. The strength of the pleasantness changes. You can just play with the flow of pleasant and unpleasant.

And then there's exploring with respect to our mind states, our moods, our emotions. Most of the hindrances—at least greed and aversion, ill will and sense desire—have a constriction in them. Now with sense desire, we may not notice the unpleasantness right away, because what's going on there is that the mind is thinking about the pleasantness of the thing it wants.

So it's kind of focused on that. When we want something, we're not experiencing the pleasantness directly because we don't have the thing. But we've got the idea in our mind: "If I get that thing, I'll be happy." And so the suffering of sense desire is often masked because we are fooled by the pleasure of thinking about having it in the future—the idea that it will be pleasant in the future. So we miss that sense desire itself has an unpleasant quality to it.

This is another useful and interesting exploration. When you notice the wanting, if you notice that the mind is pulling and wanting something, feel the wanting itself. See if you can notice the feeling tone of wanting. The feeling tone of aversion is much more obviously unpleasant. The anger or frustration or irritation—there's already a tension in there; we can feel that as unpleasant more easily. But emotions, moods, and mind states all have a feeling tone associated with them.

Thoughts can also have a feeling tone—we'll talk more about thoughts starting tomorrow in the instructions. Views and beliefs can have a feeling tone or be associated with a feeling tone. So all of our mental and physical activity has a feeling tone associated with it, and we can get curious about what that feels like. What is the feeling tone?

I would say it's actually quite interesting to begin to recognize that much of our feeling tone is shaped by conditions. I talked earlier about the conditions around feeling tone—the standing on the street corner and feeling a person touch you. There are views and beliefs around that whole situation that will shape whether that feeling of somebody touching you is pleasant or unpleasant. In the study around painful stimuli, whether you could tell in advance if it was going to be more or less painful—there's the knowing in advance, the conditions of what the mind understands before the sensation, that shapes the feeling tone.

This happens all the time. Our views and beliefs shape how we feel, shape the feeling tone of experience—not just how we feel emotionally, but whether we take something to be pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. So much of what we think of as physical pleasant or unpleasant comes because we have ideas about the experience.

The Abhidhamma and commentaries to some of the suttas actually speak to this very directly. They say that while the touch sense base does have a pleasant and unpleasant aspect to it, and our mind door can have the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral aspect to it, the bare sense at our other physical sense doors—sight, sound, smell, taste—the Abhidhamma says that is inherently neutral. There's no inherent sight that is pleasant or unpleasant.

Now, if you cut yourself with a knife, our body is designed to feel pain. Our body is designed to recognize that as unpleasant and take care of itself, to heal itself. So there is the understanding of unpleasant and pleasant possibility at the physical sense door.

I don't know that I completely believe this teaching in the Abhidhamma—that taste, for instance, is inherently neutral—because I think there are some ways that certain tastes will make us gag. Some of the tastes that make us gag happen because of condi-

tioning; I've had that happen. But there are certain flavors, I think, that are almost designed—it's like, "This is dangerous for the body." So I don't know whether this is actually true or not. But I have found it to be a very useful exploration in experience.

To begin to be curious: when there's a physical experience that we're taking to be pleasant or unpleasant, where actually is the unpleasantness or the pleasantness?

An example from my practice: I was doing walking meditation at IMS on a three-month course, so it was pretty deep into the retreat. Actually, pretty much right before this, Carol Wilson had given a talk where she said something like, "If you're noticing aversion, there's something unpleasant in your experience that you're not clearly seeing." And so I was doing walking meditation, happily walking along—lifting, moving, placing—very focused. The room was pretty full, so we were kind of close to each other. And somebody came into the room and slipped in next to me so that it was really tight.

Aversion just flared. I was immediately caught in reactivity: "How could they do that? What's going on?"

And then I remembered what Carol had said. Okay, what is it? What is unpleasant here? What's actually unpleasant?

I went through all of my senses. The person was doing a kind of funny walk, but it wasn't really unpleasant. I had to admit—it's just a funny walk. That's not what I'm reacting to. They weren't touching me, so it wasn't in the touch sense. They weren't making any noises, so it wasn't in the sound door, the ear door.

I went through all the physical senses, and it became clear—the unpleasantness that this reactivity was springing from was not there. It must be something going on in the mind.

I didn't see much at that point, but I kept walking. At some point I noticed a thought: "They're weird." Okay, there's a thought. I didn't quite see that I was reacting to that thought—I didn't see it as unpleasant so much. I just thought it was true.

I kept watching what was going on, and then I saw another thought: "They have bare feet and it's freezing cold out." This was the justification for believing they were weird.

I could see just how ridiculous the whole thing was. It was like—oh my gosh, this aversion is arising from a thought, a belief in the mind that's completely ridiculous. That's where this aversion was coming from.

In the next pass of walking, the aversion was gone, and I was spontaneously doing metta for the person. I did not have to try to let go of the aversion. The seeing clearly—investigating where the unpleasantness actually was, recognizing how the belief of "weirdness" was constructed—that was enough.

This investigation around where the reactivity is actually springing from is tremendously useful. We might be sitting in the dining hall hearing somebody do something, or sitting in the meditation hall—this is classic. You're sitting and somebody rustles next to you, and there's aversion. Is it actually the sound that's unpleasant? Or is it an idea that the person should not be moving, that they have the gall to move when they're sitting next to me?

So much of the time, we are reacting to the unpleasant quality of a thought in our own minds. The vast majority of our unpleasantness is created in this way.

When we react to something in the physical world, like the rustling of sound, the teaching of the Abhidhamma points us toward recognizing that it's not really the sound we're reacting to. This is what I feel that teaching about the neutrality of our physical senses is pointing toward.

When we see something and we like it—we see a flower, for instance—what's being seen is form and color. What we are liking is the idea of the flower in our mind. That's what's pleasant.

This is very useful to understand and to begin to be curious about. It can be seen. We can begin to recognize that when we like something or want something, the question arises: where is the actual pleasantness?

It's largely a construction of our own minds that we think something is pleasant or think it's unpleasant.

Another useful exploration is around neutral experience. What happens when experience feels pretty neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant? We tend to like the highs and the lows. We like being excited about things. We actually even sometimes prefer major drama to neutrality. So be curious about what happens with neutral. It can lead to boredom. When it's not clearly seen, the mind can get bored, thinking something more exciting should be happening.

My exploration around neutral has been interesting. I've found, at least for myself, that when there's neutral experience, that's like a place where our habitual patterns are likely to show up. When things are pretty quiet, not much going on, our mind will just reach out for some habit to bring in.

I was doing walking meditation at one point and experiencing a lot of neutral, actually recognizing there was neutral. I had also heard some things in the hall that when it gets really neutral, that may be a place where the mind is going to go to Nibbana. That's what I believed—that some major amazing thing would happen if I spent a lot of time in neutral. That was the belief I had created. So I was spending a lot of time in neutral, and the belief was, okay, this is really good. It's good that it's neutral and something good is going to happen.

Nothing good happened. It stayed neutral, and the mind went to its deeply conditioned habit of believing that I was a failure. That's what arose: you're a failure. Fortunately, in this situation I saw that this was coming out of the neutrality and the idea that something good should happen. When that didn't happen, the belief that you're a failure arose. I could just smile at it and say, wow, out of nothing, the mind went to "you're a failure." Out of neutral experience.

So this exploration of feeling tones is really fruitful. I would say don't make a huge project out of it, but bring curiosity about it from time to time.

One of the ways these teachings work—one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, would give a talk like this. He would talk about perception or feeling tone or something, and I would go off and try to do it and give myself a headache. I'd come back and report my experience, and he'd say, "Are you trying to do that?" I said, well, yeah, I thought you were telling me to do this. He said, "Nothing I say is anything for you to do. It's information that is like Dharma rain."

This talk is just Dharma information. The very listening to and taking in this information has an effect. At the next sitting or maybe sometime tomorrow while you're practicing, something of this talk might arise in the present moment. There may be, "Oh, maybe feeling tone could be available. Maybe that could be something to explore." It's not something you necessarily have to pick up to do. These talks are often more like explorations of things that can be seen, not necessarily instructions for what you should do next. If you happen to have a curiosity arise about exploring feeling tone, play with it for a little while. See what happens. Playfulness in practice and lightness in practice really support us.

CHAPTER 171

Exploring the Five Aggregates and the Sense of Self

Andrea Fella · 1h03

> *In this retreat talk, Andrea Fella offers a profound exploration of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā) and the process of selfing (ahaṅkāra and mamaṅkāra). Drawing from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), the Buddha's second discourse, she examines how form (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhārā), and consciousness (viññāṇa) constitute the entirety of our experience—and how clinging to these aggregates creates suffering.*
>
> *Fella presents the aggregates not as static categories but as dynamic processes, citing a sutta passage where each aggregate is described as a verb: feeling feels, perception perceives, fabrications fabricate. She explains how mental formations shape all other aspects of experience, using the example of anger conditioning the body, feeling tone, perceptions, and consciousness. The talk addresses why the Buddha taught that these aggregates are not self—because they are uncontrollable, impermanent, and unreliable.*
>
> *The practical heart of the teaching draws on Dōgen's famous instruction: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self." Fella encourages practitioners to investigate strong senses of identity with curiosity rather than aversion, sharing her own transformative experience with self-hatred patterns. She emphasizes that identities are mental formations to be honored and understood—strategies that once helped us navigate life—rather than problems to eliminate. Freedom comes not from getting rid of the sense of self but from understanding its constructed, impermanent nature.*

Last night Jaya talked at the beginning about listening to a talk and how sometimes we might want fewer words or more words. I'd like to offer a little reflection or suggestion about ways to practice with listening to a Dharma talk.

We can sit in meditation and simply receive the sounds. I've done this at times where I just let the words wash through, and every now and then there will be some phrase that really lands, really resonates. That's one way—not to try to track the talk, but just to be available to receive the words and the understanding of what the words mean.

Another way is to be really attentive to the content, understanding the content, but at the same time be very curious about how that content is affecting you in the moment. It's a skill, this capacity to receive content and feel the resonances of that content. That's really taking in the Dharma.

In the suttas, it talks about different circumstances under which people become awakened. Listening to a talk is one of those circumstances. Sitting in meditation is one of those circumstances. Reflecting on the Dharma internally is one of those circumstances. And giving a Dharma talk is one of those circumstances.

One of my very favorite suttas is a story of a teacher who was offering a talk on the topic that I'm going to be speaking about. He was talking to a group of other monastics, and they were asking him a lot of very detailed questions. He was explaining and exploring with them how he sees experience. The last line of the sutta says something like, "And while this discourse was being given, all of the bhikkhus listening to the discourse became awakened, and the venerable one giving the discourse also became awakened." That's inspiring to me, that possibility. May it be so.

To me it also points out how the talk is a Dharma reflection, and I'm exploring it myself as I'm offering it. So can it be received as a reflection? Received and opened to—how does this land? Not so much in the thinking realm, arguing about it or figuring it out, but just noticing. There may be some parts that land and resonate, other parts that don't. You don't have to figure them out. Just let them go in, let them wash through. I talked about Dharma rain the other day. Let it drizzle in. At some point, that teaching, that language, may arise again in a time or place where it really flourishes, leads to understanding and insight.

Now the topic tonight is exploring the five aggregates and the experience of selfing. Last week Tara spoke about the three characteristics—she spoke about anicca and anatta—and Kim spoke the next evening about dukkha. These are characteristics of all experience. Everything that we experience is impermanent, changing constantly at different paces, perhaps, or at least with the perception of different paces of change.

Experience, because it's impermanent, is unreliable as a place where we can say, "Yep, that's where I'm going to be permanently happy. If I could hold on to that, if I could have that, I could be permanently happy." But we can't have anything permanently because it's all changing. Dukkha. Unreliable.

And not self. All experience is not self. Not mine. Not who I am. Not myself.

Tara spoke about ways we might open to this truth of anatta. Sometimes it happens by surprise or spontaneously, simply through meeting experiences—just the continuity of mindfulness. We touch into a space where we're just seeing the changing nature of experience and there's no one here doing any of it. We're just seeing that unfold. So sometimes the practice opens us to understanding. It's a kind of dropping into an understanding of not-self.

And there's another way in to exploring this.

The Zen teacher Dogen had a famous quote: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be awakened by all things."

This points to an exploration not of "Can I find anattā? Can I experience anattā?" but rather, "What is this experience that I think is self?" To explore that experience directly. We feel it—we feel a sense of self at times, sometimes strongly. And the encouragement is to be curious about that. What is that like? Is it what we think it is?

When we have a sense of self, we don't usually investigate it. We just take it for granted to be what it seems to be presenting itself as: a solid, stable something that's here. We don't actually begin to be curious about it. We believe it without question, don't even reflect on it.

But as we start to be curious about it, to bring dhammavicaya—that aspect of investigation—to this experience of the sense of self, something shifts. The sense of self is not nothing. It is an arising experience. And so we investigate it like we investigate any other arising experience, like an arising emotion or an arising thought. "Oh, here's the sense of self. What's that? What's happening there? What's that like?"

As we do that, it begins to reveal its nature as impermanent, conditioned, and unreliable—not the thing that we think it is. So as we explore curiosity about this sense of self, we begin to directly, experientially understand, feel into, recognize that this sense of self is not what we assume it to be.

The Buddha talked about this sense of self as arising in a process. We could call it the selfing process. He used the phrase "I-making and my-making." And he really talked about this in relationship to another teaching called the five aggregates.

We've mentioned the five aggregates but not gone into much depth on them yet. I think Kim mentioned them in her description of dukkha, because one of the definitions of dukkha is that the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha. The five aggregates can be

understood as basically the processes of body and mind—everything that we're experiencing, the tumbling on of our mental and physical processes. And clinging to that is suffering.

So these mental and physical processes called the aggregates, the five aggregates, are: form, which is the physical realm—body and all of the physical realm around us; and then the other four aggregates, which are mental processes. The aggregates are understood actually to be both processes of body and mind and also the results of those processes. So feeling, for instance, is understood to be both the process by which feeling happens and the result—the pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant aspect of experience.

Form, feeling, perception (which Jaya spoke about last night), mental formations or volitional formations, and consciousness. These are the five aggregates, and I'll describe them in a little bit more depth in just a moment.

The Buddha spoke about our experience in different ways, for different purposes I think, pointing to different aspects of our experience. One of these ways to look at the body-mind processes is through these five aggregates—this physical aggregate of form and these four mental processes that make up our experience. Another way that the Buddha spoke about our experience was through the six sense bases: the five physical sense bases plus the sense base of the mind. Our experience can also be seen in those terms.

This exploration of the aggregates the Buddha particularly pointed to for the value of seeing how we cling to them, because that clinging to these aspects of experience is where we tend to create a sense of self. Recognizing these aggregates in our experience is something we're already doing. We've talked about most of these in various ways.

Form is body—the four elements, the physical experience of hardness, softness, all of that realm of physical experience. Plus what's described as form derived from those basic elements, which includes sight, sound, smell, and taste. So form is also the sight that contacts the eye; it's touching form. Sound is the wave through the atmosphere.

It's vibrating the air, and then it touches our eardrum and impacts form to create the sound. So this is all understood to be form.

And then feeling—we talked about that at some length. The process of feeling, sensing whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Here is where we begin to really see this sense of the aggregates as being both the process by which something happens and the result of that process.

In the suttas, there's one description of these aggregates as verbs, as opposed to nouns. We could think of pleasant experience, unpleasant experience, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience as being the *what* of our experience in the realm of feeling. But in the sutta, there's this person asking the question: "Why is it called feeling?" And the response is: "It feels. That's why it's called feeling." What does it feel? It feels pleasant. It feels unpleasant. It feels neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

With perception, a similar thing. Jaya spoke about perception last night—this recognizing aspect of experience. We recognize form and color in the realm of sight; perception gets layered on itself in a way. The result of perception, the result of the process of perception, is this recognition of something. But with the photons hitting the eye, the first thing that happens is this contact and the recognition of something being seen. What's seen initially is really just form and color, but we often don't see that part. We very quickly see a person or a book or a plant or something like that.

Sometimes when the mind gets really quiet, we can see the layered or staged nature of perception happening. On one retreat, I was sitting outside and turned my head, and my eyes landed on a shape. The mind kind of clicked into recognizing the shape: jagged. Then it clicked into recognizing the color: green. Then it clicked into recognizing: leaf. Just like that. It's a process of perception.

The sutta also describes this: "Why is it called perception? It perceives—that's why it's called perception. What does it perceive? It perceives color, it perceives form, it perceives sound."

We can see this in our experience, this process of perception. Particularly as the mind gets a little more quiet, you might notice this—sitting in the hall, hearing a sound of maybe the turkeys. The first thing is just hearing, but you might notice the mind then say the word "turkey" and think, "Well, my mind is labeling things." That is also sometimes the way perception works. It puts the word into our mind. It's recognizing experience.

And then consciousness, another aspect of mental experience. This is often understood to be the very basic knowing of experience, usually defined in terms of the six sense bases. With every sense base, there's the object and the knowing of it—the sight and the knowing of it, the sound and the knowing of it, the taste and the knowing of it. We can actually begin to notice that difference between the experience and the knowing of it. We may talk more about this as we go on.

And then volitional formations, mental formations—the fifth of the aggregates. This is the whole realm of mental experience that we often think of as the mental activity: thoughts, emotions, beliefs, ideas, views, states of mind. This includes things like states of concentration, peace, anger, irritation, boredom, ideas, beliefs, views. This is a big territory.

We've talked about working with this aspect of experience, the *what* of this, the mental formations. We've explored working with emotions, working with difficult states, working with the hindrances, working with the seven factors of awakening. All of this is mental formation. Working with thoughts, exploring being aware of thoughts—thoughts are mental formation.

The process of volitional formations is described in a little more depth in that sutta where the aggregates are described as verbs. I'm going to read Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation because it works with the wordplay that the Buddha used for this particular aggregate.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates this aggregate, which is often translated as mental formation, as "fabrication"—something constructed in the mind. All of these formations are both constructed in the mind, resulting from conditioning, and they also construct. They tumble forward; they construct.

And why are they called fabrications? Because they fabricate fabricated things. Thus they are called fabrications. What do they fabricate as a fabricated thing? For the sake of form, they fabricate form as a fabricated thing. For the sake of feeling, they fabricate feeling as a fabricated thing. For the sake of perception, they fabricate perception as a fabricated thing. For the sake of fabrications, they fabricate fabrications as a fabricated thing. For the sake of consciousness, they fabricate consciousness as a fabricated thing.

What this is pointing to is that the mental activities in our mind—all of the thoughts, ideas, beliefs, views, emotions, wholesome states—condition the rest of our experience. Arising in this moment, they shape the next moment.

How can we see this? We actually can see this. Take something like anger, the arising of anger. Anger shapes the body, it shapes form, often resulting in experience of heat, pressure in the body. So that mental formation fabricates the body in a particular way, maybe even distorting the face. Feeling tone usually becomes unpleasant when anger is arising. The perceptions we have, how we perceive things, become distorted through a filter of anger. We may perceive somebody attacking us or perceive someone doing us wrong as we have this filter.

Our consciousness is actually directed by filters like this. When we are angry, we tend to take in things that confirm. There's a confirmation bias. When we're in a particular state of mind, our consciousness tends to pull things out of experience that confirm that state and tends to ignore things that don't confirm that state. So our consciousness, what consciousness receives to be experienced, is shaped by our mental formations. And anger, this arising of anger, tends to construct more anger—the mental formation of more anger.

This is something we can also be curious about, seeing the conditioning nature of how our mind states affect our experience. We've been talking about this, noticing how thoughts affect your body. This is where this teaching comes from.

The five aggregates are happening all the time. Right now, while you're listening, the five aggregates are tumbling on. There's sound waves coming through the room that are hitting the ear. Form contacting form on your eardrum. That resonance is perceived as voice. And through the process of perception and a lot of conditioning, there's understanding of the words. So there's the perception, understanding the meaning of the words. And then there's the feeling tone—in this case, probably more related to the perception of the meaning rather than the actual vibratory energy of the sound. The feeling of how it lands: pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This may be related to mental formations that may be arising—confusion, interest, curiosity, frustration, annoyance—feeling tone associated with that, and the consciousness of all of it.

Right now, the experience you're noticing can be understood through this framework of the five aggregates. You don't have to divide up your experience this way. You don't have to try to divide up your experience this way. I'm pointing to this because there are times in which it's very useful to understand experience in this way. And the Buddha spoke about the sense of selfing coming up in dependence on these particular aspects of experience.

In his second discourse, the Anattalakkhana Sutta, the Buddha points to some of the main ways that we consider experience to be self and why these aggregates are not self. The first thing he points to in this sutta is

that these aggregates, the tumbling on of these aggregates, is not under our control—not under our ultimate control. There is some way in which we control the body. For instance, I can think and decide I'm going to pick up the glass right now. So there's some measure of control that we have. But ultimately, it's pretty limited, the measure of control that we have.

The understanding, in a way, of what we think of as self, and where we get caught around the sense of self—in meditation, we may feel like we're watching our mind, and the mind wanders, and we get frustrated. "I'm meditating. Why is my mind wandering? That should be under my control." Well, the wandering mind, the thinking mind, is a mental formation. This is what the Buddha said about the lack of control. I'll read a couple of these; I won't go through all of them for each aggregate.

"Form is not self. If form were self, the body would not lend itself to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of the body, 'Let my body be thus, let my body not be thus.' But because form is not self, the body leads to affliction, and it is not possible to say, 'Let my body be thus, let my body not be thus.'"

"Mental formations are not self. If mental formations were self, they would not lend themselves to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of mental formations, 'Let my mental formations be thus.'" Wouldn't that be nice? How often is that possible? We are seeing how rarely that is possible. Sometimes our mind is amenable to that. "May my mind have ease," and sometimes there's some ease. But much of the time—no.

And the Buddha says, "But because mental formations are not self, it is not possible to say of them, 'Let my mental formations be thus, let them not be thus.'" It's not a mistake. It's the nature of experience to not be ultimately controllable. This should be a relief, actually.

And yet we get to look at it. We get to observe it. We get to observe experience. The amazing thing about this practice and this process is that the mental formation of wise mindfulness—also not self; wouldn't it be nice to say, "May mindfulness be thus"—but the cultivation of this, because of that other teaching around mental formations, that mental formations shape experience, means that when mindfulness arises, it tends to shape experience in a certain way. It tends to shape more mindfulness. It tends to shape wisdom and understanding.

So we use this understanding to cultivate the wholesome mind, to observe and let go of the unwholesome. Mindfulness has this amazing property that we've talked about: when we bring attention to the wholesome, it increases its likelihood of coming up in the future. When we bring our mindful attention to the unwholesome, to the reactive states of mind, it creates the conditions for it to arise less frequently in our experience over time.

So this aspect of control is a common way that we identify. The sense of self thinks it should be in charge. And if it runs up against not being in charge, there's suffering. That feeling like I should be able to control my mind and be continuously mindful leads to

suffering, because we believe in that sense of control. It's just a process. When we can simply understand the uncontrollability of experience and not hold on to "I should be able to control," there's so much freedom. So much freedom.

The next piece the Buddha points to in this sutta is the impermanent nature of each of the aggregates. They're uncontrollable—we can't ultimately control these processes tumbling on—and they're impermanent. They're arising and passing away. Body experience arising and passing away. Now, the body does have some stability.

And yet we understand through the reflections that John was pointing to this morning: I'm of the nature to age. I'm of the nature to sicken. I'm of the nature to die. The body is impermanent.

Feelings are impermanent. The mental aspects of the aggregates are rapidly impermanent. When we start looking at feelings, at feeling tone, we see how rapidly they change. A sensation arises and passes, and the feeling tone with that arises and passes. Sometimes there's a little more stability, as when the mind enters into states of concentration. There can be periods of multiple minutes or even a couple of hours that have a stability of feeling tone, but ultimately it passes away.

So we can be curious about the impermanent nature of the aggregates—the Buddha points to this curiosity. Perception arising and passing away. You walk into the dining hall and there are many perceptions: perceptions about the food, perceptions about the people, perceptions about how I am in relationship to all of it. And then the mental formations, impermanent—all of the ideas and views and beliefs that arise in relationship to those perceptions, all coming and going. Consciousness of all of it, also coming and going.

The Buddha pointed to this: these aggregates are impermanent. Because they are impermanent, they are unreliable. We cannot say, "I can land on this and I will be happy. I can hold on to this thing forever and I will be happy." Because it will ultimately fall apart. It will ultimately dissipate.

Given this impermanent, unreliable nature of experience, the Buddha then asks: does it make sense to call something that is impermanent and unreliable a self? And he answers no. He says it doesn't make any sense to call something impermanent and unreliable a self.

This is really based on what our intuitive sense of self might be. We feel like a sense of self is something stable, continuing through time. Somehow we have this notion that I'm the same person I was ten years ago, that there's something continuing. A kind of process, a tumbling on of these aggregates—this process is happening, but there's no

stability there. And what we think of as self usually has some notion of stability. It also often has some notion of control, the sense that if only I could control experience, then I could have things be pleasant all the time.

This part of the sutta, in my impressionistic reading of it, is really encouraging us to investigate: what do we call self? What do we think of as self? When it feels strong, what is it? What is that experience?

This is where Dogen's teaching points. Get to know this experience. Study this sense of self. Explore. Understand. Just be curious about it.

The sense of self, in the Buddha's understanding, in the Buddhist understanding, is not nothing—it is an arising experience. Like frustration is an arising experience. It's not nothing. There are resonances with that. The arising experience of frustration has a shaping aspect to it. It shapes our relationship to the next moment. It shapes our feeling. It shapes our body. It shapes our perceptions. It shapes our consciousness.

And so the arising of these mental formations, these feelings, these emotions, has an effect. We see that effect, we can feel that effect, we get to know that effect by looking at our mind states.

The Buddha speaks of the sense of self as being a mental formation. It's an arising experience. The term that's used is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—identity view. It's an arising belief. The sense of self is a belief. And so it doesn't quite feel like emotion; it's more of a view. The sense of self is more of a view. So it's an arising experience that can be explored, that can be felt into, that can be known.

With respect to these aggregates, the Buddha pointed to different ways we identify. The first way he talked about is: I am this thing. I am form. I am feeling. I am perception. I am mental formation. I am consciousness.

As I go through these, you might just listen and see if they resonate with something familiar for you. For instance, "I am the body"—that's identification with form. Or "I am this emotion. I am miserable." Before I met the practice, I really identified as being miserable, unhappy, as someone who was never going to be happy. And there were times when I experienced happiness. What my mind did when that happened was, "Well, yes, I know I'm happy now, but I know that really what I am is miserable." So I was identifying with the miserableness. "I am miserable." Not understanding, not seeing that miserableness comes and goes like happiness comes and goes. Identifying with that. Identifying with mental functions: I'm the one who thinks, I'm the one who feels or knows. So that's one form of identification—I am something.

The second form of identification is possessiveness. Something is mine. The body is mine. Things belong to me. Ideas are mine. I've suffered a lot around identifying with the ownership of ideas.

The third is a sense of being inside of something. For instance, "I am inside of the body." Maybe that feeling is familiar. I've felt all of these—that the body is mine, mine to do with what I want; I am the body; and I am in the body. They're different, slightly different forms of identification.

Now, the Buddha goes through all four of these ways of identifying against all five of the aggregates, so there are twenty ways of personality view, of identity view coming into being. I've tasted a few of these. I can't say that I understand what it means to be inside of feeling—that one doesn't quite resonate for me. But "I am inside of consciousness"—

That one I've experienced at times—that sense of identification in a state of deep concentration, of being inside a space of vast consciousness or vast awareness. A little identification in that beautiful vast state: I'm inside of that.

Or the next one: something is inside of me. Consciousness is in me. Emotions are in me.

So again, the exploration of this is an encouragement to just be curious about how the sense of self is experienced. I don't encourage picking this up, trying to remember all of these categories, and trying to think, "Okay, is it feeling that's inside of me, or do I think I belong to feeling, or is it mine?" Just let this be, again, the dharma rain. There may be times when a strong identification comes up and there's a curiosity about observing it—perhaps a recognition of, "Wow, I really feel like I own this," or "I really feel like I am this." Believe it completely. I am miserable. That is who I am. We may begin to see that and remember, "Okay, well, that's an identification." Just be curious.

In a more holistic way, we could say—or just a way to explore experience without trying to put all these categories and labels on it—I'm going to describe a few ways of exploring sense of self that I've experienced. There are so many different ways a sense of self is experienced. And one of the powers of this curiosity is simply to begin wondering: when is a sense of self strong? How long does that sense of self last? Is it the same sense of self that lasts all day long, or are there a whole bunch of different senses of self arising? There are many, many senses of self and identities that happen.

One example of this was very stark in my experience. On one three-month retreat at IMS, there were questions in the hall in the morning, as we sometimes do here. Somebody asked a question that created a whole huge papañca storm in my mind. This ana-

lytical sense of me arose: "I'm right, and I know how that question should be asked and how it should be responded to." There was just this whole—me. It was so powerful. And it was pretty uncomfortable. I was feeling the unpleasantness of this sense of self, the clinging around it, the contraction around it.

When the morning question period ended, that sense of self was lingering. It was just there. So I went out and did walking meditation, observing and watching the sense of self, feeling how contracted it was, how much it was like "me" and all the analytical thinking and how smart I was feeling. I was just feeling all of it. And it was challenging and unpleasant to be with.

I was doing walking right in front of the door at IMS when this huge truck drove up. It was loud and banging, the door opened, the brakes squealed, and in a split second my mind switched from that analytical, forty-year-old, argumentative self to a two-year-old. "It's a truck! Oh my gosh, wow, that's so cool!" It was just like that.

I think it was because I was watching, curious about the sense of self. I didn't learn much about that analytical sense of self except that it was suffering. In terms of how it was formed—I felt the suffering of it. But what I got to see was that when conditions changed, when the mind was drawn to the big, noisy sound of the truck, it just delighted in it like a two-year-old would. The impermanence of that sense of self, the complete unrelatedness of this new sense of self to the previous one—just no connection whatsoever. Not even in the same ballpark.

So we go through many senses of self and can switch in a moment.

Curiosity is valuable here, and I'd say a good time to explore the sense of self is when it's pretty strong, when there's a clear sense of identity coming up.

One piece that's important to know, to understand, and to honor—really honor—about senses of self is that they have been constructed in our lives as strategies to navigate our world. Many of them have served us, helped us through big messes, helped us find safety. In observing the sense of self, we can have this idea or overlay that we're supposed to see not-self, or we're supposed to somehow get rid of these identities, or we're not supposed to have identities. Identities are simply mental formations. They arise and can be known.

Much as we talk about meeting our suffering and difficult states of mind with honoring and respecting—acknowledging yes, this is happening—we can explore these senses of identity in a similar way, honoring them, almost bowing to them. Like that analytical me—that served me a lot. And yes, there was a lot of clinging to it, a lot of thinking I needed to be right all the time, and the suffering that came with that. But the pattern it-

self is not wholly bad. It's simply a pattern that was navigating life. And so in the observing of it, we hold it with a sense of care and respect. This is a part of this being that can be known and understood.

That's a big piece I want to emphasize in this exploration: when you see a sense of self, don't think of it as, "Well, I'm supposed to see the not-self in this somehow." Just notice what you're noticing about this identity, how it's shaping things.

Often when a sense of self feels really clear, it's connected with habits and patterns, old deep conditioning. Identities around certain emotions—pride, shame, feelings of unworthiness, self-hatred—that pattern was very strong in my practice. And just having the patience to notice that sense of "I'm a failure, I'm no good," the courage to meet that, was completely transformative.

That pattern around self-hatred is something I observed over the course of years. At times it was more powerful than my capacity to be mindful, and I had to simply set it aside and take a walk. But other times, I could be right there with it, watching it arise. At one point, seeing the feeling of "I'm a failure" descend as I left the meditation hall, I went back to my room and realized there was actually some capacity to be with this. So I sat in meditation kind of late into the night, just watching the arising of that.

I'd see that it was coming and going. That was a powerful piece—I could see it wasn't always there in that time. I was sitting, and then there would be "you're a failure." I would just feel this shame and this withering sense. And there it is. Contact, unpleasant. Then there would be a space, and it would arise again. I'd see it: contact, unpleasant, withering feeling. I just watched it, watched it appear, disappear, appear, disappear.

At some point, the mind saw that arising thought—"you're a failure"—and was right there with the thought as it arose, seeing it arise out of nothing. No sense of shame or anything. It was just arising. This thought was just arising. And then came a kind of recognition: what's going on here is that I'm believing that thought. That's what's making this experience of self-hatred. That's what's making this identity—believing that thought.

The seeing of that, just in a moment, and the self-hatred vanished. Very, very powerful seeing. The next moment was a moment of complete bliss. And then there was the idea, "I figured it out! Never again." And then I saw that—okay, yeah, probably not. That recognition made the bliss become more just contentment. Just, yeah, right now, it's not here.

That moment was extremely powerful. It didn't get rid of all of those thoughts, but it really undermined the belief in them. So the pattern of self-hatred went from this deep rut that was nearly impossible to get out of, to a kind of wide valley of "Oh, there's that thought. Yeah, I don't need to believe that thought."

So this investigation, this curiosity, this honoring of these patterns—not to get rid of them or fix them or change them, but to understand. As Kim mentioned the other night, the practice is to understand dukkha. To understand the sense of self.

Understand it. The freedom comes with the understanding.

Let's sit for just a moment.

Just remembering that you don't have to remember any of this. Just continue noticing what's arising and honoring it, meeting that with kindness and wisdom and wise attention. Moment after moment.

Thank you for listening to the Dharma.

CHAPTER 172

Wisdom and Freedom (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this profound talk from a month-long retreat at Spirit Rock, Andrea Fella illuminates the Third Noble Truth—the cessation of suffering—and the central role of wisdom (paññā) in realizing freedom. Drawing from her teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya's emphasis that "the purpose of practice is the development of wisdom," she explores how wisdom functions as an active quality of mind that recognizes suffering, releases craving, and realizes liberation.

Fella offers an intimate account of her own journey with anger, describing how simple mindfulness practice in daily life—without any formal meditation training—led to a transformative moment of non-arising. This personal narrative illustrates the gradual nature of the path, likened in the suttas to rope slowly wearing away through exposure to the elements. She explains the three types of wisdom: sutamayā paññā (wisdom from hearing/learning), cintāmayā paññā (wisdom from reflection), and bhāvanāmayā paññā (wisdom from direct practice and insight).

The talk explores Nibbāna not as something to attain, but as the absence of creed, aversion, and delusion—"visible in this life" and accessible in ordinary moments. Fella describes various ways wisdom manifests: shifts in perspective around difficulty, seeing the conditioned nature of experience, recognizing experience as mental constructs, and witnessing the non-arising of reactivity. She emphasizes that recognizing wisdom at work strengthens it, and that while insights are impermanent, they leave an indelible understanding that supports continued practice through the gradual fading of defilements.

My heart feels so full sitting here and seeing you and knowing the work that you're doing, what you are exploring and seeing and understanding.

We've been here for three weeks, and it is such a privilege to witness what's unfolding for those of you who I'm meeting with, but also in talking with the other teachers, what's unfolding for everyone. About seventy-eight different retreats happening. And an amazing quality of the Dharma is that it meets all seventy-eight retreats.

The other night Jaya spoke about a kaleidoscope and how the Dharma can be like a kaleidoscope. The kaleidoscope has all the little bits of glass or crystals—I have one with shells in it that I particularly love. The same shells, but a little turn and you see it

in a completely different way. The Dharma can be like that. We can look at the Dharma from different perspectives, different angles, to get different understandings perhaps, but all pointing at the same truth.

Tonight I'd like to turn that kaleidoscope a little bit and continue the exploration of the last few nights on the Four Noble Truths and the path by orienting around the Third Noble Truth and what supports that—what supports that realization of the release of dukkha, the realization of the release of suffering. There will be some overlap in terms of what others have said, but to me it feels like this is a really good place to linger, this topic.

One of my core teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, has said that the purpose of practice is the development of wisdom. Wisdom is found in the list of the five faculties, which are five qualities that support the path of practice. Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about them as five qualities that are alive moment to moment in our practice and that may shape how we're meeting the experience in a particular moment.

These five faculties are confidence, faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. Perhaps sometimes faith is strong, and that motivates energy, that motivates us to practice, which develops the mindfulness. The momentum of mindfulness creates that concentration which allows a cultivation of the wisdom. And then that wisdom further supports our confidence, supports our wish, our willingness, our engagement with the practice.

Sometimes wisdom may be very strong in clearly seeing. At other times, mindfulness may be strong in seeing things, but not with the clarity to just have things go poof—to have some of those reactive patterns and habits go poof. And so that's a time when wisdom is being developed.

The wisdom connected with the path of practice is associated with understanding suffering. Jaya mentioned this the other night. The Buddha said, "I teach only suffering and the end of suffering." So all of the understanding that is developed is looking at understanding how suffering arises, the things that put it together, the causes of suffering, the possibility of its release, and the skills, the tools, the practices that support the cultivation of seeing that release. That's the classic definition of wisdom, really—the seeing of the Four Noble Truths.

As Jaya spoke about, it's present at the beginning as an understanding and is with us all the way along the path and is what is understood at the end. We come to completely see through how our minds create not only the suffering, not only the craving, the clinging—those being qualities of mind that our minds are engaging in—but our minds are also creating everything that we're clinging to.

Wisdom sounds like something—I don't know, just the definition of wisdom we may have from our lives sounds like something that is like something we'd have in a book. But in the practice, as I've come to understand it through exploring the experience of wisdom, it's an activity of mind. Wisdom is that function of mind, that activity which engages with those actions connected with the Four Noble Truths.

The activity of wisdom is to recognize suffering, to understand it. When there's an understanding of suffering, wisdom is working. The activity of wisdom is to let go of the craving. When that happens, wisdom is working. The activity of wisdom is to realize the release of suffering. And the entire path is cultivated through this development of wisdom.

Wisdom develops in relationship to seeing the impermanent, unreliable, conditioned nature of experience, seeing the not-self nature of experience. And as that wisdom grows strong, as we clearly see the nature of experience in this way, the mind, imbued with that wisdom, the activity of wisdom releases the suffering.

It releases the suffering when there is clinging, and it also recognizes that these things are not worth picking up. So this framing of realizing the release of suffering—sometimes we do experience it that way, as a feeling of release. Other times, it's felt as something much subtler: just not picking up anything that would lead to craving. Just not picking it up. The mind simply doesn't go there. It understands that way leads to suffering. There's just no movement in that direction to pick it up.

This not picking up is the freedom. This is Nibbana—the ending of suffering. And in the suttas, it's primarily described by what it is not: non-clinging, the absence of craving, the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. Nibbana is not something we get. It's not a thing to get. It is the absence of craving, the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion.

Jaya quoted this the other night: "This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

That phrase—as I was reading this the last couple of days, thinking about this talk—the phrase "non-reliance on craving" really landed for me. It startled me. Why would I rely on craving? But when I look at what my mind does, that's exactly what it does. It relies on craving to navigate the world. Craving believes that craving is the answer. And so we rely on it to find happiness. This phrase, "non-reliance on craving"—for me, it just touched the heart, let it soften a little, let that phrase reverberate.

One of the clearest definitions in the suttas of Nibbana is the ending or absence of greed, aversion, and delusion—the extinction of greed, aversion, and delusion. I'm going to read a few quotes strung together. I think they're from a book by Nyanaponica called *The Word of the Buddha*, a little booklet that gathered all the teachings of the Buddha. The Four Noble Truths are said to encompass all the teachings of the Buddha, and under each truth, he brought together the relevant teachings. It's one of my favorite books.

Under the Third Noble Truth, he put together these quotes:

"The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called Nibbana. Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed, with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is Nibbana—immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.

"And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing remains to be done. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, nor tastes, nor contacts of any kind—neither the desired nor the undesired—can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is the mind. Gained is deliverance. This is peace. This is exquisite."

The resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana.

In those quotes, there are a couple of phrases that really resonate with me. One: "If lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one experiences no mental pain or grief." That sounds pretty good. It doesn't mean there won't be physical pain, and it doesn't mean there isn't a feeling of resonating with the suffering of the world. Dispassion allows

room for vast compassion. When the heart is not constricted with greed, aversion, and delusion, there's room for so much connection, so much resonance of heart with both the joy and the sorrow, held with balance of mind.

Sometimes I think we might hear these descriptions and find them sounding kind of flat. Why would I want that? But as we practice, we do begin to get little tastes of what it means when the mind has let go of greed, aversion, and delusion. And it feels anything but disconnected and flat. It feels incredibly connected. So: "experiences no mental pain and grief."

The other phrase that strikes me is "visible in this life." This description of freedom, of nibbana being the extinction of greed, aversion, and delusion—the little experiences I've had along the way of when the mind does let go of greed or aversion, or sees clearly—this is a kind of experience I've seen as possible not just when sitting on a cushion with eyes closed in stillness, but when I'm in my kitchen cutting an apple. Freedom in a moment. The mind not going somewhere. The possibility of the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion in this life. And my aspiration is in this lived life, not just in this life sitting in meditation. This possibility of carrying what we're doing here into the world.

This cultivation of wisdom that allows for this release—wisdom being the wholesome quality of mind that does the activity of letting go—the cultivation of wisdom is gradual. Kim spoke to this, about the gradual nature of the path, bringing in the image of fading away with viraga, dispassion. I love that in the teaching of liberative dependent arising, or transcendent dependent origination, this aspect of the path, viraga, is actually a metaphor—this fading away. Raga is like the fading of color of a cloth that's been dyed a bright color. You might put that cloth in the sun and it gradually fades. So that's the process: the fading away of greed, aversion, and delusion in our minds.

There are many stories in the suttas of sudden awakenings, but most of those happened after a long time of practice. So there is that gradual cultivation, the gradual development of wisdom.

There's another analogy in the suttas about the rigging of a ship wearing away. The story goes something like this: after a ship has been out at sea for six months, where the rigging has been getting used, exposed to the elements, splashed by salt water, exposed to the sun and the wind—at some point that ship gets hauled up onto dry land. It sits on dry land and it's exposed to more elements: the cold, the sand blowing on it from the land, more wind and sun and water. Over the course of months, that rigging rots away. It falls apart.

I think of this as the rotting rope analogy. Think about a piece of rope you might come across on a beach somewhere. If you come back to that beach day after day, you might not see much change in that rope. But maybe one day, six months later, you come back and think, "Oh, that piece of rope is still here. Let me pick it up and take it away." And you try to pick it up, and it just disintegrates because it's been worn away moment by moment, day by day, by the elements.

This is an analogy for the path of practice, for its gradual nature. Each moment of mindfulness is like a grain of sand across that rope. It takes many moments for the clinging to wear away.

Now, that may sound depressing. But there's a saying: the Dharma is good in the beginning, the Dharma is good in the middle, and the Dharma is good in the end. Because we do taste—we get little tastes of wisdom at work. And I heard that James told a little bit of my story. Within the first couple months of my practice, I saw something about anger. Anger was something that was making me pretty non-functional at the time, and I was looking at it just in a really basic way. After having spent a couple months observing it in daily life, there came this moment of seeing. I had no training whatsoever other than a little sentence in a book that said, "Try observing your difficult emotions rather than acting on them." Okay, I guess I'll see what that's like.

And the first time I really saw the anger, it was like, "Wow, I did not know this hurt." My mind had believed—that reliance on craving and clinging—the mind had believed that anger was going to do something for me.

It was going to make the person I was angry at miserable so that I would somehow feel better because they were miserable. This was what the mind was doing with this idea.

The first time I really felt it, it was like, wow, that is so painful. I have no idea what to do with this. I guess I go back to work. I was sitting at my computer, frozen, when this happened.

I had set an intention to wake up every time I experienced anger, and I did that for months. The process was slow and gradual. I did begin noticing that the anger wasn't as strong when I noticed it. Now, retrospectively, I know that the mindfulness was becoming very attuned to anger and arising more quickly as the anger was coming up. So it wasn't as painful, it wasn't as strong. It was much easier to say, "Oh yeah, there it is," and get on with my day.

I didn't have any guidance on feeling it in my body. I knew nothing, really—I was such a beginner. But just the power of this simple, simple practice in daily life was remarkable. I had not ever sat down to meditate while I was doing this.

And then one day, I was in my kitchen cutting an apple. The memory of the person I was angry at arose—we were together at a fruit stand in the Sacramento River Valley. I could see that the memory was connected to what I was doing, to cutting the apple. That was a conditioned thing; I could see that.

What I'm describing here took place in a split second, though it takes a while to describe. I saw that thought about this person I was angry with, and I felt this freight train of energy, this pull of "Oh yeah, I really want to jump on that thought and think more thoughts to get angry." I felt the intention toward anger there.

And what happened in that moment—and again, I know this retrospectively—is that wisdom arose. Not consciously, really, but in a way that recognized: that way lies anger. And my mind said, "I don't have to get on that thought. I don't have to go there."

I didn't believe it, because I had not had this person come up in my mind without anger arising. So I was standing there, waiting for the anger to come up. And it did not arise.

I sank to my knees with gratitude. It was a moment of seeing the non-arising of something that had been so powerful in my experience. And I knew: this stuff works. I will be doing this for the rest of my life. This works.

So this is the practice, just in a simple way. And I had never even sat down to meditate before I saw this. Actually, it was around that time that I thought, "Gee, maybe they call it practice because it helps you see these things in daily life. So maybe I'll sit down and meditate." That experience pulled me into the practice.

The practice of satipaṭṭhāna, the gradual development of seeing experience even in this really simple way, can give rise to very profound understanding. Wisdom growing, in that case really grain by grain, just over the course of those months. Wisdom developing around the suffering of anger. And the wisdom strong enough in that moment when I cut the apple to direct the mind not to go there. I didn't have to do the letting go. I didn't do anything other than stand there with a knife in my hand, watching in amazement as my mind didn't get angry.

Satipaṭṭhāna, our practice, cultivates this wisdom moment by moment. So I want to spend some time exploring the cultivation of wisdom. My teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, spoke about wisdom a lot. He used this word more than most other teachers I've had, and it caught my attention.

He would talk about wisdom at work—"see wisdom at work," he would say. He would talk about using wisdom reflections to help us in our practice.

In the suttas, there's a teaching about three kinds of wisdom. First, there's the wisdom of hearing, learning, listening: *sutamaya paññā*. *Suta* meaning hearing, *maya* meaning to bring into being, and *paññā* meaning wisdom—the wisdom that is brought into being through listening. This is the kind of wisdom that is received from our teachers, from reading books, from studying the Dharma. We have to learn the wisdom somewhere. The Buddha is said to have understood all of this on his own, figured it out without any books or anybody to help him with these wisdom understandings. The rest of us need some help. So there's the learning we engage in through receiving the teachings.

The second kind of wisdom is *cintamaya paññā*—the wisdom that is brought into being through reflection. We hear, we listen, we read, we take in the Dharma, and then we think about it. Does this make sense?

I met this practice through a friend sending me a book when I wrote to her saying I was in the Peace Corps, far away from all of my friends. My friend sent me a book where I read that line: "Try observing your emotions instead of acting on them." I thought about that sentence and concluded it didn't make any sense to me. Wouldn't that just make me more angry? But I did have a little bit of faith because my friend said this was useful, so I borrowed the faith of my friend. And I was at wit's end anyway—nothing else had worked, so I might as well try this. There wasn't real intellectual understanding there, but there was a little bit of willingness to try it out. That's the faith piece. I borrowed the faith of my friend and just tried it out. And then, as I described, within a few months I began to understand how it worked.

That connects with the third kind of wisdom: *bhāvanāmaya paññā*, the wisdom connected with practice, with actually engaging in the practices—not just thinking about it, but doing it. Stepping into the process of looking at experience. This includes both the cultivation of wisdom through practice and the direct experience of wisdom itself, the arising of insight and understanding.

The second kind of wisdom, *cintamaya paññā*, can be really useful in our *bhāvanāmaya paññā*—in the time when we're actually sitting in meditation and cultivating our mindfulness practice. There are times when the mind is a little wobbly or caught by something, and we can drop in wisdom that might help us. Many of you have talked about this. Almost intuitively sometimes this happens. Sometimes wisdom will do this on its own.

I think I mentioned at one point that I was sitting in meditation and a phrase arose—something a teacher had said to me in an interview a year earlier. That phrase arose, and it was exactly the wisdom the mind needed in that moment. It wasn't something I tried to do, but wisdom that arose in a verbal way. "Oh yes, that sounds useful. Let's explore that." Sometimes thoughts can be connected with wisdom, and we can actually use thoughts skillfully in our practice. When we're a little out of balance or wobbly, we might drop in a reminder: "This is impermanent. This is just constructed phenomenon." Sometimes that wisdom can go in quite deeply and allow for a release. But sometimes it just gives us a little more space, lets us settle back and recognize, "Okay, right, I can be with this." Understanding at the intellectual level can support us to meet things at the experiential level.

At one point, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, in one of my interviews with him, asked me to recognize wisdom at work in my experience. "What is it like for you when wisdom is at work?" I said, "I don't think I know what you mean, Sayadaw. I don't think I get it."

But I went off and started to hold that question in my mind. I wasn't really trying to figure it out, but when I noticed some kind of easing of experience or a release from being caught by something, I just thought, well, wisdom must be working there somehow. That's how I began this exploration.

Over the course of quite a bit of time, I've come to see so many different ways that wisdom works. And what I've begun to understand too is that this recognition—because wisdom is a wholesome quality, like concentration, like mindfulness—when we become aware with mindfulness of wholesome qualities, it strengthens them. So becoming aware when wisdom is working tends to strengthen wisdom. This is another way to cultivate it: becoming aware of these moments when wisdom is at work.

Now, that terrain Jaya was talking about—those moments of freedom, little moments, those little moments of just a release of some kind—those are some of the moments when wisdom is at work. I'd like to describe a few of these, by no means comprehensive, but just a few of the ways we might see wisdom at work.

One of the most familiar ways, perhaps, or an early way that we start to see wisdom at work, is when we feel a shift of perspective around something that's been challenging. We've been caught by something—caught by a pattern of frustration or confusion or depression—and then we recognize, "Oh, this is just confusion. I can know this." There's a little feeling of letting go there. It's not that the pattern disappears, but there's some ease around it. It feels like there's space.

One way I sometimes talk about this is through an analogy: when we have our foot on the gas pedal in a car, the gears are engaged and they're going. When we're caught by a pattern, the gears are engaged. But when we can see, "Oh, it's just confusion," it's as if the gears disengage, and the car gets put into neutral. There's no more fuel being added. But when the gears disengage, they don't stop spinning. We still see the pattern working, but there's a lot more ease around it. This is wisdom allowing that disengagement, allowing us to witness, to see how that pattern is feeling, how it affects us.

We might also see the conditioned nature of experience. Sometimes, through this continuity of mindfulness, this kind of thing can happen pretty much any time—in the in-between times or in sitting practice. Just watching a pattern unfold. For instance, sitting in meditation and feeling pressure in the bladder, then recognizing the unpleasantness of that, and realizing it's a good idea to get up and relieve that pressure. Sometimes we can see that unfolding and recognize, "I'm not doing this. This is just conditions arising and conditioning the next thing and the next thing." The conditions of sitting for an hour creating the full bladder, the pressure creating the intention to stand and relieve the pressure—all of that can be seen as not me doing it.

Often we don't quite see it that way. We think, "Oh, I'm getting up and going to relieve myself." But we can see these conditions unfolding and directly understand—the wisdom understands—it's not me doing it. The insight into not-self comes through seeing that conditioned unfolding.

Sometimes we might see experience as simply something arising right in the present moment. A thought arises about the past, and we recognize this is just a thought happening in the present moment. We see it as an arising—it wasn't there a moment ago, it's there now. We see that impermanent nature, arising in this split second.

You may recognize some of these as I talk about them. And you may not have quite recognized them as being manifestations of wisdom. That's part of why I'm naming these things—to support your recognition of this quality that is at work in all of you.

Another understanding that might happen—and one of you in your report today described this, which made me remember it—is beginning to see that everything in our experience, what we are experiencing, is a construct of our own minds.

I see this kind of like our experience as a reflection of what is out there. I don't think of what's in my mind as being completely constructed out of whole cloth. I think you're actually sitting out there. I think there are a bunch of people actually in this room, and it's not just a figment of my imagination. But what I know of it, what this being experiences, is entirely a construct of the mind. And that can be directly seen. It can be quite unsettling to see that.

At one point, seeing this, I think the way it first really expressed itself to me or showed itself to me was that I could see I was clinging to something—I could see the clinging. I could see that the clinging was my mind doing that. But then recognizing that what I was clinging to was also something my mind made up. The mind just goes, "Yeah, that's ridiculous." We can't actually cling to anything out there. The only thing we cling to is something our minds construct. And we can see this. That is wisdom that is very freeing, as the mind begins to understand its uselessness. Clinging doesn't serve us. We've been relying on something that's not reliable.

I'll just mention one or two more of these. I have a whole list of them here, and I'm not going to get through them all. But one thing I want to point out is that sometimes I've been talking about these wisdoms that arise, that are experienced as a release or a shift, a feeling of letting go. But early on in this talk I mentioned there's also the not picking up—this kind of seeing that there isn't a picking up. There can be a recognition at times that greed, aversion, and delusion are simply not arising.

At one point, following the whole experience I described about anger—that was not the end of my anger, I'm here to tell you. There was a lot of work over the next couple of years. That was not even the last anger about that particular person. But it really gave me the confidence to keep looking at it. And over a couple of years, I kind of watched it grow, watched it, watched it, saw it happening, had to set it aside a lot of the time because it was too strong, stickier, more powerful than the momentum of mindfulness. So I couldn't look at it a lot of the time, but I would see it, I'd bow to it, I'd say, "Yep, I'll get back to you. I promise I'll get back to you."

And I began to notice over the course of probably a couple of years that the pattern wasn't arising as frequently. Then one day—I remember exactly where I was; some of these insights have that quality, seared into your mind—I know exactly where I was walking on my sidewalk when I realized, "Wow, I haven't had that anger come up in a long time." Must have been months. And in that moment, I was thinking about the per-

son I had been so angry at because I remembered the anger I had experienced many times. And I could not even call it up. I could not construct it. It was gone. And I never saw it go away. It disappeared while I wasn't looking.

This is also how wisdom works sometimes. It can work in the background or silently, just that gradual wearing away. It's like I went to pick up that rope of anger and it just wasn't even there anymore. So sometimes wisdom expresses as the non-arising of reactivity. It's just not picked up.

The other example in this category, more directly experienced, is that description I talked about where I saw the mind kind of heading towards anger—not angry in the moment, but leaning like, "Yeah, I want to get angry"—but wisdom took me in another direction. That was a very direct seeing of the non-arising of reactivity.

And then sometimes we're in a space where the mind is just so balanced. A lot of continuity of mindfulness, just seeing experience coming and going, arising and passing. Nothing sticky. Nothing clung to, just slipping through. Again, wisdom is there—not as an experience of release, but as the understanding of non-clinging in that moment.

Sometimes in those meditative states, seeing things very rapidly arise and pass away, there's that kind of understanding. Things are happening so rapidly that the mind understands there isn't anything to cling to. It understands that impermanent and coreless nature—just nothing to cling to.

So these moments of seeing wisdom at work are a pointer to freedom. They probably still have some clinging in them somewhere, because much of the time those kinds of experiences are still experiences. And it's so clear when they're happening. It's like, "Wow, why would I ever pick anything up? Why would I ever want to get angry? Why would I ever do that?" It's just so clear.

I remember on one retreat, I was watching things come and go and seeing the mind just respond with, "Yeah, no, nothing to cling to. Don't pick it up." I was so happy. It was like somebody was whispering in my ear, "Don't cling, don't cling." And then I thought I'd figured it out. Half a day later, when the delusion came back, when that reliance on craving re-arose, it became very clear to me that it is not obvious. It is only obvious with that clarity.

And so insights are impermanent. And yet, as Kim said the other night, we can't unsee them. We know. There's a knowing there, a deep connection with that truth. Even though we can't see it now, the value of having seen it—when we're no longer able to see it directly—is that we now know this is delusion.

Before we really have that clarity or understanding, when delusion is there, it's very hard to see. We can't really recognize it as delusion. We are fully in that reliance on craving. But having seen through it, when the reliance on craving comes back, when those patterns of delusion return, we can see them and know, "Yep, that's delusion."

As Kim said, we can't unsee it. We may not be seeing it directly in this moment, but there's an understanding that can be there, that can support us to have more patience with meeting the pattern again and again and again—as the wisdom gets stronger, develops, and grows gradually.

CHAPTER 173

Evening Talk: Five Aggregates and Studying Self-ing

Andrea Fella · 59 min

In this evening dharma talk, Andrea Fella offers an intimate exploration of how we can study the sense of self through the lens of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā). Drawing primarily from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), she illuminates how the Buddha pointed to the uncontrollable, impermanent, and unreliable nature of form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness as evidence of not-self (anattā).

Fella presents the aggregates not merely as categories of experience but as active processes—verbs rather than nouns. She gives particular attention to the volitional formations (saṅkhārā), describing them as the 'engine' of experience that constructs and shapes all other aggregates. The sense of self, she explains, is itself a volitional formation that arises and passes like any other conditioned phenomenon. She shares the Buddha's teaching on four patterns of identification with each aggregate: 'I am this,' 'this is mine,' 'I am inside this,' and 'this is inside me'—offering twenty potential ways we construct identity.

With characteristic warmth and humor, Fella encourages practitioners not to hunt for subtle senses of self but to notice when identification arises obviously—in moments of pride, comparison, or reactivity. She suggests that 'othering' always implies 'selfing,' and invites curiosity about both. The talk emphasizes approaching these patterns with a non-contentious attitude, honoring each arising as worthy of attention rather than something to eliminate. This practical guidance supports practitioners in seeing through the constructed nature of self without creating a new project of self-improvement.

As we practice receiving experience, there are lots of different things that we notice—different patterns, different habits of mind, some personal to us, familiar reactivities, and some more universal. All of what's happening to us, what's happening in experience, is just this human experience tumbling on. In many ways, everything that we're experiencing is simply human nature.

Some of it may be more personally conditioned, perhaps based on our own family patterns and habits, or what happened to us on the playground at school, or just how we've grown up and the conditions we were surrounded by. But a particular pattern we all have—our own flavors of—is a human tendency, a pattern of selfing.

The sense of self is an arising experience. We usually, or often, take it for being me. There's a kind of belief in it, a belief in that pattern that it is me, who I am. And yet this too is just another arising experience that can be seen. We can be curious about this sense of self, what we are thinking of as a self, what we are thinking of as a sense of self. As we begin to get curious about it, we start to see that it is not what we think it is. It's not stable. In observing the pattern, we see there's not just one thing we're calling "me." Lots of different senses of self are happening. We see it's an arising that arises and passes. One sense of self arises and passes. Another sense of self arises and passes. We see the impermanent nature of it, the conditioned nature of it, how it arises based on things happening in the world or things happening in our minds and our experience.

This seeing, this observing the sense of self like we would observe any other arising experience—with curiosity and interest—begins to undermine the kind of beliefs we have in it. It undermines those unquestioned beliefs about the sense of self. We can say that perhaps studying the sense of self, or being curious about it, doesn't have to be picked up as a project, which the word "studying" seems to imply—like, "Okay, I'm going to really study this, look at it." But it is a phenomenon that will arise, sometimes more obviously than others. And so some curiosity about what it is when it arises can be valuable.

As we are curious about a sense of self, we begin to see that it is not what we think it is. What we take to be self is not self. The Buddha talked about this sense of selfing, this process of selfing. The term translated into English is "I-making" and "my-making." He talked about it a lot through the perspective or the exploration of the five aggregates.

Carol mentioned these the other day, and I think most of you have heard talks on the five aggregates or are familiar with them at least to some extent. Just as a reminder, I'll do a very brief recap of the five aggregates to set the context for the exploration around studying selfing.

The word itself, "aggregate," is a kind of technical word that we don't use very much in English. In the Pali, the word *khandha*, I understand, is actually a much more ordinary word. It means something like "group" or "heap." But "aggregate" is actually a good word because in the suttas these five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—are described both as the results of experience, the "what" of our experience. Form is body experience, physical sensations. Feeling is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. Perception is the noticing of recognition, the

perception that happens as we recognize something. Mental formations are those many emotions, moods, and thoughts. And consciousness is the simple knowing aspect of experience. The aggregates are talked about in that way, as the "what" of experience.

But they're also described as the process by which these things are experienced. So the word "aggregate" to me is interesting because it is both a noun—aggregate, like aggregate rock, which is a rock of rocks, that's kind of the image of what the aggregates are, just a group of stuff—so "aggregate" can be the experience itself. But "aggregate" is also a verb: to aggregate, to collect, to gather.

One of my favorite suttas around the aggregates describes them in terms of process, as verbs rather than as nouns. For example, it describes feeling this way: "Why is it called feeling? Because it feels. What does it feel? It feels pleasant. It feels unpleasant. It feels neither pleasant nor unpleasant." It's described as the process of feeling. All of them are described in this form of verbs.

So we can think of the aggregates as the processes of body and mind. The aggregates to me are an interesting set. They, in my understanding of the teachings, describe our conditioned experience—the happenings in our body and mind, the conditioned happenings in our body and mind. So pretty much everything we're experiencing.

There are other ways that the Buddha talks about the processes or experiences of body and mind, the six sense spaces being one of those. The aggregates are interesting to me because in terms of processes of body and mind, they describe one physical process—the process of form—and four mental processes. So this teaching on the five aggregates really teases apart the workings of the mind, how the mind experiences, how it puts experience together.

Form, the physical process of our human system, includes the physical sense bases and their objects: body, eye, ear, nose, tongue—the physical sense bases—and their objects: tactile sensations, sight, sound, smell, taste. This is a very rudimentary sense of our physical experience. The physicality of experience in the touch sense, for instance, is vibration, pulsing, tingling, heat, coolness, liquidity, moisture, hardness, softness. The physical touch sensation is not, for instance, hand or foot. That experience or recognition of hand or foot is found in the perception aggregate—that recognition.

Our physical sense bases have really quite simple input. The eye experiences form and color. Any objects that we see—wall, door—that's all perception. In my own exploration of the aggregate of form, it has been a really helpful way to begin teasing apart ways that mind and body get confused or conflated, the way the overlay of concept gets confused with the actual physical experience. We can begin to see the actual physical

experience and then recognize, for instance, the sensation of pressure, and then perhaps an image of the foot as the perception. So the recognition of the form aggregate helps us begin to tease apart the physical from the mental.

And then feeling—this process of recognizing pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This aspect of experience is understood to be mental. As I said, there is one physical aggregate and four mental ones, so the aggregate of feeling is understood to be mental. Feeling tone is not inherent in the objects of experience; it depends on conditions. It is constructed based on history, conditioning, events happening in the present moment.

I saw this really clearly on one retreat while eating a meal. It was a simple meal—an apple and bean dip for an evening meal. I took a bite of the bean dip and just tasted, experienced that. I don't remember much other than the bitterness and just a little bit of the oiliness of the bean dip. I don't remember much about the pleasantness or unpleasantness I experienced there. But when I took the bite of apple, it was so pleasant—it was like the best apple I'd ever eaten, or so I thought. It was just so juicy and just the right amount of tartness and sweetness for my liking.

A couple of things happened as I ate. One is that when I had the bite of bean dip and then the bite of apple, I noticed that the intensity of the pleasantness was stronger after the bean dip. Something about the contrast, conditions on the tongue, whatever, just created conditions of more pleasantness. And then the other thing I noticed was that as I ate, the mind got used to it. It wasn't so interesting anymore, and that also reduced the pleasantness. So we can be curious about this process of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—how the mind feels experience.

And perception—again, I'm going through these really quickly—perception is that process of recognition of experience. A sight happens; form and color hit the eye, and there's a pattern there. We could say that perception depends on memory, like our mind goes and tries to find the thing from our history that is most similar. So we see something—there's the form and color—and then the mind recognizes it as chair. That recognition may happen as a word in the mind, the mind saying "chair," or it might happen as an image, or it might happen as a felt sense of sitting on a chair.

It can come in through various sense modalities. The process of perception is layered in a way.

I saw this on another retreat, watching how the mind put together perception. I was sitting just outside and turned my head, and I landed on a form. The mind recognized it in a kind of staged way, and it did it with words in the mind. It said: "green, jagged, leaf." So noticing that that process was a process in the mind—recognition, perception—different from the seeing. It was a process of recognition.

This process of recognition is very useful. We probably couldn't walk across a room without it. And it's useful to recognize that it's a happening, that it is a part of our mental process, happening all the time.

And then consciousness—usually understood to be a very simple aspect of knowing experience, just the meeting of the sense base. There are said to be six classes of consciousness, one for each of the sense bases: seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, smelling consciousness, tasting consciousness, touch consciousness, and mind consciousness. Just a simple recognition—contact of a sound with the ear, hearing consciousness arises, hearing arises. A really simple aspect of knowing.

I saved volitional formations for last. It's not usually last in the list of the aggregates, but I wanted to spend just a little bit more time with this one. In terms of the "what" of experience, this is a lot of what we're noticing: moods, emotions, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, views—all of these are mental formations. States of mind, including concentration, mindfulness, patience—all states of mind are mental formations.

What we could say is the "what" of the mental formation. The mental formations are those mental activities that include intention, include some kind of activity, agency—but not necessarily a conscious agency, not necessarily a conscious act of will. But these patterns—and we can see this, we know this actually—with something like anger: when we're caught in anger, it's like anger is doing our experience. It's shaping our experience. There's a kind of activity of anger. And likewise, there's an activity of metta that shapes our experience. This is the process side of the volitional formations—they shape our experience.

The definition of volitional formations in this verb form states that volitional formations construct the conditioned. What is the conditioned they construct? They construct conditioned form as form. They construct conditioned feeling as feeling. They construct conditioned perception as perception. They construct conditioned volitional formation as volitional formation. They construct conditioned consciousness as consciousness. So this is the engine of our experience. Volitional formations shape what happens. The sense of self is a volitional formation. It shapes our experience.

For example, just looking at anger in terms of how it shapes the other aggregates: when anger is arising, it can affect the body. We know this—it shapes the feeling of the body. I often feel pressure and heat when anger is present. It can distort the face, make it kind of ugly. Feeling tone usually becomes unpleasant with anger. We tend to perceive things through the lens of anger, perhaps seeing what someone else is doing as an attack on us, or interpreting somebody else's facial expression as meaning something when maybe they just have some pain in their gut. Our consciousness is also directed by anger. When anger is present, consciousness tends to become conscious of certain things and not of others.

Selective attention. And anger tends to construct more anger. So this is how volitional formations work. They're very potent, part of our experience and what we see and explore. How does experience condition other experience?

These five aggregates are happening all the time, whether we're mindful or not. It's like the tumbling on of our experience. Mindfulness is also a mental formation, and I almost think of it as being a mental formation that reveals the functioning of the five aggregates. Sometimes the mindfulness can come up and meet all five aggregates in a kind of broader sense of what's happening. Sometimes the mindfulness may land or connect with one of the aggregates in particular—form or feeling. Mindfulness meets just what's happening. The aggregates are happening, and when mindfulness arises, that's what it's meeting: the arising and passing, the tumbling on of these conditioned experiences.

In his second discourse, the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, the Buddha pointed to how we tend to identify, how a sense of self is created in relationship to these aggregates. The first thing he points to in the sutta is this: in terms of these aggregates, he's talking to a group of people and saying, "In terms of form, do you have control over form? Do you have control over feeling?" This is the first thing he points to. I'll read you two of these passages.

"Form is not self. If form were self, the body would not lend itself to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of the body, 'Let my body be thus, let my body not be thus.' But because form is not self, body leads to affliction, and it is not possible to say, 'Let my body be thus, let my body not be thus.'"

"Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were self, consciousness would not lend itself to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.' But because consciousness is not self, consciousness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to say, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.'"

He says this for all five aggregates, pointing to the uncontrollable nature—the not inherently controllable nature—of these conditioned experiences. There are times when we have some measure of control, but not ultimate control. We cannot say, "May my mindfulness be thus." Wouldn't that be nice? "May I be continuously mindful." It's not possible to say that, because it is not self.

This is a common way that we impute a sense of self—this sense of agency, a sense of control, of ability to control. And then we suffer when it's not possible, because we feel like we failed in some way. We feel like if we were a better person, or if we were doing it right, we would be able to control this. And the Buddha says, "Well, it's not self. That's why you're not able to control it."

It's actually something of a relief. When we see that something is not controllable—oh, that's a pointer to not-self. There's so much evidence for not-self out there. The mind wanders? Evidence for not-self, right there. We don't see it as such, often. We feel like, again because of that view or belief of self, we think it's somehow a personal failing that the mind has wandered.

So control—this aspect of control—he really emphasizes this. Noticing the uncontrollable nature... we don't like that. It feels uncomfortable. But we may be able to hold it with this understanding: "Oh right, this is a pointer to not-self."

Then, for each of the aggregates in the sutta, he points to the impermanent nature of each of these aggregates. Form, impermanent. Feeling, impermanent.

Perception, impermanent. Volitional formation, impermanent. Consciousness, impermanent.

And then, because impermanent, inherently unreliable as a place to land for lasting happiness. This word *dukkha* can mean the experience of suffering, and it also can mean the inherent unreliability of experience—that it is not a place where we can land for lasting happiness. It is *dukkha* because it is not reliable. That's another translation that can be used at times for *dukkha*: the unreliability of experience. Conditioned experience arises and passes away. It does not last. Not reliable.

And then the Buddha asks a question here. He says, does it make sense to call something a self that is impermanent and unreliable?

So what is it that we call self? What is it that we think of as a sense of self? I think it often does include this kind of sense of permanence, of stability, some kind of reliability. But really, one of the ways I take this part of the sutta is as an encouragement to

look at what it is that we think of as self. What is it that we take to be self? And then to look closely at it and see if it is actually functioning in the way we think it is, in terms of that belief of what self is.

We don't really articulate to ourselves very clearly what we think of as self. It's a feeling, it's a sense. So get to know the experience you're calling self when it arises. And it arises a lot—you don't have to go looking very far for it. Sometimes, as I said the other day, the experience may feel more like reactivity, and you may not have a clear sense of what the sense of self is in that reactivity. You don't have to go trying to figure out what the sense of self is in the pattern of reactivity. There will be times when the sense of self is really clear. Then begin to be curious about it. What is that? What am I calling this "me"? What am I calling this sense of me? Get to know the experience that you're calling sense of self.

The Buddha talked about identification, identity, and view—this I-making and my-making—in a four-part way of looking at each of the aggregates. Four ways to look at each of the five aggregates, so twenty different ways of a sense of identity arising. I'm not going to go through all twenty right now. I'm just going to give you the pattern and explore a couple of the ways in which we might notice this.

The first pattern of identification he points to is: I am form, feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness. I am the body. There's that sense of "I am the body." I am a mental formation—I am angry, I am miserable, I am confused. Roles or social identities are mental formations also: I'm the parent, I'm the student. These are ways that we have that sense of "I am something." I am the one who thinks, who knows, who chooses.

The second pattern is: something is mine. Form is mine. Feeling is mine. Things belong to me. Emotions are mine. Ideas are mine. At one point I suffered so much around this appropriation of a word. It was *my* word.

Other people were using the word and they weren't giving me credit for it. So much suffering. An idea is mine. What is that feeling of appropriation, that mineness? What is that? What is that like? What does that feel like?

The third pattern: I am inside of form, feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness. For me, this one has the flavor at times of feeling like I'm inside the body. Maybe that kind of sense of somehow I am this thing that's traveling around in this body. Occasionally, at times, experiencing being inside of consciousness—the sense of vast consciousness and a sense of me kind of somehow in that. Again, just ways that maybe help us see how we identify.

And the last pattern: something is inside of me. Consciousness is in me, emotions are in me. I'm big and these things are in me. Again, just being curious about how you are feeling a sense of self. It is a phenomenon, it is an arising, it is a mental formation that's arising.

So those four again, just to restate them: I am something, I am an aggregate. The aggregate is mine. I am inside the aggregate. The aggregate is inside me.

There's another teaching that the Buddha offers that I found to be a simplification in a way, a simpler way of looking at the sense of self. I can see often when there's a sense of self, it falls into one of three categories, as opposed to these twenty that the Buddha's talking about. So this is a simpler perspective. The Buddha said often of experience: we should know form is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself. Feeling is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

And so that three-part reflection: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself. The first one—this is not mine—is the way we take something to be mine, the way that we identify, that sense of appropriation again.

Then the other two I began to tease apart in my own experience just through seeing a sense of self. The first one: I am. I am this. To me, "I am" brings up the sense of the agent, the doer, the one who's in control. So that piece of the sense of control is what this speaks to. When we're identifying, we may be identifying "I am"—I am the doer, I am the thinker, I am the one who chooses, the one who decides, the one who acts. The agent of the sentence. I am.

The third one, to me, is a subtler experience. The self that feels like it's the doer—that one can be more obvious in some ways. And then this last one, "this is not myself," puts the sense of self as the object of the sentence rather than the subject of the sentence. There was one time I was observing experience and I could clearly see I was not doing consciousness, I was not doing what was going on in here. But it sure felt like it was happening to me. I went and reported that to my teacher, who was Gil Fronsdal at the time, and I said, "I can't see through this." Me, the doer, not able to see through that sense of it's happening to me. He just laughed and said, "Just notice that's how it is." Of course, of course—that's what he said.

But that kind of recognition—to me it was a subtler sense of self in a way. The sense of "I am the one who does"—that one was easier to see and easier to release in a way. It was more obvious.

This sense of things happening to me—just another sense of me, a subtler sense of that. So there's lots of different ways that a sense of self is experienced.

I think it's useful to begin to see this. When we recognize that there are many different identities, at some point I began to see that what I took to be the sense of self—many of these senses of self were just familiar patterns of contraction. And there were a lot of different ones. I had somehow created this idea that they were perhaps pieces of one big one. But then seeing them come and go, come and go, watching familiar patterns... You know, me being the analytical, intelligent one who knows how to ask questions in the hall when other people aren't doing it right. This analytical person—that was a very strong identity. I suffered a lot around it and could see it clearly.

At one point I was watching that identity, doing walking meditation in front of IMS, watching that identity and feeling the suffering of it. Just this "analytical Andrea." And then a truck drove up. Within a second, I was not analytical Andrea anymore. I was a two-year-old just delighting in a truck. It was like—poof—that one disappeared and this one arose. It was quite startling because it had been such a sticky pattern, and then it was gone in a second, replaced by this other experience.

So we can see these patterns come and go, see their impermanent nature, begin to understand that they're not what we think they are. Identities are often conditioned patterns and habits, like that analytical one of mine, conditioned by years in school where I got rewarded. It wasn't me that made that. There were so many conditions that created that pattern—not just about me, but about how my parents were with me, how it was in school, what other kids said. So many different pressures created that sense of self.

Sometimes we can see senses of self as strategies that have been conditioned for us to navigate the challenges of life, to navigate the difficulties of life. What are your patterns, habits, strategies? How do you feel them? Again, curiosity about them as they arise.

And it doesn't have to be a pulling apart. I offer this teaching about the aggregates as a support for understanding the whole of this process of selfing, but in the exploration of the experience of it, just notice what's obvious. This sense of self, the whole thing of it—let it reveal itself, how it's functioning.

We can observe our identities and see how they shape our experience. They are mental formations. How do they shape our experience? What do they make us think? How do they make our body feel? How do they shape our actions as a sense of self arises?

So again, looking at a sense of self is probably easiest when it feels pretty obvious, when it arises more prominently, rather than trying to find a sense of self.

James Baraz tells a fun story about this. He said he was given the instruction at some point to go off and notice a sense of self. He was doing walking meditation in the basement at IMS, and he said it was all very subtle—"Oh my, not much sense of self here, and oh, maybe there's a little sense of self there"—kind of looking for the sense of self. He was alone in the basement until somebody came down and walked by. James was doing a really slow walking, and this person walked by kind of fast. The thought that arose in his mind was, "Well, I'm doing so much better than he is." Oh! Wow, that one was obvious. There it is. You don't have to go looking for some subtle thing. Just be with your experience, and there will be times when a sense of self is really obvious.

Some emotions, some senses like "I'm right, I know how to ask questions"—that sense. See what's going on there. Certain emotions can have a sticky sense of self: shame, unworthiness, self-hatred, pride, arrogance. They contain a sense of self in them also. All of our reactive emotions have a sense of self in them. Sometimes the suffering of the reactivity—like for me with anger—the suffering of the anger was way more obvious than the sense of self in the anger.

There was at times the sense of "I'm right," but the anger was way stronger in terms of what could be seen obviously. So just notice what's clear, what's obvious.

Another interesting piece to be curious about in terms of selfing is if you notice othering happening. You start noticing, "Oh, they and them, they're doing that thing. They should, they shouldn't." When there's a sense of other, there is a sense of self. We can notice that othering as a kind of counterpoint to selfing. So be curious about othering. What's going on there?

A sense of self may also arise when there are others in our environment and it's like we think we know what they're thinking about us. That sense of being othered, that experience can be interesting to see. So just, again, be curious about where you're noticing the sense of self and what you are noticing there. You don't have to pull apart whether it's "I am inside of X" or "X is inside of me." Some of those things will become clear at times. It feels like I'm in control, feels like I am the one who is doing, I am the thing. Sometimes that is clear. Just notice what is obvious.

I think an important piece too about exploring the sense of self is not having a contentious relationship with it. We're talking about allowing experience, allowing our reactivity to be here and just be with it, be curious about it. Same thing with these senses of self—a kind of sense of honoring that it is an arising and it is worthy of our attention. There's something to learn here. The sense of self is such a powerful shaping force in our minds, as are all of the mental formations, all the volitional formations. So curiosity about how they are arising and how they are tumbling on.

And check the attitude when you're noticing a sense of self. We've got lots of opinions and ideas about them. But see if it can come back to that simple recognition: this is what's arising. What does this feel like? What's this?

CHAPTER 174

Recognizing Wisdom

Andrea Fella · 22 min

In this contemplative talk, Andrea Fella offers a profound exploration of how wisdom (paññā) manifests and can be recognized in meditation practice. Drawing from her own experience and the teachings of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, she invites practitioners to investigate the "job description" of wisdom—what it does, how it functions, and how it is experienced. Rather than seeking wisdom directly, she emphasizes creating conditions for its development by becoming curious about what obstructs it, particularly the attitudes of greed, aversion, and delusion.

Fella identifies several "symptoms" of wisdom working: experiencing a shift in perspective around challenging situations, recognizing dukkha simply as dukkha without resistance, seeing thoughts of the past as present-moment arisings, and understanding the conditioned nature of how suffering is created. She shares a particularly illuminating personal example of working with a persistent pattern of anger, where wisdom operated almost imperceptibly in the background until one day she realized the reactivity had completely released. This gradual process resonates with sutta descriptions of defilements wearing away like ship rigging exposed to the elements over time.

The practical relevance of this teaching lies in its invitation to notice and appreciate wisdom already at work in our practice. Since recognizing wholesome qualities nourishes their growth, becoming attuned to wisdom's functioning strengthens it further. This creates a positive feedback loop connecting to the five spiritual faculties (pañc'indriya)—as wisdom strengthens, so do confidence, energy, mindfulness, and concentration, all supporting deeper understanding and the release from dukkha.

This morning I'd like to offer some reflections on recognizing wisdom working in our practice.

We cultivate wisdom not through trying to find it, but by creating conditions that support its development. And one of the main conditions is beginning to be curious about what's in the way of wisdom. So we check the attitude, we begin to get really familiar with those attitudes related to greed, aversion, and delusion. As we see them and begin to understand them, the mind moves more and more in the direction of wise attitude, wise mindfulness—that non-reactive, curious, allowing attention that can learn with experience.

As we find more and more our way to this wise attention, we have the experience of wisdom working. And you've all had experiences of wisdom working. At one point, Sayadaw U Tejaniya explicitly asked me, "What is it like for you when wisdom's working?" That became a kind of curiosity. At first, I wasn't really quite sure what he meant. But as that question was simply held in practice, I began to see many different ways that wisdom expresses itself—wisdom as an activity of mind.

Sometimes Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about getting familiar with the job descriptions of our activities of mind. He would say, get familiar with the job description of aversion or of greed. And this was an encouragement to get familiar with the job description of wisdom. What does wisdom do? How does it function? How is it experienced?

As a wholesome quality, the recognition of it—as we've been talking about—creates the condition for its nourishment. It feeds it. And so the recognition of wisdom at work also nourishes it.

At one point on a retreat I was teaching, somebody asked me a question in the hall: What are the symptoms of wisdom? I like that phrasing of the question. So here are a few ways that I've noticed the symptoms of wisdom. And I'm sure there are many, many others. This is an encouragement both to point to ways in which you've already seen wisdom at work but perhaps didn't quite take it in as that's what's happening —"Oh, this is wisdom doing its job"—and also to inspire a curiosity for yourself about how you experience wisdom working. Because you do.

One way, maybe one of the first ways that we experience wisdom working, is when we feel a shift of perspective around something challenging, where there's not resistance to it. We're seeing it, but there's just a sense of, "Oh, this is just frustration. This is just confusion." And so while the pattern may not disappear, wisdom is supporting the capacity of mind to know it with balance.

We could say, in a way, that part of the job description of wisdom is to understand dukkha really well. Wisdom knows dukkha as dukkha. That's that recognition: "Oh, this is dukkha, this is just anger."

Another part of the job description of wisdom is that it can release dukkha. In that case, the wisdom is perhaps releasing just the reactivity around something—like thinking it's a problem—so that the pattern, though it may have strong momentum, is still seen with some measure of curiosity and interest where learning can happen, where further wisdom can grow.

Sometimes we can see experience simply as a present moment arising, just a pattern arising in this moment. For example, recognizing thoughts of the past arising and recognizing that they're happening now—just a thought happening in this moment.

We may see the conditioned nature of how dukkha is created. For example, we see an idea in our mind about something someone is doing, and then we realize that a reactivity is happening not to what the person is doing but to our ideas about it. Again, wisdom recognizing the process by which dukkha is created. Wisdom often arises, or the development of wisdom is often connected, with the experience of dukkha.

We might also recognize that what has felt like a deep pattern of reactivity, something that happens frequently, is actually created in an instant.

Loneliness, for instance—we may feel a sense that it's a pervasive pattern, but then actually see it arise in dependence on a thought and recognize that it is coming into being in this moment. It did not exist a moment ago. We begin to poke holes in the notion of its pervasiveness, seeing the impermanent nature.

Sometimes wisdom is quite strong, and as soon as it sees a pattern of dukkha, we feel it let go. We feel a release. That release is a symptom of wisdom—it is not the wisdom itself.

The other piece about wisdom is that sometimes wisdom expresses itself as thoughts. Like earlier when I said, "Oh, this is just anger." But the thoughts are not the wisdom. They're perhaps an expression of it. The wisdom is the understanding of the dukkha. We might at times attune to that sense of release as a symptom of wisdom and almost lean into it, or look for it, or use it as a signpost for wisdom. And yet sometimes wisdom can operate almost in the background.

I've had times in practice looking at patterns and seeing how much the mind would be caught by that pattern—anger in particular. When I tried to turn the mindfulness to it, I would just instantly be in the anger and not really able to look at it. So for quite some time, when I saw anger arising and saw the rapidity of it, I would kind of bow to it, acknowledge it, recognize it. "Yep, I see you. And I'll pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger. But right now I'm going to put my attention on my feet. I'm going to pay attention to something neutral."

That whole complex of intention became encapsulated by the phrase "not now" in my mind, with a gentle approach—a feeling of bowing to the anger, "not now," and putting my attention somewhere else. I did that for a long time with one particular pattern,

a particular anger around a particular situation that was very charged. I'd see the thoughts about that situation arise and think, "Okay, yep, I feel that—not now." And I did that redirecting for a long time.

The way wisdom operated in this situation was very quiet, almost imperceptible—actually imperceptible until a certain point. I began noticing slowly, very slowly, that those flares of anger, that movement, were getting a little more spaced apart. They were getting spaced further apart. Instead of being several times a day, it was every few days, or every week or so. It was just very gradually not happening as much.

And then one day—this day when the wisdom became apparent to me—I remember it as one of those things where, when wisdom is strong, when understanding is clear, it gets seared into your mind. I remember exactly where I was when this recognition arose: that I hadn't felt that anger in a long time. That was what arose in that moment. "Gee, I haven't felt that anger at that person, that situation. I haven't felt that in a long time. I don't even know how long it's been."

And of course, in that moment, the thought of that person, the situation, was there in my mind. And I could not find a shred of anger. It was gone. The pattern had released while I wasn't looking. And at some point there was that awareness: it's gone.

This is resonant with some of the descriptions in the suttas of the gradual wearing away of the defilements—the images of the rigging of a ship slowly wearing away. A ship, after having spent a long time at sea with the rigging exposed to the salt water and the sun and the wind, being pulled up on dry land for the season and further exposed to wind and sun and sand, slowly wearing away and eventually falling apart. But each day, not seeing any particular change in that wearing away of the rope. Then one day you notice: oh, it's fallen apart.

So sometimes wisdom doesn't have that kind of feedback of release.

It's simply the non-arising. We recognize that something's not there anymore—a reactivity no longer present.

So just being curious about this quality, this wholesome quality of mind that we are cultivating in this practice: wisdom. Wisdom and awareness are the main two wholesome qualities we actively cultivate, with the rest of the wholesome qualities being revealed through this strengthening of wisdom.

And as we recognize wisdom and cultivate the conditions for wisdom, we receive very clear feedback about the value of the practice—the release from dukkha, the non-arising of dukkha. This supports a further arising of confidence, of faith.

The five faculties that Carol talked about a week ago—with the strengthening of understanding comes a strengthening of confidence, a sense of: yes, this is useful. And with that, there's a strengthening of energy, mindfulness, concentration, and more wisdom.

So let's sit together.

CHAPTER 175

Evening Talk: Five Aggregates and Emptiness

Andrea Fella · 1h00

In this evening talk, Andrea Fella continues her exploration of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā) through the lens of emptiness (suññatā), drawing primarily from the Pheṇapiṇḍūpama Sutta, the Lump of Foam Discourse. She begins by clarifying the Theravāda understanding of emptiness—not as a metaphysical statement about reality, but as a direct investigation into the insubstantial, conditioned nature of experience itself. Empty of self and anything pertaining to self, our experience is revealed as processes tumbling on without any stable, solid core.

The talk examines each aggregate through the Buddha's striking similes: form (rūpa) as a lump of foam on the Ganges—appearing solid from a distance but disintegrating upon inspection; feeling (vedanā) as a water bubble arising and bursting with contact; perception (saññā) as a shimmering mirage that reflects something real yet deceives us about its nature; mental formations (saṅkhārā) as a plantain tree trunk that appears solid but contains only layers of sheaves with no heartwood; and consciousness (viññāṇa) as a magician's illusion, weaving together sense streams into seemingly coherent experience.

Andrea offers practical guidance for investigating these teachings directly in meditation and daily life. She explores how our beliefs and views shape feeling tone, how perception creates convincing but constructed representations of reality, and how seeing the conditioned arising of each aggregate helps dissolve our habitual grasping. The talk illuminates how recognizing the empty nature of the aggregates supports the letting go of misperceptions about self, ultimately freeing us from unnecessary suffering.

This evening, I'd like to continue exploring the five aggregates, which I talked about last week. This is what we're seeing—this is our experience—so there's actually quite a bit to explore around it. The perspective I'd like to bring this evening is from a particular sutta that points to or explores the empty nature of the aggregates. I want to say something about that perspective: why it's useful, how it's helpful for us.

First, a little bit about the Theravada perspective of emptiness. My understanding of the Theravadan perspective on emptiness is that it's not a kind of metaphysical teaching, a teaching about the nature of stuff out there. As we explored a little bit around looking at perception of impermanence yesterday, the teaching is really radically pointing us to looking at the nature of our experience. And so the Theravadan perspective on emptiness is regarding the empty nature of experience—the insubstantial nature of ex-

perience, we could say. Other words that point in here: without inherent existence, empty of inherent existence. Another way to think of it is the conditioned nature of experience, the tumbling on of processes of body and mind affecting each other. No stable, nothing stable in there, nothing solid in there. In that way, experience is empty.

Perhaps think of it as empty of thingness. Every experience has an arising, and maybe there's a phrase that talks about the arising, the persisting, and passing away of experience—all experience having that trajectory, that impermanent nature. But there's the understanding that there's no thing there. So empty of thingness, empty of substantiality.

I think we can begin to see, recognize, or understand the empty nature of experience from the perspective of conditionality—seeing how a thought arises which conditions an action. No me there making that decision. Thought conditioning an action. Intention conditions action. We can see how sight conditions perception, conditions thinking. We can see this in our practice. We begin to deeply recognize that this being is just a tumbling on of these processes of body and mind.

Another way into the understanding of emptiness is through the recognition of the impermanent nature of experience—seeing the arising and ceasing, the arising and ceasing, that begins to poke holes in the idea that there's anything that's stable. So we could also say that the understanding of emptiness is: there's not a thing, there is process. The process is not nothing. The process can be recognized, can be seen. It's just not what we usually take it to be.

One of the ways the Buddha defined emptiness is in a sutta where Ananda came to the Buddha and said, "It is said that the world is empty. The world is empty, Lord. In what respect is it said that the world is empty?" And the world here—the Buddha pointed to a kind of definition of the world. He said, "Empty. It is just this fathom-long body with its perceptions and mind that I make known the world, the arising of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world."

So this is my understanding of what the meaning of world here is: the world of experience. That's all we know of the world. This body and mind meeting—these sense organs, very sensitive sense organs being impinged, contacted by stimuli. And our mind, what we experience, is our mind's reflection of that, you could say. And so this is what, in my understanding, he means by the world.

The Buddha responds, "Insofar as it is empty of self or anything pertaining to a self, thus it is said that the world is empty." So empty of self or anything pertaining to self.

The sutta that I'm going to explore—many of you have probably heard it or heard teachings from it before. In pointing to the emptiness of the five aggregates, I think this is quite useful because, in terms of the way the Buddha speaks about emptiness as being empty of self and what pertains to self, the five aggregates are the way the Buddha pointed to how we tend to misperceive self. And so seeing the emptiness of the aggregates can help us to let go, to re-understand, to perceive more accurately what's going on here in this tumbling on of processes.

The sutta is the Lump of Foam Sutta, the one that uses the similes for the aggregates. We'll look at each one of these and explore a little bit about the analogy itself and something about how it might help us to see the empty nature of the aggregate.

The commentaries say that the Buddha was sitting on the bank of the Ganges River and he saw a lump of foam floating down the Ganges. That created the inspiration for him to give this Dharma talk. He said, "Suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. One with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial."

For what substance could there be in a lump of foam?

So too, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—one inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?

This image of a lump of foam—I haven't seen lumps of foam on the Ganges River, but I have seen them in the Pacific Ocean. I was out one day with a fellow teacher. We were taking a day away from the February retreat at Spirit Rock, and we went out to the ocean. It was a windy day, a cold day. There was a lot of wind whipping up the waves. The waves were crashing down, and there were huge lumps of foam being blown up in the air and landing on the beach. Big, huge lumps of foam.

You look at a lump of foam like that from a distance, and it looks like a form. I can imagine on the Ganges, if a big lump of foam is floating along, it's holding its shape, appearing kind of stable. From a distance it might seem quite stable. Well, these lumps of foam on the beach in San Francisco—the wind was blowing them, and they weren't small. They were lumps of foam as big as this table here. They were coming at us, these big lumps of foam just flying down the beach. And as they were flying down the beach, they were simply disintegrating. What substance could there be in foam, in a lump of foam? It was just this ephemeral kind of process.

The Buddha doesn't mention this part so much in the sutta, but just unpacking this analogy: foam is created—at least in the Pacific Ocean, I know—in big lumps like that when there's a lot of agitation, a lot of stirring. The organic matter in the water gets stirred up and bubbles, creates a froth, and clings together. So there are conditions that come together to create this lump of foam. And there are conditions that came together to create our bodies. Pointing to the conditioned nature of experience is a big part of understanding the empty nature of the aggregates.

We can reflect on the nature of the body, and the Buddha encouraged this. There are places in the Satipatthana Sutta to reflect on the nature of the body to decay—the charnel ground contemplations. There you can really see how the body falls apart when there's no more life force in it. And the encouragement is to reflect: this too is my nature. This is the nature of the body.

We can look inwardly into the feeling, the experience of body, and feel its actual experience. We talked about this last week when I discussed the aggregates. The actual experience of body is quite dynamic. It doesn't stay still very long. We often relate to our body through a concept—hand or head or foot—and that can create a sense of stability. But when we actually feel the body, just right now maybe the hand is a good place to feel this. You just touch in and feel into the sensations. In that space that we call hand, what are the sensations happening there? Maybe even coming a little closer to a finger. Not pushing in, but just receiving. What are the sensations there?

As I explore it, it's like there's a lot of dynamics. Nothing lasts very long. Sensations are coming and going quite quickly. And those sensations are coming and going in dependence on conditions. There's the condition of the touch sense of the hands, but then there are nerve endings and the blood coursing through, and there's lots of sensations that may be experienced there.

At the sensation level, when we touch into that world of experience, we do see the impermanent and kind of bubbly, popping nature of experience. At one point, paying attention to my breath during the three-month course, the sensations of the breath just felt like bubbles popping. I remembered this analogy and went to Joseph. I said, "It wasn't just an analogy—it's like the way the body actually is. It's bubbles." He was pretty muted in his response, but I was very excited.

So yes, we can touch that kind of quality of sensations. But then our minds kind of look down at the body and say, "It looks pretty stable to me." Even as we know that cells are changing and being sloughed off and all kinds of things are changing, there's just some sense of that stability. And so some reflection can also support us here—bringing to mind that this being began as an egg and a sperm joining. That joining process began

the process of cell division and then specialization of cells. I mean, we were two cells. We weren't two cells. It's all just a process. So some reflection can also support that recognition of the conditioned or empty nature of our experience.

And what do we grasp at when we grasp at the body? This is an interesting question. When we're clinging, when we think we're clinging to body, what are we actually clinging to? Usually it's some idea. An idea of how we want our body to be. An image. Some concept there. Again, concept. Concept is a major place where, when we're not seeing concept as yet another creation of the mind, we often reify around concepts and take that concept to be the reality. And that concept-making tends to obscure the impermanent nature, the empty nature of experience. So it's interesting to look at what it is we're actually clinging to if we think we're clinging to body.

So, feeling tone. "Suppose that in the autumn when it's raining and big raindrops are falling, a water bubble arises and bursts on the surface of the water. One with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a water bubble? So too, whatever kind of feeling there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, one inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in feeling?"

So this image of a water bubble appearing when a raindrop or drop hits the water. One day I was standing in front of IMS and watching this happen. It was pouring rain and there was a puddle in the pavement that had collected because of the water. And when the water drops would hit the puddle, a little bubble would appear. It would float on the surface and then vanish. It made me laugh every time it vanished. There was one, it arose, just a sudden appearance and a disappearance. I think the laughing was because of the little bit of startle—that it looked so thing-like, and just vanished so quickly.

The commentaries mention around this particular analogy that as soon as you try to grasp one of those bubbles, it's going to go away. That part of the ephemeral nature of the water bubble—the reaching out to grasp it, you can't. It's too ephemeral.

So some of the similarities here with feeling and exploring this: similarly, like the moment that the drop hits the water, that moment of contact, very quickly the water bubble forms. The drop creates a plopping in the water, creates a little air pocket, and the water kind of hovers over that little air pocket for a while and then bursts. So with contact as a condition, there is feeling. Contact and feeling, contact and feeling—that kind of ephemeral, very fleeting experience with every contact.

The conditioned nature of that water bubble takes several things to come together for that water bubble to appear: the pond, the falling water, the contact, maybe even the rapidity—how quickly it strikes may have something to do with whether that bubble is created or not. So there are conditions that come together for the creation of that water bubble. And likewise, conditions create feeling. It's not inherent.

I mentioned this last week: feeling is not inherent in the experience. So this is an interesting exploration. What is it? Not so much to think about, but to be curious about. Something arising is pleasant, something arising is unpleasant. What's the condition for which something is pleasant? What's the condition for which something is unpleasant?

There are a couple of pieces there that are interesting to look at. There are some basic things—like, you know, if you cut yourself with a knife, that's generally unpleasant. But beyond that area of contact, there's so much area of feeling where it's not that simple. Feeling tone can depend on how we perceive something. So for instance, the classic analogy or simile of the snake and the rope.

We walk into a room and see a coiled form in a corner. It's dim, the lights are dim. We might think it's a snake, and that will produce feeling tone, probably some reactivity as well. But then if the lights come on and we see it's a rope—a misperception—the feeling tone is very different about a coiled rope in the corner. Now there may be some ideas like, "Who would leave a coiled rope in the corner of the room?" But the rope itself, what we are perceiving, is affecting how the feeling tone is experienced. This happens all the time, way more than we might think.

Views also influence feeling tone. An example of this: I was meditating one night late in my house. I had trouble sleeping, so I got up and was just meditating in the middle of the night. I began hearing this tapping noise, and there was some fear there. I could see there was some reactivity. Mostly this thinking of it as unpleasant—just like, "It's unpleasant. This is an unpleasant sound."

Then as I kept observing, I began seeing a lot of things that were going on, like an idea that the tapping was a rat in my wall. When I saw that idea, that view, that this is some creature in my wall making this sound, I could see that the feeling tone of the sound was shaped by that view. When that was seen, it was like, "Oh, there is fear here. There is this idea that there's some rat in the wall." I could see that and see there was some reactivity there. Then when I heard the tapping again, it was just neutral or even slightly pleasant, because the view had been teased out of the picture.

Originally the sense of that tapping being unpleasant seemed inherent—the sense that "this tapping is unpleasant." But seeing what is it actually? What is actually unpleasant here? So often it's view, it's an idea, it's a concept.

We can see this in spades with our fellow yogis—our ideas and views about things that they do or don't do. And it's all our own ideas in our minds. Look at where the reaction is. Look at what is actually creating or shaping that sense of feeling tone. Feeling tone, like an airy bubble, just arising and based on conditions. Again, that sense of conditionality being an important exploration around this emptiness of the aggregates.

Now, perception. "Suppose that in the last month of the hot season, at high noon, a shimmering mirage appears. One with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, and insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mirage? So too, whatever kind of perception there is, whether past, future, present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, one inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, and insubstantial. For what substance could there be in perception?"

I love this analogy of the mirage. I actually did a little bit of looking at how a mirage actually works. The classic mirage of seeing water in a desert—the way it works is that there's heat shimmering off of the desert. It creates something that produces a kind of reflective surface, the shimmering heat. Maybe there's a little bit of moisture in the air creating the conditions for the reflection. And what you're seeing when you see water, when you think you're seeing water on the desert from a distance, is a reflection of the sky on the surface there. It looks like water.

You can take a picture of a mirage—it's an optical phenomenon. It's not completely nothing, and it is actually a reflection of something. That's the piece I think is so interesting about this analogy. Because our perceptions are the best our minds can do in the moment to recognize experience. But it's a reflection of experience, not the experience itself.

The deceiving power of the mirage is that if you take it to be reality, you're going to go running after it, and it's always going to recede because of the way mirages work, and you're never going to get to water. There's no water there. But the mirage is deceptive in that it makes you think there might be water there. So it's a misperception—there's something actually being reflected, it's reflecting the sky, but the mind is taking it to be something that it's not.

And that is what we tend to do—this is where delusion enters into perception. We tend to take our perceptions to be reality. We don't even consider that what we're experiencing is our mind's creation. We simply take it to be what's out there.

So perception is empty of substantial nature. It's not what we're taking it to be. And yet, as I said last week, perception does a pretty good job. It does a pretty good job of reflecting what's out there. Perception itself is a useful and necessary process for us to navigate the world. So we're not trying to get rid of it, but we do want to not misunderstand it. We want to have an understanding that what we are experiencing—the perceptions, actually everything we're experiencing—is constructed in our minds. That's all that's going on. We're experiencing what's constructed in our mind.

We can see the process of perception. I talked about this last week: hearing a sound, you may see in the mind an image of what the sound is, that representation. It may be an accurate reflection, or it may not be. But we often do, I think partly because perception does such a good job much of the time, take the concepts to be reality. There's a kind of reification—it's like, "This is what is out there." This is a key way we take perceptions to be substantial, this kind of assuming. It's a belief, an assumption of their reality.

This mistake is easier to see when perception makes an error. This has been a fun part of my own practice—to be curious about this, to recognize when perception makes a mistake and see what happens.

I'll keep this one brief. There was one point when I was at Shwe Oo Min, hearing a squealing sound at night—actually in late evening, at dusk. It sounded, my perception was, that it was a pig. The squealing was like the sound of a pig, so that was my perception. The sound seemed kind of distressed, and so my mind created the story that this pig was being butchered. I imagined there was a butcher shop on the other side of the wall from the monastery and that this was happening each evening—they were butchering the pig for market the next day. That was my story.

Now, I knew that was a story. I knew that I did not actually know there was a pig being butchered there. But there was still compassion arising for that imagined pig.

Then one night, instead of meditating in my room, I was out walking at dusk at that time, and there were these bats flying very close, and they were squealing. So that squealing I had heard was not a pig—it was a bat.

This was so instructive, because now I knew that the whole thing about the butcher shop, all of that, was a concoction of the mind. But I had not had a clue that the idea that it was a pig was also a concoction of the mind. That was quite something. Perception had made a mistake.

I'm thinking about that snake-rope analogy—the perception of the coiled form is a snake, the perception of the coiled form is a rope. Different experiences arise based on those perceptions. So again, to see that kind of belief in our perceptions as reality—this is not easy to see. But we can begin to be curious about perception.

On one retreat, Sayadaw talked about perception so much that it just became what I started to be curious about. So much of the understanding I have around perception came not because I was looking for it, but because it was in the field during that particular retreat.

Now, mental formation. "Suppose someone seeking heartwood, needing heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood, would take a sharp axe and enter a forest. There they would see the trunk of a large plantain tree, straight, fresh, without fruit bud core."

They would cut it down at the root, cut off the crown, and unroll the coil. As they unroll the coil, they would not find even softwood, let alone heartwood. One with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in the trunk of a plantain tree?

So too, whatever kind of volitional formations there are—whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—one inspects them, ponders them, and carefully investigates them. As they investigate them, they appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in volitional formations?

This image of the plantain tree is wonderful. They're big. I lived in the South Pacific, and there were banana trees there. They have big fat trunks. They look really stable, really solid. You can come up and knock against them—they're hard. They look pretty stable. But if you chop one down, it's just these sheaves, layers and layers and layers, this coil that's described in the sutta. Layer upon layer upon layer. The sheaves are pretty rigid, kind of stiff, and there's layer upon layer of these rigid sheaves. But if you take each one apart, there's nothing solid in terms of wood. It's just a pile of leaves in front of you. You can't use it for wood.

This analogy for me also points to the experience of mental formations—just feeling layered, especially with some of these deep, sticky, old habit patterns we have. How layered they are. And the rigidity of the sheaf—those patterns get kind of stiff. They're layered upon layered upon layer, and we interpret them to be a thing, or solid, or "It's been here forever, it's the way I've always been."

But then as we start to observe our mental formations, we see they're just one on top of another. They condition each other, they kind of weave together, but it's all just mental formation and mental formation and mental formation, layering on itself. Sometimes when I think about exploring this, I mention that sense of stepping back. It's just a big mess. Can you just know the big mess? And as we observe that big mess, we see that it's not stable. We feel the kind of movement in there, the different pieces of reactivity, different kinds of mental habits and formations. We see that shifting quality of it. And we begin to understand it's not heartwood. It's not who I am. It's not me—it's just processes unfolding.

Again, the believing aspect seems to come into many of the ways in which we take these aggregates to be stable—believing the substantiality of them, believing the meness of them. The belief kind of holds that plantain tree together. The belief holds all of those different sheaves together.

So seeing or recognizing what's being believed, connected with a whole pattern of layered reactivity—that's been so helpful in my own practice. I've mentioned it before, but I'll mention it again because it is so powerful. What is being believed? Seeing a deep, deep pattern of self-hatred arising—it's like watching a banana tree being created right in the moment, this big stiff thing. But seeing the belief there: it's just a thought that's being believed. That's all that's happening here. That's all that's happening.

And then consciousness. "Suppose that a magician or a magician's apprentice would display a magical illusion at a crossroads. One with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in magical illusion? So too, whatever consciousness there is—whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—one inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in consciousness?"

This is an interesting simile.

All the others are more about natural processes, natural things. This one brings in a being, this simile—an intentionality of weaving a spell. I'm not sure I've completely unpacked this in my own understanding, but there are a couple of pieces that feel resonant to me in this analogy.

A magician weaves together many different things and pulls focus so that you're not seeing where the illusion is created. There's so much going on in this magical illusion. And then when something appears in some fashion, we haven't seen how it was created. The focus had been pulled; we hadn't seen how it came to be. There are conditions that had it come to be—it didn't just magically appear. But that's the illusion: that it just magically appears.

There's something of that in how our minds deceive us, how delusion deceives us into taking things to be solid and real and stable. We haven't seen them come to be. They are just there, and we take them as if they've always been there.

Another piece of this illusion relates to consciousness itself. Consciousness is this simple knowing aspect of experience—six kinds of consciousness: seeing consciousness, smelling consciousness, tasting, touching, hearing, and mind consciousness. But we often don't experience them as individual streams. When I look at the wall, I see the wall, and I'm not going to go running fast at that wall because I know it's hard based on my experience of walls before. The mind, in seeing that wall, has created the understanding—and it's a valuable one—that it's solid. The seeing of the wall and the solidity, the hardness, the touching of that wall are woven together in my mind.

I think this is how consciousness weaves together all of our senses into a coherent experience. This is a piece of the magic show of our minds. Again, the processes of mind are just these streams that our mind is putting together, really helpfully, to help us navigate the world. But it is all just the creation of our minds.

Let me say a little more about consciousness, because I didn't talk about this too much last time. Consciousness, this bare aspect of knowing, is different from awareness or mindfulness. I'm using awareness and mindfulness synonymously here. Mindfulness is different from consciousness in that mindfulness may or may not be arising in the present moment. Consciousness is arising in every moment, whether we are mindful or not.

We can be lost in thought and still walking down the street because consciousness, feeling, and perception, as Sayadaw will say, are doing their jobs. Mindfulness doesn't have to be there to navigate the world in that way. Consciousness in that way is arising and helping our system take care of itself—to know that you're getting ready to walk

into a tree, for instance. Consciousness, feeling, and perception help us navigate the world. So every moment of experience will arise with consciousness; mindfulness will come and go.

Now, being mindful of consciousness—this is interesting. Every moment of experience has the moment of knowing, the consciousness of hearing, and there's the hearing itself. There's the hearing, the object, and the consciousness. Every moment has both of those things: the object and the consciousness. There's the hearing and the knowing of hearing. There's the sound and the knowing of hearing. There's the sight and the knowing of seeing. There's a mind state and the knowing of the mind state. Every object has both: the object and the knowing of it.

Mindfulness can recognize the object side, and it can recognize the knowing side. My understanding is that mindfulness basically uses the five aggregates to reflect them back on themselves. Mindfulness uses consciousness, feeling, and perception to reflect all of the aggregates back on themselves. It's hard to talk about, but I'll do the best I can here.

In terms of recognizing the knowing, which is useful for seeing the processes of body and mind—what's going on here?—awareness can recognize the knowing itself. It can recognize the knowing; it can recognize the object. We might play with this a little bit. This is not something we force. For me, this tends to happen especially if there's been a dharma field of exploration around this topic; then the mind may start to recognize the knowing side.

But trying to find it is probably not so helpful. We may, however, be able to recognize that there's body sensation—there's the contact, there's the pressure—and then there is knowing of that.

I'm going to offer you an image that was helpful for me in this way of seeing, this understanding that every experience can reveal the knowing. It's there. It's not like we have to find it. It's already there.

I was sitting a retreat at Cloud Mountain during the winter, and it was quite cold. It had snowed three days in a row and hadn't gotten above thirty-two degrees. The air was really clear, and the sun finally came out one afternoon and started to heat up the snow that had gathered on the trees. It was really light snow—so light I could just blow it away. About eight inches deep, but it would just poof. Really light and crystalline. As the sun hit the trees, the snow started to fall off in great clumps. Walking through the woods, I'd hear this clump, then another.

That afternoon I was sitting and looking out my window into the courtyard. One of these snowfalls came right through the courtyard, and as the snow fell through, it illuminated sunlight that was streaming through—sunlight that had not been apparent. I was startled by that. There's sun out there? It looked like it was just shadow. The entire courtyard appeared to be in shade. I walked out onto the deck and leaned over, and there were two patches of sun underneath the deck. So there was sunlight streaming through the courtyard that was not visible in the air. There was no dust. You know how you can often see sunlight when there's dust? There was none. So it just looked like shade. But then as the snow fell through it, the light was revealed.

We often think of light as illuminating objects. In this case, the object illuminated the light.

That became a kind of meditation image for me. The object illuminates the knowing. I don't have to think of it as the knowing illuminating the object. The object can help the mind see the knowing. This image was supportive for that understanding—the recognition that there are just objects and knowing, objects and knowing, objects and knowing.

I think this simile of the magic show is truly appropriate when considering the entirety of our experience. This believing process is like the magician's wand—everything becomes solid and stable through it. And yet it's all just processes constructed in the mind. We can start to see this nature of experience as void, hollow, insubstantial. Just processes tumbling on. That's all.

I'll close with a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh: "For things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them." We could change that word "views" to "beliefs." For things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our beliefs about them.

CHAPTER 176

Awareness with Thoughts and Thinking

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this guided meditation and teaching, Andrea Fella offers a nuanced exploration of how awareness relates to thinking—one of the most challenging aspects of meditation practice. Rather than treating thoughts as obstacles to eliminate, she invites practitioners to investigate the quality of mind that has been thinking and the "planet" we wake up on when mindfulness returns.*
>
> *Fella distinguishes between different modes of thinking: the emotionally charged thoughts that pull us strongly into content, and the more dreamlike drifting that lacks emotional investment. She introduces the concept of "modalities of thought"—how we can think through hearing (inner dialogue), seeing (imagery), or kinesthetic feeling—and encourages curiosity about these processes rather than judgment. The teaching emphasizes that the moment of mindfulness returning is extraordinarily instructive, revealing the effortless and receptive nature of awareness itself.*
>
> *A key insight offered is the distinction between attention (manasikāra) and mindfulness (sati). Attention is a mental factor that selects what awareness connects with, operating whether we're mindful or not—as evidenced by how we navigate the world even while lost in thought. This practice works by not choosing where to place attention, but rather observing where attention naturally goes. Fella also addresses how we can be aware with thinking through broader, receptive awareness that can simultaneously know thought content, its effects on us, and accompanying body sensations—a skill essential for bringing mindfulness into daily life where thinking is necessary.*

Awareness with Thoughts and Thinking

We'll start with just noticing how you are in this moment. Just acknowledging: this is how the experience is.

And remembering that relaxation is so helpful for supporting a quite natural capacity to be aware. You could start with some relaxation of body, consciously scanning the body and relaxing, softening the muscles of the body.

I also find it helpful at times, rather than consciously doing a scan and exploring a conscious relaxation, to just invite—drop in an invitation for the body to relax. And then just see how the body and mind respond to that invitation.

May the body relax.

I often find that just dropping that invitation in and being available to see how the body and mind respond, some aspect, some area releases that I wasn't even aware was held.

May the body relax.

May the mind relax.

Not trying to do it or figure out how it might work for the mind to relax. Just dropping that invitation in.

May the mind relax.

Turning the attention towards recognizing awareness. Are you aware? What is obvious? What is awareness naturally already connecting with? That may be body sensation. Maybe sound. Emotions or moods.

Are you aware? What is obvious?

What is obvious moment to moment may change, will change. Whatever the object is itself may shift and change—pitch and tone of sound, body sensation pulsing, fluctuating. And the attention may also shift to some entirely new experience. The curiosity about that shift of attention, and not needing to stop it, just taking in whatever the attention is naturally and easily connecting with right in this moment.

From time to time, checking, being curious about the attitude, the relationship to experience. Do you want something to happen? Moving towards a wanting? Do you want something to stop happening? Pushing away? There may be ideas or beliefs present. It should be this way, it should be that way. Or it may be okay.

And keeping the practice simple: Are you aware?

What's being received? What is awareness already aware of?

Awareness will get lost. Our habit of being pulled into the content of thinking is quite strong. And at some point there will be recognition—awareness will return. Notice in that moment, often we are already connecting to "I've been thinking." But can you recognize, or be curious about, the return of awareness itself? Aware again, in that moment.

Because thoughts are such powerful shapers of experience, there's value in a curiosity about how having been lost in thought has affected the present moment experience. Often in the return—that recognition of being aware again—the content itself fades a little bit, but the impact of having been thinking lingers. What is here now?

I sometimes think about, or have the idea or image, that being lost in thought is like being on another planet. The mind makes a whole world in its thoughts. And when we come into awareness, we are waking up into that space. So it's kind of like: what planet am I on right now, as awareness returns? Often that planet has been shaped by the thoughts, perhaps with emotions or moods. So maybe it's planet frustrated. Or maybe it's planet calm. Sometimes when our minds wander into thoughts, it doesn't always construct reactivity—it sometimes can construct ease and calm. That can be surprising to notice. So if you're not reacting to the fact of having been wandering, you might notice surprising things upon the return of mindfulness.

Are you aware? What is obvious?

As we become aware of thinking, we might notice there are different ways that we think. Sometimes it feels like our thoughts charge us out of the present moment—there's a lot of pull to the content, a lot of emotional investment. And sometimes our minds drift out of the present moment, not so much with investment in the content, but more almost dreamlike images, or just random thoughts. I'm just describing things I've noticed here. We're not looking for anything, but you may recognize when you notice thinking that there are these different kinds of flavors of thought.

When there's that more emotional tone to the thinking, it's really helpful to notice the effect. As you wake up into thinking, we may have a habit of noticing "thinking" and then trying to come back to some kind of experience, like the breath, or come back to something that's not the thinking. And while attending to the content of the thoughts itself may not be so useful, there's a kind of place in between—noticing that the thinking, that the contents, have had an effect. That effect is already here.

So when there's this waking up with thinking: what's here? It's the same instruction. What's obvious? Just different ways of describing the different kinds of experiences we might have. What's obvious in this moment, as we've been lost in thought? What planet have I woken up on? Planet calm, planet frustration, planet anger, planet confusion. What is the space that you're already in? What's here?

When there's more of a drifting out of the present moment, when it's not so much an emotional connection or tone, often the content doesn't pull us so much. It's more the quality of the mind that's the space we've ended up in. So it's still useful to check: what's that space like? One thing we may notice in waking up with those kinds of thoughts is how the mind is thinking. I sometimes call this the modality of thought.

We can think in almost all of—I'd say we probably can think in any one of—our sense modalities. We often think as if we're hearing ourselves or talking to ourselves, through the sense door of hearing. We often think through imagery, seeing. We can also think through a kinesthetic experience, a sense of the feeling of something. I used to be a dancer, and that was how I thought about my dances—the feeling of what it was like. So there's that possibility too.

So when there's less of a charge or pull—more of that drifting out of the present moment—sometimes we might notice that the mind has been thinking in one of these ways. I've found it useful to simply notice: oh yes, there's been imagery, or there's been the experience of talking to myself.

But again, it's really useful to notice the quality of the mind that has been thinking, because often in that space of drifting out of the present moment there is more calm or ease. Sometimes I've found that after waking up, if I'm not judging myself for having been lost in thought—if it was one of those spaces of drifting—there can be more ease in the waking up than there was before the mind wandered. Just that curiosity of "what's here now?" can reveal this. And sometimes it is reactivity. So simply noticing that, looking at the quality of the mind that has been thinking—it can be surprising. Maybe it's joy. Maybe it's happiness. Maybe it's mettā.

Often when we're lost in thought, we are drawn to the content of thought. In formal sitting, this exploration around "what's the quality of the mind that's thinking?" is really helpful—not attending too much to what the content is. And yet, in our lives we need to think, and we can be aware with thinking.

As I said last night, the attempt to be aware of thinking by looking at it often doesn't work—it will often make the thought go away. The kind of awareness that allows us to be aware with the thought is this more receptive awareness, a broader awareness. That kind of awareness can know the content of the thought, can know how that content affects you, can know how it might play out—the shaping of how that thinking might unfold. It can notice the body sensations that are happening with that thought. That broad awareness can know all of this together.

This is a learning, a process of exploring what it means to be aware with thinking. There's often such a habit of aiming or directing the attention that we don't have the opportunity as much to have that space of broad awareness that's just noticing the thoughts happening.

As I mentioned last night, one place where you can begin to recognize that you can be aware with the content of thought is in that moment when mindfulness returns while thinking. Because often in that place there is awareness and thinking at the same time. And it's because that kind of awareness returning is receptive awareness—it's first receptive before we pick it up and then start to direct.

That moment of mindfulness returning—there's so much to learn there about how broad awareness feels, about the effortless quality of awareness, about the nature of how awareness receives experience. That moment is so instructive, if we're not judging ourselves for the mind being lost. When I began to see the value of that moment, it did not matter how many times my mind wandered. I got so interested in that moment of mindfulness returning, in what I was learning there. There's so much to see in that moment.

So there was a question—and I want to keep this somewhat brief; I sometimes do a longer dharma talk on this topic, so this will be an abbreviated version. The question was: "Can you distinguish attention from awareness in this tradition? Is it the difference between seeing and looking? Manasikāra versus sati, with examples."

Attention is a function of mind. My sense of what attention does is it chooses something out of experience to connect with. It's the factor of mind that, we could say, decides what awareness is connecting with. It is different from the factor of sati, of mindfulness.

We can know this through a simple reflection. If you're wandering around lost in thought, not mindful—and we've all experienced this, walking down the street completely lost in our thoughts, not aware—you are still walking through the world, still seeing and hearing, not walking into things, not stepping in front of cars. Something is processing. Seeing and hearing are still happening, and something is attending to that. So attention is working even when we're not mindful. That's one way we can see that mindfulness and attention are not the same thing.

And yet what I didn't understand initially about mindfulness was that I thought when I was mindful, it meant that I was choosing what to be mindful of. This is an interesting feature about attention. Attention is a factor that—kind of like the way our breath works...

We can either choose to breathe consciously—breathe in, breathe out—or we can forget about breathing altogether and breathing will happen on its own. Attention is kind of like that. We can choose where to place our attention, and if we are not choosing where to place it, the attention will be somewhere nonetheless.

Many forms of mindfulness practice work by cultivating mindfulness through choosing what we are attending to—choose to attend to the breath, for instance. This form of mindfulness is more interested in not choosing, but rather seeing that process of attention do its thing. Attention will be picking something out of experience.

Now, we might think of attention as being something specific. But attention can be specific and focused, or attention can be noticing broader, more diffuse experience. Sometimes the attention is connecting to a space or the quality of the mind as opposed to something specific—a sensation in the body, an experience, or a sound.

I used to think that if I wasn't choosing what to attend to, then I wasn't being mindful. This practice works counter to that assumption. We are simply exploring where the attention already is, with awareness.

So you have some days of practice here without our words to bother you. The rest of today and tomorrow—we won't be here in the morning tomorrow, but you're welcome to come and sit together during this time. We'll start the groups on Monday.

There was a question about whether it's okay to lie down in the hall. We generally encourage that only if you have a physical need. For me, with this body, I pretty much do exclusively lying meditation. I know there are some bodies that need to do that in the still posture. But it's not something to do in the hall simply because you're tired of sitting and want to lie down.

What we will do is set up a space with a couple of zabutans, and we'll put a sign on it indicating that it's a shared space for occasional lying posture. You're always welcome to do your lying meditation or any meditation in your rooms as well. That's mostly what I choose to do.

When I'm doing lying meditation, there are times when the mind gets into spaces that are so quiet that it's very close to sleep. I can kind of come in and out of sleep and see that happening. And when I fall asleep, I snore. Sometimes I actually hear the snoring—"What's that sound? Oh yes, that's me snoring." I don't want to have that happening in the hall, so I choose primarily to practice in my room, especially when the mindfulness gets more continuous, more stable, more settled.

It's fine to do the lying practice in the hall. If you've not done a lot of it, you can talk to me about how to approach it. The one key trick I use if I feel I'm in the hall and maybe in danger of falling asleep is putting my arm at right angles to the floor. You need some kind of feedback. If you fall asleep, your arm will drop. Now, you may not always notice that it drops, but when you wake up, you will know that it has dropped and therefore know that you have fallen asleep. This is important because in the lying posture, it's possible to fall asleep and wake up feeling like it's been continuous mindfulness, not knowing that you've actually drifted off. So you need some feedback.

Enjoy your days.

CHAPTER 177

Working with Difficulty

Andrea Fella · 46 min

> *In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella addresses one of meditation's most essential skills: knowing when we can simply be present with difficult experiences and when we need additional support. She begins by distinguishing between not liking something and genuinely being unable to be with it—a crucial recognition that prevents us from prematurely abandoning our capacity to meet what arises.*
>
> *Fella challenges the common belief that certain mind states, such as spaciness or agitation, are inherently incompatible with mindfulness. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), she reminds us that every mind state is simply a mind state that can be known with awareness. She offers several practical tools: dropping in wisdom reflections like "this is nature" or "this is dukkha" to reconnect with right view; using questions as invitations rather than demands for answers; and the "and" practice of broadening attention when reactivity narrows our awareness. For persistent patterns, she suggests noticing both their presence and absence, and distinguishing between moments of being caught versus not caught.*
>
> *Throughout, Fella emphasizes that the purpose of meeting difficulty is not to eliminate it but to understand its impermanent, conditioned, and not-self nature. This understanding, cultivated through the three levels of wisdom (sutamayā paññā, cintāmayā paññā, and bhāvanāmayā paññā), naturally supports the release of clinging and suffering. Her teaching offers both reassurance that mindfulness can meet any experience and practical guidance for when additional skillful means are needed.*

This morning I thought of reflecting a little bit about working with difficulty—those skillful means for when it's challenging to simply settle back and meet what is arising.

As we've said repeatedly, a big piece of the learning that develops and grows is recognizing when we can be with something, when the mind is balanced to meet just this is what's happening, and when we can't, when that's a challenge, when that's a struggle.

And yet there are some pieces to recognize, some ideas, some beliefs that can be in the back of the mind that make us think we can't be with something when actually it's possible. Some of the tools I'm going to explore are ways that might potentially support the mind in having more capacity to recognize that it can meet what's here.

I think the first piece is the distinction between not liking something and not being able to be with it. Things can be unpleasant, we can not like them, and we can simply recognize they're unpleasant and we don't like them. But if we're not noticing the not liking—the aversion—we may think that this object is a problem, that the object is in the way of being mindful.

So the key, as we've said several times, is: can we actually be aware with it? We may know the aversion, we may know the experience, and if the aversion isn't getting stronger, if what we're responding to isn't kind of taking over, then there's still learning happening. We have to begin to recognize how much the aversion or reactivity is pulling us out of mindfulness. Can we be aware of the experience and the reactivity? Are we getting lost in the experience? Are we getting lost in the reactivity? If we're finding ourselves repeatedly lost, repeatedly pulled out of mindfulness, not able to be mindful, that's probably a time to start bringing in some tools.

We do need to honor the strength of our reactivity. It's not helpful to try to push through, to just bear down and say, "I'm going to sit through this." That may be cultivating aversion—probably is cultivating aversion. And we can use our familiar tools to stabilize our mind, whatever those are, whether it's metta or stabilizing with a primary object. Whatever tools you use are fine.

And as Carol pointed out that first day, it's really important to bring right view into the mind as you shift to a tool, to recognize that the point of using a tool, of shifting the attention away from what is actually happening, is to help stabilize the mind—not to get rid of, not to avoid. That's a piece to also explore.

So we can use our familiar tools to stabilize our mind, and yet we can often have a belief that some experiences are problematic, that it's not possible to be mindful of them, or that the difficulty is somehow in the way of mindfulness.

A classic example of that is the experience of spaciness—the idea that if I'm spacey, it means I'm not mindful, or that I can't be mindful with spaciness. But spaciness is just another mind state. It is possible to be aware with it. It's possible to recognize, "Oh, this is what it's like to have a spacey mind." But if we have a belief in the back of the mind that spaciness is somehow inherently non-mindful, we won't even try.

I think that's what we often think with some of these states of mind that we consider problematic. We think they're inherently non-mindful, that certain mind states are inherently non-mindful. But every mind state is just a mind state, and we can bring mindfulness to it, we can know it with mindfulness. We may not actually be able to bring

mindfulness to it through effort—I've seen that with certain mind states, it's more that when the momentum of mindfulness is there, the mindfulness and awareness can meet those states of mind. It's not that I'm actually doing the mindfulness there.

Sometimes if we have an idea that certain states of mind are inherently non-mindful, we might jump more quickly to our habitual tools, our skillful means. We might jump quickly to, "Okay, I need to settle the mind here, I need to calm the mind, I need to bring in some metta." If we have the belief that we can't be present with certain mind states, we won't even explore that possibility.

One of the tools we can explore there is simply recognizing that the conscious picking up of a tool—the recognition of "Oh, I need to do this," or thinking "I should shift the attention to the breath" or "I should bring in some metta"—that very arising, that conscious arising of that thought, means you've already recognized whatever it is you think you can't be mindful of. You already have seen it.

This happened to me. I think I mentioned this briefly the other day. I was walking to my room, which is where I mostly did my meditation at the monastery at Chuyumen, and I noticed that I was trying to put my mind into what I would call a meditative mind state. In retrospect, that meant a subtle repression of thought. That was what a meditative mind state meant to me. And then I recognized: wait a minute, I'm already aware. I saw my mind starting to make that shift, to pick up that perspective of "this is what meditation is."

And seeing that kind of shift, there was the recognition: wait a minute, I'm already aware of this. Why not just know this? What's wrong with knowing this mind state?

There are so many ideas and agendas and beliefs about meditation that have us holding the perspective that we can be aware of certain things and not others. One tool that I use, one thing I recognize in my own mind, is that if the mind is saying something like "I can't be mindful with this," I recognize that I already am mindful of this. What does that mean? It's already happening. So open into that and check the attitude, because there's that belief, that idea in the back of the mind.

Over time, I think one of the key tools in my toolkit in terms of working with difficulty is knowing that it's possible—and this developed over a long stretch of time—knowing that it's possible for mindfulness to meet any experience. There's nothing that mindfulness can't meet. And it is also true that it is not always possible in this moment. The strength of reactivity may be stronger than the strength of the mindfulness in this moment, and there are times to bring in some supports.

This morning I want to reflect on a few supports that are outside of different practices. They're more supports that I've stumbled into and that Sayadaw has pointed to in terms of being able to connect with what's actually happening—supports that help us to meet what is actually happening.

The first thing, and Carol mentioned this the other day, is right view. The recognition that the aim of exploring experience, even a difficulty, the aim of being with the experience of a difficulty isn't to get rid of it. It's to understand it. Through that understanding, over time we begin to see the impermanent, the unreliable, the conditioned nature of experience—that the experience is not me, not mine, not who I am. And those understandings support letting go. The mind, when it sees something as impermanent, unreliable, not-self, realizes it doesn't make any sense to cling to it.

But this is the development. This isn't where we start. We can remember at the beginning that this is our direction, this is our perspective, this is our aim: to understand experience so that wisdom will support the release of suffering and clinging.

To me, this brings in a real sense of curiosity about what's going on. Curiosity is such a support—curiosity about "what is this?" Not curiosity about how I can get rid of this, but what is this experience? What's happening here?

So that's the first piece: just reminding yourself that this is happening, it's something to understand. Every single experience has Dharma nature. No matter what it is—whether it's aversion or greed or a belief in the mind, or the arising of compassion and joy—every single experience has Dharma nature. Every single arising will pass away. Every experience is impermanent. It's unreliable as a place that we can land on for lasting happiness. So it doesn't matter what is happening. Every experience can show this Dharma nature. That's what we're exploring. That's what we're trying to see and understand: the Dharma nature. So bring curiosity to whatever is happening. There's no special experience that has to happen in order for us to find Dharma nature. Everything has Dharma nature.

Another useful support—and this is in line with wise view, supports for helping the mind have that perspective—is to consciously drop in wisdom reflections. Reminding yourself of wisdom, either wisdom that you've heard from teachers or read from dharma books, or things that you know you've understood in the past. Maybe not in this moment, but you know you understand it.

This is the level of wisdom that is the hearing, that we've learned. And then the level of wisdom that is reflective, the use of thought. Bringing in wisdom reflections is a use of this second level of wisdom essentially, the *cintāmayā paññā*, the wisdom of reflec-

tion. We can drop in reminders to ourselves of wisdom that we've understood. "This is impermanent." "This is dukkha." That one actually has been surprisingly helpful for me when I recognize, oh yeah, that's right.

It's all dukkha. This is what the Buddha said we should understand. When I saw that clearly, it was so interesting—just reminding myself, *this is dukkha.*

Another reflection that Sayadaw has suggested is "This is nature." That one has been deeply resonant for me. What this means, to me, is that it points to the conditioned nature of experience. Whatever is happening right now—this difficulty, this challenge—has been conditioned. It arose based on conditions. It will continue as long as conditions are in place. It will end when conditions fall apart.

Dropping that in is a kind of pointer to this aspect of Dharma nature, the conditioned nature of experience. *This is nature.* To me, this creates such ease in the mind when something challenging is present—just to remind myself of this. It also brings in that recognition that everything has Dharma nature, that there's nothing outside of what can be understood, what can be learned with.

So this is the use of wisdom reflections. But something important to notice: when you drop in a wisdom reflection, it's not meant to bring in a lot of thinking. It's not about elaborating with many thoughts. It's just a recognition that what's here is a condition. Thoughts are powerful conditioners, and dropping in a thought like this can have a shaping effect on your experience.

So notice what happens when you drop in a wisdom reflection. That's the practice. Drop it in, kind of like dropping a pebble into a still pond, and then notice the ripples that follow. We're dropping a pebble of wisdom into our experience—and then what are the ripples? What happens when you drop in that wisdom reflection?

As I said, for me, when I drop in the reflection "this is nature," I feel space. I feel more balance. I feel a subtleness, a capacity, and more curiosity arising. So notice the effect that wisdom reflections have on your experience. Again, it's a pointing toward being more fully with what is here. It's not trying to shift attention away from what's here. It's an exploration, a tool that may support you to open more fully to what's here.

The next tool or support I'll offer is again one that Sayadaw points to: the use of questions to support investigation of what's happening. And again, with questions, you're not trying to figure out the answer. It's very similar to dropping in wisdom reflections. You drop in a question and then just see what happens. I use the analogy of pressing a doorbell. What happens? Who answers the door?

You drop in a question, and the initial questions can be simple: What is obvious? What's the attitude? These basic questions of the practice can support meeting a challenge, a difficulty. Especially "What's the attitude?" Sometimes that's all we need—to recognize that when there is struggle, there's some attitude that isn't being seen. If we drop in that question, sometimes the attitude can become obvious, can become clear. But we don't have to dig for it.

We don't have to look for it. As Sayadaw says, these questions are tools that support the strengthening of curiosity in our minds. But we don't have to look for an answer. We simply drop in these questions and then see what's obvious, what's here.

In terms of working with difficulty, certain questions may be particularly supportive. The first ones are fundamental: What's obvious? What's the attitude? What's the relationship to it? How does it make the body feel? And again, the intention isn't to direct the attention to the body, but dropping in that question can support a very natural opening to what is happening with the body.

One really useful question when difficulty is present is: What purpose is it serving? Again, we're not trying to figure it out, but sometimes that question can land in a way that allows us to see something more that's already happening right now—something where the nib of the reactivity is connecting to something that might be a little bit buried under the surface. What purpose is this serving?

Another question I find useful is: What is being believed? It has a similar flavor to asking what purpose this is serving. What's being believed?

So these are some supports using questions. And again, they are all supports to help the mind open more fully to what's here. It's not a digging. It's not trying to see anything in particular. It's an invitation. You can think of questions as an invitation. I sometimes think of them as asking, "Body and mind, are you willing to show me what's being believed right now?"—as opposed to "I need to see that." It's an invitation, an inviting of curiosity. Perhaps this is something that might be useful.

There are times when what's happening and the reactivity to it are fairly strong, pulling the attention while the reactivity amps up. In those situations, I've found that not aiming directly at the object can be helpful. One tool I've found really useful is letting the attention get more broad. I call this the "and" practice.

There's something going on. There's the reactivity. There's the attitude to that reactivity. And there's seeing happening. And there's hearing happening. And there's other body sensations. Oh, and there's that thing. And there's seeing. It's just reminding yourself, stepping back to a broadening of attention.

Sometimes with a reactive experience, awareness collapses down to just that thing, and it feels like there's nothing other than that. But there are thousands of things happening in the present moment. So we step back and consciously remind ourselves: there are other things happening right now. We're not trying to avoid noticing that thing—it's not completely stepping away. It's not that much of a stepping away. It's more like opening more fully to the recognition that a lot of things are happening. That thing is happening. And there's seeing. And there's a breath. And there's a body sensation. And there's a sound. And there's that thing. It's that quality of "and"—just keep going.

And... And... And...

That's a little bit more of directing in a way. It's directing the attention kind of away from that challenging thing. And sometimes that is useful.

Another thing I found really useful, especially when there's something—a kind of reactivity that happens a lot—and some of you mentioned this kind of pattern, a pattern that's very familiar, something that's coming up a lot, that seems kind of persistent. When there's a persistent pattern, when it comes up a lot, when it seems more stable in a way, when it feels like it's always there or there a lot—something I find really useful is to notice when it's not there. Notice its absence.

It's not always there. And sometimes we don't consciously recognize that so much. So notice its absence. Notice when it's present. Notice when it's absent. Just noticing that distinction. What's it like when it's absent? What's the experience when it's not there?

The Buddha actually points to this in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta around hindrances: notice when they're present, notice when they're absent.

And then, when it is present, I found it useful to recognize the difference—that there are times when it's present and it's just like, yeah, it's there, it's not a problem. There's that thing, whatever—pain in the body, impatience—and it's not a problem. And then it shifts to being a problem. We get caught. This is an attitude arising. This is a kind of reactivity to the thing.

So noticing the difference. Caught, not caught. Caught, not caught. And I found it useful to keep that simple, not to even necessarily try to understand what's the flavor of caught. Is it greed? Is it aversion? Is it confusion? Is it beliefs? Is it ideas? But just knowing that I'm caught, noticing the difference between caught and not caught.

You'll start to see—that's essentially the place where we can start to see when we're caught. We can actually also know that we're caught. And when we're not caught, we feel the flavor of the mind that's not caught. We notice that difference. And we can also see that we can know being caught without being caught.

So that's enough, I think, around that. Let's sit together.

Just letting the mind notice what's here. Are you aware? What is obvious? And remembering the support of relaxation—just this moment receiving experience.

CHAPTER 178

Supports for Continuity

Andrea Fella · 1h04

In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella investigates the art of sustaining mindfulness throughout the day without the forceful effort that often accompanies our attempts at continuous practice. Drawing on Sayadaw U Tejaniya's teaching of the three yogi jobs—cultivating right view, being aware, and keeping being aware—she explores what actually supports the momentum of mindfulness rather than depleting us through striving.

Fella offers the skillful analogy of riding a kick scooter: at first we must tap frequently to build momentum, but as momentum develops, we can ride with increasingly light effort. She emphasizes that recognizing the value of practice naturally inspires continuation, connecting this to the faculty of faith (saddhā) as a condition for energy. The talk addresses common places where mindfulness gets lost—painful sensations, habitual mind states like boredom or anxiety, shifts in attention, and even the unfamiliar territories that open as practice deepens. Rather than forcing awareness in these situations, Fella encourages curiosity about what catches the mind.

The teaching culminates with an exploration of sampajañña (clear comprehension) from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), where one understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away during all activities. Fella emphasizes that this broad, 360-degree awareness develops naturally through cultivating momentum, and that even brief bursts of such continuity can offer profound insight into the nature of mind.

We've been talking a lot about the importance of continuity. Sayadaw U Tejaniya, at one point when yogis were—I don't know what the right word is—a little confused perhaps about not having a lot of instruction in the practice, kept coming to him asking, "What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do in this practice?" So he came up with the idea of three key yogi jobs that we do in this practice. We've been talking about them all, not so much in this framework, but we've mentioned them all. He said the three yogi jobs are to cultivate right view, to be aware, and to keep being aware—basically to do that continuously.

And yet, I think the way we normally go about continuity is a kind of more forceful or effortful way, and that's not so helpful necessarily. We can use effort to support and cultivate mindfulness, but it often is bound up with some striving, some holding, some pushing, some trying, some more doing.

So what I thought to explore this evening is some things that support continuity. What is it that creates conditions that support continuity of practice? As Carol said, the idea of continuity often creates this idea of "I've got to do this all day long," and we do—we are encouraged to practice all day long—but not with a kind of forceful mind. So we can also think about what will support this. We could also say momentum—the momentum of mindfulness or the establishment of mindfulness. Those are other words that evoke this continuity, the mindfulness that is happening moment after moment, that momentum of mindfulness, that establishment of mindfulness.

It is essentially this: moment after moment mindfulness is what concentration is in this practice. The continuity of mindfulness is what establishes that concentration, which is where the capacity to see clearly comes from.

We've talked about a lot of these things that I'm going to explore tonight in different ways, maybe touching on them in light ways here and there, but I'm just going to put them all together.

Sayadaw pointed to really understanding the value of practice. He said if we really understood the value of practice, we wouldn't stop practicing. This points to faith, really. Carol spoke about faith the other day and that sense of taking refuge in awareness and wisdom. When we taste the value that awareness and wisdom have for us, it inspires us to continue practice. Carol spoke about the five faculties and how faith, confidence, is a condition that supports energy. When faith is strong in our hearts, when we have a sense of the value of practice, quite naturally there's a motivation to practice. You don't have to try so hard. It's just where our heart wants to go.

Beginning to really notice—and this is the place where we've pointed to—notice what it's like when you are aware, when you are seeing clearly. What does it feel like? This is how we begin to feel the benefits of awareness and wisdom. We feel the kind of spaciousness around a challenge. So many of you have pointed to this in the practice meetings: seeing a challenging experience arising, and yet being able to have a new relationship with it, not so much a problem. I've asked several of you, "What is that like? What does that feel like?" To have that different relationship—that's really connecting to the value of the practice. It's connecting to how it feels to be attending with mindfulness and wisdom. It feels valuable. We understand it's valuable. We understand it's worthwhile.

And so the more we recognize that value, the more it supports our natural inclination towards engaging.

Faith. Confidence. Understanding the value of practice is a support for continuity. We've talked about making effort in this practice, and this is a way to cultivate a momentum to engage. As I said this morning, Sayadaw said the only work we give our minds is to remind ourselves to be aware. This is a form of effort in this practice—just this reminding. But it's so light. It is so light. Aware. Aware.

At the beginning, we've talked about using these questions: Am I aware? Or simply, Aware, perhaps? And, What is obvious? As we begin to recognize the experience of being aware a little more clearly, and as we begin to feel into a momentum of awareness, then it might be useful to explore backing off on the questions. As Carol mentioned, not even actually asking the question in the mind—it's more like you're nodding at experience. This. And aware. Touching into the experience.

The gentle effort we make gets tuned to the momentum. And the more momentum there is, the less we have to put in that personal effort, the less we have to try.

I often give this analogy—many of you have heard it, so you'll hear it again here—of riding on a scooter. Not a motorized scooter, but a kick scooter, one of those where you stand with your foot on the platform and tap the ground to get yourself going. At the beginning, you have to tap pretty frequently to build momentum. But after a little while, there's momentum, and you can put your foot up and just ride for a bit. Then you start to feel into when the scooter gets a little wobbly, and you know you need to tap again.

It's like that with mindfulness. At the beginning, we need to remind ourselves more frequently: Aware of what? Maybe using those questions. But as momentum builds, we become familiar with the experience of that momentum—like getting familiar with riding on the scooter and knowing when that momentum is there. Then we can back off of how much we're reminding ourselves, like we back off of tapping on the ground.

And actually, on that scooter, if you're going at a pretty good pace, maybe even with a little downhill—sometimes that happens with practice—we gain the momentum, and it really feels like it's carrying itself. Sometimes you can just ride for a ways. If you put your foot down at that point, it's actually going to get in the way. It's going to slow you down.

Likewise with mindfulness. If you're reminding yourself, be aware, be aware, be aware, and you're already aware, it's kind of getting in the way.

At one point Joseph had his own way of expressing this to me. I was going in for an interview, and I don't remember what I was reporting, but what he said in response I remember so clearly. He said, "If you go into a room and the light is already on, it doesn't make any sense to keep flipping the light switch."

It's that kind of thing. There was a little too much vigor in my practice, trying to connect with being aware. This is part of the art form of the effort in this practice—understanding and knowing how light it can be. And knowing when we do need to engage, when we do need to bring in that question: Am I aware? What's obvious?

Mindfulness is a wholesome quality of mind. It's a mental formation, one of those fabrications I was talking about this morning. It has conditions. It is conditioned.

It arises in dependence on conditions, and it also conditions our mind. As with other wholesome qualities, recognizing mindfulness, being aware of it, being cognizant of it—knowing what it feels like, knowing when it's there, when it gets weak—cultivates mindfulness like any wholesome state. Being aware of love supports the conditions for more love to arise. Mindfulness is similar in that way. Recognizing mindfulness is a supportive condition for mindfulness.

And so mindfulness arises and passes like other experiences, like other qualities of mind. I think it's useful, in terms of cultivating a continuity of mindfulness, to understand what we're exploring here: can we create conditions for mindfulness to arise more frequently? I have found it really useful to take an interest in that arising and passing of mindfulness—not as a form of judgment, but to begin to get curious about what are the conditions that support mindfulness. What are the conditions that allow it to be here? What are the conditions in which it gets weak? It's like studying this quality of mind. Sayadaw U Pandita said mindfulness is the most wholesome mind state. And we can explore it, as well as anger and aversion and greed and love and compassion and patience. We can get curious about mindfulness.

We often think of the comings and goings of mindfulness as being a problem. We would call it, when mindfulness goes, "the mind wandered." And when it comes back, it means it had wandered, and that was a problem. We've talked about this already, especially looking at that moment of mindfulness returning, and I want to highlight it again here because it is a support for cultivating continuity—to recognize when mindfulness returns. In that moment, if we're not judging ourselves, we're recognizing: this is what it's like for mindfulness to come back. This is the experience of awareness. This is what it's like. That recognition is a great place to begin to get familiar with the experience, with the feeling of it.

So there are these moments of mindfulness returning. We could call it unprompted mindfulness. Many meditation practices work by prompting mindfulness, and I'd say when we're exploring the question "Am I aware? What's obvious?"—that's a prompting

of mindfulness. That's this technique's version of prompting mindfulness. We are aware, and we're reminding ourselves to continue to be aware. That's a prompting of mindfulness, and that is one way to encourage and cultivate mindfulness.

But these moments when mindfulness just returns—those are moments of unprompted mindfulness. They simply arise. There are a lot of them, and they're such a great place to begin to recognize the quality of awareness, the effortless quality of it. We've talked about this, so I won't dwell on it too much, but I want to point to this: recognizing the moment of mindfulness returning is a support for continuity. If we think about continuity as meaning we have to hold on to mindfulness, we have to be constantly prompting it, then those moments when mindfulness returns will seem like a problem. But they're another support for continuity—those moments of noticing mindfulness returning.

And then there are the places or ways that we lose mindfulness. Often we might notice these in retrospect, and I'd encourage this as another kind of exploration: where am I losing mindfulness? This can involve noticing, through the arc of your day, the places or times of day, the activities you're doing, or the mind states that are happening where mindfulness tends to get lost. What I want to encourage here is curiosity. What happens in those times? What happens in those situations?

Curiosity is a very natural motivator for energy. It's a great support for cultivating continuity, for cultivating the momentum of mindfulness. So being curious about where we lose mindfulness, where the attention wants to go.

Now I want to say this, really emphasizing the curiosity, because there can be a tendency if you begin to recognize places or times that you tend to lose mindfulness. For instance, you might notice you lose awareness in particular activities like your yogi job, or when you're putting on your shoes and your coat to go outside, or when you go into your room—that's another one. Sometimes we lose mindfulness when we go into our room. So there may be particular places or activities where we notice, over the days, that we begin to recognize: "Yeah, whenever I go into that yogi job, I just lose it," or "whenever I go into the bathroom, I lose it."

Recognizing where we lose awareness, we can bring curiosity to what happens in those situations. Not as a way to double down, to say to yourself, "Okay, I know I lose awareness when I go to my yogi job, so I am going to be mindful. I'm walking, walking, walking. I'm picking up the knife. I'm chopping, chopping, chopping." That kind of forcing, trying to stay present in a situation where you've noticed in the past that your mind tends to get lost—you're not going to learn that way.

There's something going on. When our mindfulness gets lost, something is happening. We've missed something. We've not seen something. It may just be a habit of some kind. It could be a picking up on some kind of excitement—there are so many different things that might happen.

For instance, going to a yogi job, if you're in a yogi job with other people, maybe there's a little bit of a feeling of excitement. Even though you're not talking, you're in a community. It feels social, and so there's a little bit of orienting to what the other people are doing. And maybe that's where the mind gets lost—it doesn't notice that it has gotten really happy about being in this little community of veggie choppers. So it's missed something.

As you notice a place or location or activity where you tend to lose mindfulness, as you're heading there, just get curious: What happens? What happens there? Not to try to change or force anything, but just be curious. Something goes on. Something happens in this situation. Can the curiosity help you to recognize what is it that has caught the mind? What is it that catches the mind?

And that is the basic encouragement no matter what way we lose awareness. I'm going to go through some other examples of different kinds of experiences.

We might lose awareness with painful experience, painful body sensation, difficult bodily experience. I noticed this in my own practice. There were a couple different strategies that my mind used, but they all involved not being mindful when there was a lot of pain in my body. One of them was singing. My mind started singing, and it would be checked out. I would wake up singing and recognize, "Oh, so this is what happened." Originally, I'd wake up and say, "Oh, there's singing, and oh yeah, there's that pain." I would try to be mindful of the pain and it would just catch me and pull me in, and I would be aversive to it, and then I would start singing again.

At some point, through this kind of exploration, I began to notice that when I woke up in the singing, the mind was not bothered by the pain. There was a little moment there of being aware and not being bothered by the pain. That was kind of interesting to me. It was like, "Huh, my mind has figured out how not to be bothered by this pain. It just doesn't know how to do it with awareness."

As I explored this, I realized that when there was awareness with the pain, the mind was magnetized and zoomed in on the pain. That was cultivating the aversion, and that was making things worse. When the mind went to the singing, it was basically a way to ignore the pain, a way to not be looking at the pain directly.

So I explored that as I came back. This was a strategy my mind had used to avoid pain—to get lost in singing. And I began to realize: I don't actually have to lose awareness when there's pain. And I don't have to be drawn into the pain either.

So I allowed that learning around what the mind was doing as it wandered, or what it was doing when it got caught in a situation like that with the painful bodily sensation. I used what the mind was doing as a way to learn something about how to be with the experience. And what it meant was being with the whole experience and not focusing in on the pain. That's what I learned. I saw that the mind is not bothered by the pain when it's not focusing on it. So maybe I can be aware and not zero in on looking at the pain.

Our minds have strategies that they've learned, and sometimes those strategies—well, we've talked about why our minds do these things, these habitual things. This is maybe another reason: in this case, my mind was doing that in order to not be so stressed by the pain, and that was the only way it knew how to do that. Well, it knew a couple of ways. Another one was spacing out. It had figured out how to space out and not attend to the pain too. So there were a couple different strategies the mind had learned, but they generally involved not being mindful. And so I began to be curious about that—what might it mean? I saw that the focus on the pain was what was kind of amplifying it. So what might it mean?

Our minds have learned strategies to deal with challenging situations. They do the best they can in navigating our lives before we meet this practice. This creates all these habits, and they become our comfortable things, even if they're not necessarily ultimately that helpful. But our minds were doing the best they could. What can we learn from that? What can we learn from bringing mindfulness to what those habits are and how they function?

In that case, I saw that the habit functioned to decouple me from focusing so closely on the pain. Okay, maybe I can try to do that with awareness.

We also often lose mindfulness in habitual mind states—boredom, depression, anxiety, confusion, wanting, planning, thoughts of home. When we notice those habitual mind states, at some point we often will wake up into them. Recognizing in that moment what the experience is that we are waking up into. I talked about this as being like asking, "What planet are we on?" It may be around thoughts having created something, a world of some kind, or a mood maybe creates a feeling or a space. Boredom or confusion or anxiety. For me, depression was one that I tended to get lost in.

When we wake up into the experience, we begin to have a sense of what it means, what the experience is. Again, not to try to jump over it or to come back to something else. It's like, "Oh, it feels like this. It feels like this." Whatever thought had been happening, it feels like this. And that recognition—that kind of beginning to recognize those habitual states in the moment that we wake up—gives us a familiarity, a sense of what the quality of that mind is. And it may begin to help us to see it as it's coming into being.

When we tend to get lost in a habitual state of mind, something that comes back a lot, we're often in it or it's already there before we really notice it. But this kind of recognizing—okay, this is what I tend to get lost in, just that familiarity of recognizing that—then we might start to recognize, and also the recognition of when it's not there, we might start to see, "Oh, here's the climate starting to change." The feeling of a mood starting to shift. I remember feeling like the self-hatred was just starting to descend, really starting to feel the beginning of it. Instead of being already lost in it or caught in it, beginning to see how it arises.

This supports us because when we can begin to see how something arises, there can be a little bit more curiosity again about what this is. What is it that gets me caught here? What is the mind doing here?

There was one retreat where I was experiencing a lot of anger. It was a situation that had happened on the retreat with somebody there that I was in relationship with. And every time I was in their proximity, there would be some anger, and then sometimes just thinking about it later. It was something that had happened at the retreat that had generated this anger, and it just kept coming back—the memory about it, all of this.

And boy, it was my anger retreat. I got to see anger in spades. I felt the pain of it. It's kind of like, well, why does it go here? It is so painful. So many of you have asked that kind of question.

At one point, I watched it so much that I got to really feel the beginnings of it. On a retreat at home—I think it was a three-month retreat—Carol said, "Get to know the smell of it coming." And that's what it's like, just the feeling of it starting to put itself together.

With the anger, at one point I saw this. I got to see just the very beginnings of it. And it felt warm and pleasant and powerful. Just a split second later, it turned into pain. But just that split second at the beginning of the anger, it felt like I'm in control here. I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm going to do.

Quickly it became very unpleasant, but the very first split second of it was pleasant. I was shocked. That's the hook. That's what the mind is hooked to there. It gets hooked to that feeling of control.

So we can, just again through being willing to watch these patterns—just watch them, watch them, watch them—we don't always get to see the beginnings, but we're learning something wherever we are waking up with it. Whether it's waking up into it, what are you seeing there?

We also can lose awareness when attention shifts. This is one of the reasons why I like to emphasize noticing the shift of attention early, especially in this style of practice. I think a lot of those moments when our mind just kind of wanders off, it's because we haven't noticed the attention has shifted. We haven't noticed that the attention picked up on something. Our agenda was someplace else, but the attention picked up on something else. We haven't noticed that shift.

We have the agenda to be meditating. We are sitting here, thinking, "I'm going to be doing this." With this style of practice, it's more open—we're receiving whatever arises. But there can be things that arise where we still have this idea that that's not the practice. Those moments of the attention shifting to something, or perhaps shifting to something we're not so clear about—we maybe have an idea of mindfulness as being where objects are really clear and precise. And so if the attention shifts to one of those more diffuse or vague experiences, if we've got the habit of noticing only precise experiences, we may not notice that the attention has shifted to a different kind of experience.

So those shifts of attention, really cultivating curiosity about them—for me that has been one of the things that's really supported continuity. Notice: oh, the attention's changed. And again, not to have any agenda for where the attention needs to be. We're not in charge of the attention in this practice. We are curious about how the attention is being shaped.

I mentioned this one too, so I'll just touch on it briefly. The mind can go into habitual states where we tend to get lost—spacing out, sleepiness, those foggy, dull states of mind. We can have the idea or the sense that they're inherently not mindful states, a belief that we can't be mindful in them. But it's not necessary for mindfulness to get lost in those states. And so again, curiosity. This has been such an interesting thing for me to explore.

When the mind starts feeling really slippery and just kind of drifting out, when it feels like it stops attending to things and just goes—rather than thinking, "I need to focus," we can ask, "Oh, what does that feel like? What does it feel like for the mind to just go, to feel like it floats off?"

The feeling that it's floating off, we often think of as being somehow a problem, but it's just another mind state. We can be aware with any mind state. Just interest. Interest in this.

And again, with some of these states, it really is interest that supports our capacity to see them. Sleepiness, for instance. If you are exploring, trying to be aware of sleepiness, it's probably going to wake you up. So trying to be aware will shift the mind state. But it's possible to be aware *with* it, with curiosity. Aiming the attention alters the climate in the mind, and some experiences are more subtle—trying to look at them obscures the experience. That's what I'm trying to say. The energy that we might be using to look at something is grosser than what is actually happening.

So some of those states of the mind settling into quiet, or just releasing—seeing those experiences requires a different quality. It's more just interest that can allow that, not "I need to look at this." The momentum of mindfulness can begin to allow mindfulness to infuse states and experiences where we may tend to get lost.

I think this can happen as the practice deepens. Sometimes shifts of mind towards more subtle experience or new, unfamiliar states—those places too we can get lost. Mindfulness can get lost as the mind begins to settle, and I don't know what's actually going on, but it kind of feels like the mindfulness and wisdom start to get interested in things that I don't have any idea about. There's less familiarity. As the practice deepens, there can be less familiarity for some of the objects, some of the experiences that happen.

And in those places, sometimes the mind can wander. Sometimes that has to do with unfamiliarity. Sometimes it has to do with a kind of "whoa, that's scary, I don't know what that is," and we pop out of it. That's not so much the mind wandering or getting lost—it's more like it just pops out of something. But sometimes we can go into a state, sink into it maybe, and not have so much awareness in there, partly through unfamiliarity.

The momentum of mindfulness and curiosity can be very helpful here with these kinds of things. I would play with this over and over again—just sit, let my mind do its thing, and then I would notice it was gone. Drifted. It just slipped out. There was a lot of clarity, seeing very clearly, and then suddenly mindfulness is gone. And then mindful-

ness would return. "Wow, it went away. It just slipped out. What happened?" And so I would let it settle again, and then it would slip out again. Just over and over, curiosity: What's happening there? What's happening there?

Again, with that kind of thing, we can't try to see it or hold on to the mindfulness. It really is a patience for seeing something that's unfamiliar.

Also, as the practice deepens, as there's more settledness, there can be other flavors of the mind getting lost. One teacher, Michelle McDonald, talked about what she called the purity-purification cycle—the mind settles, becomes more pure, more wholesome qualities arising: more ease, more settledness, more peace, more spaciousness. And then sometimes in that kind of space, for different reasons, the mind just kind of gets complacent there, isn't really clearly aware of that, and then it picks up on one of its old habit patterns and starts to ruminate. Or it starts to plan its next retreat because this one is so good.

It just goes out and gets lost in those places of purity. There's a lot of clarity in those states, and they can be places where mindfulness slips away too.

Sometimes in that settled space, it's like conditions are being created for something that hasn't been seen, something that's been held back, held down for a long time. Finally there's room for it to be seen. And sometimes those patterns—deep, old conditioning—arise in those spaces. It's not a mistake. Sometimes it feels like the mind recognizes: okay, you're ready now for this.

So there can be these cycles of ease and peace and settledness, and then seeing—it's like another door, another room has been opened, revealing material that hasn't been seen in a very long time, or has never really been clearly explored or looked at. The purification, the seeing. For me, this was a useful framing: Oh, it's purification. That's it. This understanding eased my mind a little bit around the process.

I'll end with talking about one of the classic teachings on continuity, from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—clear comprehension. Many of you are probably familiar with that section where it talks about one acting with clear comprehension, or "in full awareness" as it's sometimes translated. While going forward and returning, one acts in full awareness. While looking forward and away, one acts in full awareness. While flexing and extending one's limbs, one acts in full awareness.

This is pointing to all activities. The sutta mentions even while defecating and urinating—I love that it includes what might seem like the most profane activity. One acts in full awareness. So it really is encouraging us with all activities, as we've been practicing here: while chopping vegetables, while going for a walk, while eating a meal, while getting dressed in the morning.

The key in this sutta, however, is the phrase "full awareness"—one acts in full awareness. Not just that we engage with all activities, but with full awareness. The Pāli is *sampajañña*.

The definition of sampajañña is not given in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, but it is defined elsewhere, and that definition is something like: one clearly comprehends when feelings, thoughts, and perceptions are known as they arise, persist, and pass away.

If we take that phrase and put it into the sutta: while going forward and returning, one understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away. When flexing and extending one's limbs, one understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away.

This is a very broad awareness being pointed to. Feelings, thoughts, and perceptions is a kind of stand-in for three of the aggregates: feeling, perception, and mental formation. With all activities.

To me, this is the culmination. This is what's pointed to in this sutta. It's a pretty high bar: one understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away while doing all activities. But this is what starts to happen as the momentum of mindfulness develops. As there is more momentum, we start to see feelings, thoughts, and perceptions with whatever we're doing. This broad awareness can see so much at one time. Carol calls it 360-degree mindfulness—just aware of the whole of experience. And this also points to attuning to the impermanent nature of experience, bringing in the wisdom side as well.

I don't feel like we can really *do* this; to me, it feels like something that arises. As we cultivate the momentum of mindfulness, as we cultivate this capacity to see experience, this begins to be available.

One last piece about continuity: when I first heard talks about this, I thought I had to work really hard for a really long time, developing mindfulness all day long, before I'd see anything, before I'd have any kind of insight or understanding. But what I've seen in my own practice is what I'll call little bursts of continuity. There are times when, for a

few moments—three seconds—conditions come together for us to see in a moment, while we're doing whatever we're doing, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away in a split second. This can happen in daily life.

The intention to cultivate the continuity of mindfulness, to notice mindfulness when it returns, to prompt it with light effort—this creates conditions where at times there may be just a moment of something arising.

There was a moment for me early in my practice—and I wouldn't have even known to describe it this way at the time—but I had been cultivating awareness of anger, just practicing with that. And then there was one moment in my kitchen where I was cutting an apple, and in a split second I got a burst of that continuity. For just two seconds, a few moments. And in those few moments, I saw a whole array of things arise. I saw thoughts related to what I was doing arise. I saw other thoughts related to those, connected to anger. And I saw the whole mushrooming of anger that could begin but hadn't begun—all within a split second. A burst of continuity revealed feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away.

It was a very powerful moment. The first time, I think, that I ever really saw. It was the moment that let me understand: this practice works, and I'm going to be doing this for the rest of my life. Because it was so clear that this was a path for understanding the mind and being released from painful mind states. And it happened in a very brief moment.

Sometimes we can get these little bursts of continuity. But they only come with the intention to cultivate that continuity.

Let us end with the sharing of blessings. Appreciating the value of practice—this is what we've been exploring—and sharing it. Now let us chant the verses of sharing and aspiration.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice, may my spiritual teachers and guides of great virtue, my mother, my father, and my relatives, the sun and the moon, and all virtuous leaders of the world—may the highest gods and evil forces, celestial beings, guardian spirits of the earth, and the Lord of Death—may those who are friendly, indifferent, or hostile—may all beings receive the blessings of my life. May they soon attain the threefold bliss and realize the deathless.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice and through this act of sharing, may all desires and attachments quickly cease, and all harmful states of mind, until I realize Nibbāna. In every kind of birth, may I have an upright mind with mindfulness and wisdom, austerity and vigor. May the forces of delusion not take hold nor weaken my resolve.

The Buddha is my excellent refuge. Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma. The Solitary Buddha is my noble guide. The Sangha is my supreme support. Through the supreme power of all these, may darkness and delusion be dispelled.

CHAPTER 179

Noticing Perception

Andrea Fella · 1h00

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella offers a deep investigation into saññā (perception), one of the five aggregates (khandhas), examining how this fundamental mental process shapes everything we experience. Drawing on her practice with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, she explains that perception functions as the mind's pattern-matching system—going into memory banks to find the closest match for incoming sensory stimuli. She describes how perception operates in layers, from basic recognition of form and color to more complex identification of objects.

Fella unpacks the Buddha's analogy of perception as a mirage—we experience not reality directly, but the mind's construction of it based on conditioning and memory. Through vivid personal examples—mistaking bat squeals for a pig being slaughtered, watching her mind construct 'leaf' from 'green, jagged,' and the Exploratorium exhibit where flashing lights created the illusion of a school bus—she demonstrates how perception stabilizes our world while simultaneously deceiving us into believing in permanence and solidity.

The talk addresses how perception intertwines with delusion, leading us to mistake our mental constructions for accurate representations of reality. Fella emphasizes the Buddha's instruction to 'cultivate the perception of impermanence' (anicca-saññā), explaining that this counteracts our habitual perception of stability. When we see that both what we cling to and the clinging itself are mind-made, understanding of dukkha and anattā naturally follows. Rather than trying to stop perception, we learn to recognize it at work, preventing the slide into papañca (mental proliferation).

This evening I'd like to reflect on the process of perception.

We've been talking about this quite a bit, and tonight I'd like to come at it from the perspective of seeing the process of perception itself—how it's conditioned, how it confuses us, how it gets us caught in misperceptions. Some of this will be revisiting things we've talked about, but perhaps from a slightly different perspective.

One thing I want to say at the beginning is that I'm going to be talking about how we might be able to recognize perception at work in our minds. And yet this isn't, as we've said a number of times, an instruction to try to do that, to try to look for it or see it. That

can be a way to explore these aggregates, perception being one of the five aggregates. We can sometimes aim or direct toward trying to look at those aspects of our experience. But there's another way into this whole thing.

The way I found it worked for me with Sayadaw U Tejaniya is that sometimes he would start talking about something. On one retreat in particular, he talked about perception a lot. Almost every group I was in, he was talking about perception—how perception and delusion kind of mixed it up. And without trying, just being in the field of that curiosity that Sayadaw had about perception, my mind started to be curious about perception, and I started seeing it in different ways.

So this also can be a way that we start to see something or recognize something—not so much by trying to find it, but just being in the field of discussion about it or exploration about it. As we've said, as the mindfulness gets more continuous, it can start to see things more clearly; sometimes it can start to see more subtlety. This is one of the areas it can start to see. So just take it in that way. This isn't something to leave the hall and start trying to do.

A little bit of a review about what perception is: perception as one of the five aggregates. We've talked about those a couple of times now in the hall—these functions of mind. I talk about them as being functions or processes of mind that kind of make up what we are experiencing.

Just to name them: there's the aggregate of the body, of form, the physical aspect of experience. Then there's feeling, the process of experiencing pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. There's the process of perception, of recognizing experience. There are mental formations, the volitional activities of mind, which includes thoughts, emotions, and beliefs—all the wholesome and unwholesome qualities of our mind. This includes things like greed, aversion, and delusion. It includes things like mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom. So that's a big bucket, the mental formations. And then there's consciousness, this kind of bare recognition of experience, the knowing of experience, the meeting of experience at a sense door—contact with the eye door, and eye consciousness arises.

There are six kinds of consciousness: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness. Likewise with perception—six classes of perception, the same six classes. Feeling also has the same six classes. These aggregates work with the six sense bases; each sense base will have these aggregates connected with it.

One of the things about perception, feeling, and consciousness: I think of those three as kind of the bare experience of what we're experiencing. The mental formations are in relationship to what we are experiencing. So perception, feeling, and consciousness—that's kind of how we know our experience. Sometimes we know it more through the feeling door, the feeling experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Sometimes we know it more just through the knowing; we just know the experience. And sometimes we know it through this aspect of perception.

Perception, I think, is one of the functions of mind where we really tend to land with our understanding of our world, because it is that function that helps us to recognize experience. It operates with memory. We meet experience over and over again, and as we meet experience—in a field of learning with our families as we grow up—we're told, "Well, that's a chair," and "That's a wall." We're given names for things. And we begin to recognize walls that we've never seen before because of this pattern matching, this way we have of recognizing experience.

That is a really useful function in our minds. We can recognize something that we've never seen before, never experienced before, because of its similarity to things that we have experienced.

And this process does make mistakes. We'll get into that.

So this mental process of recognition is related to memory in a way. It is connected to what we've learned. When there's contact with the eye or ear—a stimulus—it's almost like the process of perception is the mind going into its memory banks and saying, "What is this like? What's the closest match I can find for this stimulus that's coming into my eye or my ear?"

Perception also has a kind of layered nature to it. Perception can work at a level that's very basic—just in the eye door, for instance, recognizing form and color, shape, shadow, light and dark, without much orientation to what the experience is or what the name of the experience is, other than "that's light" or "that's dark," or "that's a square" or "that's a circle." Form, color—that's one layer of how perception can work. And then we may start there, just noticing squares and circles, and then we might recognize them as zabutans and zafus.

This kind of seeing of how perception functions—I don't see this all the time, but every now and then there's a really clear example of it: the mind, through the continuity of mindfulness, able to watch the mind put a perception together. This happened for me on one retreat. I was sitting outside and my head turned, and it just landed on a shape. I watched the mind name the color, the form. It landed on a shape, and it's like I

heard the mind saying, "Green. Jagged." And then it came up with the perception "leaf." So the perception was layered on top of the more basic perceptions of green and the jagged shape. Then "leaf" kind of popped into the mind as the recognition of what that form was.

Perception often happens in the mind as a kind of subtle form of thought. In that example, it was those words popping into my mind. I wasn't trying to identify that thing personally. I wasn't trying to do that. That was the process of perception recognizing green, jagged, leaf. In that case, those perceptions appeared in the mind as those words. This is one way that perceptions can appear—we can recognize the name of something.

But just as thoughts can appear in our minds through any sense door, we may experience thoughts as words in our mind or as images—almost as if we're talking to ourselves through the ear, like we're hearing something or seeing something. Thoughts can be in these different forms. They can even be, I think I mentioned, the sense of thinking physically, through dance—the feeling of the dance. I would think it and feel it. That's another way that thoughts can arise.

And so perception also can happen through any of these doorways. I'd say probably for most of us, perceptions will often happen through those sense doors that are our strongest. So often for those of us who are sighted and who have hearing and language, the perception often comes as a visual image or as a word in the mind, as if we're saying the word in the mind.

Often we talk about perception from this perspective of the recognition of objects, and this is one of the main ways that perception works—it's an easy way to talk about it. But there are some other functions of perception. Perception also creates the experience of location, of space.

I experienced this when I was in Hawaii practicing for quite a long time. I was in a little cottage, meditating inside, and there are so many birds there. You may experience this here at certain times of the day when the birds are really singing. But my experience was, as the birds sang—and they were loud—there was a sense of hearing happening, a recognition of "bird," and often an image of a bird in my mind. I would envision these birds walking around on the ground—the francolins in particular, they're really noisy. And I would envision them, I would see them, but I would also have this feeling of the mind launching into space in the direction that I thought the bird was. The creation of the distance and the location of the bird. There was this clear sense of the mind trying to locate the bird.

And that is also a part of the perceptual process.

I've experienced a flavor of how the mind orients towards space habitually. At my parents' house, there's a stairway, and the stairs are all the same height—mostly—when we're going upstairs. We don't recognize how the perception of the first couple of stairs affects us in terms of the rest. We expect the stairs will all be about the same height. In my parents' house, the top step is about an inch and a half shorter. And every time, for years, it took a long time before I didn't land funny at that top stair. The mind was expecting a certain height to land on, and when it wasn't there, there was a kind of drop. That too is perception at work.

Perception works in different ways. I think there is also perception around time, perception around the location of our body, the orientation of our body upright. We feel this in airplanes sometimes—when the airplane tips, we feel the shift of our body in space. These kinds of things are related to perception.

Perception is a really useful process, recognizing what's around us and what objects are. It's really useful, and it's just something that happens. It's not something we're trying to stop from happening. But what we often do is mistake some things about perception. There are confusions and delusions that arise around perception. I want to speak to some of that, but first I want to talk a little about beginning to see this process, see perception working.

For me, the place where this has been most obvious, where it's easiest to see, where it naturally arises with a little more continuity of mindfulness, is when I'm hearing sounds. What I might experience is the hearing, the experience of the sound in the ear—the sound of a woodpecker. The sound is just the sound. And then in the mind, the word "woodpecker" appears, if you know what a woodpecker is. Or maybe an image of a woodpecker appears. It may even appear in context. Sometimes with birds, I may see them on the branch of a tree. It's not just a bird with no background—the bird appears in context. That image or word, that's perception at work.

And quickly, as Carol mentioned the other night, very quickly what can happen is we go from that bare recognition of "that's what that is" to thinking about it, to having ideas and beliefs and opinions about it, to having reactions to it. The perception can be a launching point for so much of that slippery slope towards *papañca* that Carol talked about.

If we can start to recognize perception, when we start to see the perception itself—and my speaking about this might create that kind of interest, that "oh, that's perception"—the seeing of it may help to keep it just at that level, not going down the slope of

"oh, where might that woodpecker be and where can I find it?" and "let me go out on my next walking and see if I can find woodpeckers." Just: there was the perception, there was the sound, and there was the recognition. It was a woodpecker.

Sometimes I've seen with the process of perception, when conditions are a little fuzzy—like seeing in dim light—I'll watch the mind experimenting, exploring: "What is that? What is that experience?" One time I walked into the common area room we were sharing, and the light was really dim.

It was night. It was dark. There was just one little light on in the corner, very dim. And there was this big, massive shape there. My mind went, "It's a deformed being." And then, "No, I'm pretty sure it's not a deformed being." But it tried on three or four different perceptions before it landed on, "Oh, it's a vase of flowers."

Sometimes that can be fun to see—how the mind works. I just saw this the other day, actually. I was walking somewhere in this vicinity around IMS, near a parking lot, and there was this massive boulder in the parking lot. I thought, "Wow, I don't remember seeing that massive boulder." The next moment it was like, "Oh no, that's a car with a car cover on it." Again, the perception—when I first looked at it, yeah, it kind of looked like a big boulder. But no, it was just perception making a mistake.

It's also helpful to look at perception as we see it at work. We begin to recognize perception at times, and we get a sense of the difference between perception and thinking—where it has slipped from just the recognition of what's there, how we're meeting experience, into the thinking about it. When we see perception working, it has less opportunity to deceive us, to fool us.

Perception is very intertwined with the process of conditioning. And the process of perception can get us into trouble when we don't quite see how it works.

There's an analogy that the Buddha uses for each of the aggregates, and I won't go through them all now, but just the one for perception. He says that perception is like a mirage. Each of these analogies is a kind of description, an analogy of how that experience may feel. But it also brings in some of the way that aggregate tends to carry a delusive nature—how we get confused about it.

With perception, this is such a great analogy. Perception is like a mirage. If we unpack what a mirage is—I think the classic mirage that we're all familiar with, that probably most of us have experienced or seen, is on a warm day in a dry climate, like the classic image of seeing water in a desert. What that is, at least as I understand how it works, is that the air waves and the heat create this optical refraction that makes like a mirror out of the air. What we're seeing is the sky reflected on the ground. And it looks

like water. We're seeing something that we've got a history of. It's like, "Oh, that looks like water." I've seen in Death Valley not only the blue water, but also distant objects reflected in it. It's really quite compelling. This looks like water. But it is basically an optical pattern. They don't call it exactly an illusion because it's not that something is there that's not there. It's a reflection of something that is there. But it's being misperceived—often misperceived.

This is perfect as an analogy for perception. Because perception is our way of experiencing the world—one of the key functions through which we experience the world, along with feeling and knowing. What we are experiencing is a reflection of something that's out there. But we're not experiencing what's out there. We're experiencing the reflection. We're experiencing the mind's construction based on memory, based on prior history, based on conditioning. We are experiencing what the mind has constructed.

We're not experiencing the world directly. We experience the world through our mind's creation of it. This is quite profound and quite startling when we start to see it. All of our experience, everything that we experience, is created by our minds.

the mirage—often those mirages can be misunderstood. And this is pointing to how we misunderstand perception. We take our perceptions to be accurate representations of reality, and that's one of the big places we get caught, one of the ways we get confused by perception.

Because this process—because what we are experiencing is what's created by our mind—this process is prone to distortion. It can be distorted by interpretation and is affected by conditioning. What we perceive, how we perceive the world... we kind of think we're taking in the world like we're cameras and microphones picking up what's actually out there, and that what we're experiencing is that recording somehow. But that's not quite the way our minds work. Our minds are much more influenced by history and conditioning. What we are taking in is already shaped by past conditions.

So our perceptions are not pure, let's say. They are influenced by our history, our upbringing, our ideas. And then likewise, our perceptions will come into relationship with our ideas and beliefs, and so what we perceive will then shape how we relate to things.

An example that kind of incorporates both of these sides: This experience happened at Shwe Oo Min practicing with Sayadaw, probably during that retreat when he was talking about perception so much. So it was appropriate—the exploration and what happened here. This happened over the course of a number of days.

I was practicing in my room, mostly in the evenings. Around the same time each evening, there was this squealing noise that started happening. And the perception that arose in the mind was that this was a pig squealing. This was conditioned by my past—I had heard pigs squealing, so I perceived this as a pig. And then the mind started to go into some thinking and some ideas about the pig, and some *paññā* about what was going on with the pig.

It was happening so regularly every night. The monastery is pretty close to the village, and my room was pretty close to the monastery wall. So I had this thought that on the other side of that wall was the local butcher, and the squealing was the pig being slaughtered for the market the next day.

I knew that this was all a story, that I did not actually know whether the pig was being butchered. Maybe it was just a pig squealing every night. But anyway, that's what the mind had done with that squealing. And it happened regularly. I don't remember how long it took for the story about the butcher to arise over the days, but it arose. And over the days I was feeling all this compassion for the pig each evening.

Then one night I decided instead to do a walking meditation at that time rather than sitting in my room. As I was walking up and down the walkway, there were these bats flying around, swooping. It was kind of startling—they would fly right at you and then just miss. And these bats were squealing. I immediately recognized that this is what I had been hearing, and that the perception of a pig had been a misperception.

Now, I kind of knew that the story about the butcher shop was a construction in my mind—there's no need for compassion if they're bats, not pigs. But what I had no idea of was that it was not a pig. That was a shock.

Seeing how the perception can make a mistake—it was a kind of innocent mistake, because that squealing was the only experience I'd had of that kind. It was the best match this mind could find for that sound. So that part was conditioned: the seeing of it as a pig, the recognizing it as a pig. And then the squealing itself sounded distressed, so that perception conditioned what arose next.

Distressed squealing is what conditioned the whole chain of assumptions and views about the pig being slaughtered and the compassion that arose with that. So perceptions play with conditioning in fascinating ways.

This experience also made it very clear to me that the whole thing around the compassion and all of that—it was not responding to something that was out there. It was responding to a construction of my own mind. It was responding to the construction that this was a pig. And it was just a construction of the mind.

So there are really many layers of understanding that happened with this. The seeing of the perception and the whole conditioning process, but also the seeing that the experience was just in the mind. The recognition, the perception, what I was perceiving—that was a mental function. It was just the mind doing that. Everything that we experience, everything is created by our minds.

I'd say that perception and feeling and knowing does a pretty good job of helping us navigate the world. It does a pretty good job of representing things. But it is so prone to mistake and error. It's really humbling to see how much we are attributing reality to our perceptions. Delusion is what convinces the mind to believe that perceptions are what is out there.

We can work with perceptions. It's not that we're trying to stop perception or not have perception, but we do need to know that perception has this nature of being conditioned, being influenced by past conditioning, that it's not necessarily accurate.

There was an exhibit I saw at a science museum in San Francisco called the Exploratorium. This was a number of years ago. My nephew had come out for a visit, and I thought, this is a great place—let's go to the Exploratorium. It's a fun place with all these science exhibits, things that point out different ways that our world works and how we see the world. It's got all kinds of interesting things.

We walked in, and I noticed on the back—it's a big cavernous warehouse-type place, just open with all these different exhibits around—hanging up in the air were these bars. They were probably six feet tall, spaced maybe about three or four feet apart. Just tube bars hanging from the ceiling, and there were lights flashing on them. That was my first experience with that exhibit: seeing from a distance bars with lights flashing on them hanging from the ceiling. I thought, huh, I wonder what that's about. I'll have to check that out later.

We wandered around, and at some point came and sat down, resting our feet and having a drink. My nephew was sitting there looking up at the ceiling, and he said, "Oh, it's a school bus."

I looked up to where he was looking and it was the bars with flashing lights on them. I did not see a school bus there. I saw yellow lights flashing on most of the bars with an occasional red light. I thought, what? What are you talking about?

Then he said, "Oh, now it's butterflies." I thought, what?

So I stood there for a while, wondering what's going on here. What is he seeing? I stood there and it just took a kind of relaxation of the eye, and suddenly the mind perceived that there was a screen hanging from the ceiling. A screen that was about forty feet wide and six feet high. And across that screen was driving a school bus. The image was so detailed that I could read the name of the school district on the side of the school bus.

And I knew that I was not seeing a school bus, that all that was happening were flashing lights on those bars. The mind

This was an exhibit on perception and how the mind holds on to what we've just perceived for a few moments. And in this case, if you kind of held on, it seemed to be functioning with the way our sense apparatus works. The school bus was driving across the picture, so the lights on this bar were being—in the mind—carried from one bar to the next. The timing of the flashing lights was just right such that by the time the eye and the mind carried that set of flashing lights across, and it carried multiple versions of that flashing light across to get the image, it was stunning to see: this is mind-made. This is mind-made. This is the kind of thing that goes on all the time and we don't notice it. We don't recognize it—this way that the mind holds on to experience.

And it's useful. It is very useful that our minds hold on to and stabilize experience. This is one of the functions of perception: it stabilizes our world. What's actually going on in our visual field as I'm looking around is pretty chaotic. As I move my head, it looks like you're all staying pretty still. But if there were a camera doing what my eye does, it would be pretty jumpy. We would see that it was bouncing around. So our perceptual field tends to stabilize. The perceptual processes tend to stabilize our experience. And perception also holds on to the last things it has perceived to smooth out the experience—as that example with the lights and bars at the Exploratorium and seeing the school bus illustrated.

This is both a feature and one of the big ways we get caught, because we believe in the stability of our world. We believe in the stability of experience. This, I think, is one of the key ways we have the misperception that takes what is impermanent to be permanent—because of very fundamental ways our perception works, this stabilizing nature of perception. And this is where the delusion creeps in too. We believe that stability. So much suffering happens around this.

In terms of suffering and clinging, I think we do really get the flavor of the experience of suffering through the experience of craving and clinging and aversion and greed. We get the flavor of suffering, and we understand that we're clinging to something. Many of us understand the suffering is our mind's doing. We begin to get that—our minds are creating the suffering by trying to cling to things.

What's a little harder to see is that what we are clinging to is also made by our minds. We are clinging to stuff our mind makes up. Now, it is reflective of what's out there, but we can't actually cling to what's out there because what we're experiencing is what's created by our minds. And this process of perception is really playing into the stabilizing, into thinking there is something to cling to. The idea, the concept, the perception—the whole process kind of gets stabilized, and we can hold on to concepts and perceptions. The mind can repeat perceptions. And that's, again, a feature. It helps us to smooth out the experience so that we're not in a chaotic perceptual field. But it also gets misunderstood to be the nature of things—as being stable. And they are not stable.

So this, I think, is part of the encouragement to cultivate the perception of impermanence. Our minds habitually cultivate the perception of stability. That's the way our sensory apparatus has functioned. And so it's interesting to me that the Buddha used that phrase: cultivate the perception of impermanence. Often these three—anicca, dukkha, anattā; impermanent, unreliable, not-self—are described as characteristics. And that makes it sound like there's something out there that they're characteristic of. In the suttas, the words for impermanent, unreliable, and not-self are not connected with that word in the texts.

The word for characteristic, *lakkhaṇa*, is not actually used in the text of the sutta itself. It's assigned as a name to one of the suttas—the Anattā Lakkhaṇa Sutta, the Characteristic of Not-Self—but within the discourse, that word is not used. What is used over and over again is to cultivate the perception, or to observe impermanence, observe unreliability, observe not-self.

To me this is another piece of teaching that reveals why he uses this language—cultivate the perception of impermanence—because what we are experiencing is what's been created in our mind. All that we can know is our perceptions, our experience. That pointing to cultivate the perception of not-self, as opposed to "see that this is true in the world," really indicates to me that the Buddha was directing us to experience over and over again. He's pointing to: know the experience, know what's happening here.

Then we can see that with the way the mind functions, there are times it perceives things as stable and times it perceives things as changing. Sometimes it's useful to perceive things as stable. The Buddha is pointing to the usefulness of recognizing the perception of impermanence. Because when the mind sees the perception of impermanence, it encounters the counterpoint to seeing things as stable. It's like: well, sometimes it feels stable, sometimes it feels impermanent. The mind understands that this is a perception. And it also begins to understand that experience is unreliable as something to cling to, because we want to cling to something stable.

The whole process of clinging is about landing and staying—taking a stand, finding that landing spot. And there's nowhere to land. The trying to land on something, the clinging to something, will reveal itself in its changing nature at some point, and then suffering will arise.

So the Buddha said: cultivate the perception of impermanence. It will support the understanding of unreliability, of the dukkha nature of experience, and it will support the understanding of the not-self nature of experience. He encouraged us to cultivate all of these—the perception of dukkha, the perception of unreliability, and the perception of not-self.

CHAPTER 180

Transcendent Dependent Arising

Andrea Fella · 1h01

In this dharma talk, Andrea Fella illuminates the teaching of transcendent dependent arising (lokuttara paṭiccasamuppāda), a twelve-link chain describing the conditions that support the mind's natural movement toward freedom. While the more commonly known dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) describes how suffering perpetuates itself through ignorance, craving, and clinging, this complementary teaching reveals how the same lawful process—when this arises, that arises—can lead to liberation.

The chain begins with suffering (dukkha) as a supportive condition for faith (saddhā), which arises when we encounter both the recognition of suffering and a teaching that offers a path forward. Faith supports delight (pāmojja), which supports rapture (pīti), tranquility (passaddhi), happiness (sukha), and concentration (samādhi). These wholesome qualities then support knowledge and vision of things as they are (yathābhūtañāṇadassana)—seeing the impermanent, unreliable, and not-self nature of experience.

Andrea explores how this seeing leads to disenchantment (nibbidā), where we recognize our former enchantment with greed, aversion, and delusion. She describes various emotional flavors that arise in this territory—fear, vulnerability, homesickness for delusion, and resistance—emphasizing that noticing our relationship to experience becomes crucial practice here. As dispassion (virāga) develops, the mind naturally ceases moving toward or away from experiences, understanding that picking up anything makes no sense. This dispassion serves as a decisive supportive condition for release (vimutti) and the knowledge of release. The talk offers both inspiration and practical guidance for recognizing this unfolding process in one's own practice.

Over these weeks of being here, we've been watching the mind do its thing, getting familiar with the habits and patterns of our minds. And I've been hearing from pretty much all of you a real sense of just being able to watch—a kind of amazement of, "Yeah, I don't have to be involved with it. I can just watch it happen." And often we see it weaken. We see it fall apart. We do experience a kind of letting go. At least we experience a kind of okayness that it's here. We're not caught up in the habit or pattern.

So we're seeing how the habits and patterns affect our minds. We're learning with them. We're also seeing how the practice affects our mind. Both of these things are going on at the same time—the qualities of awareness and wisdom and patience. We're

hearing the understanding and the recognition: "Oh, this is what it's like to be aware with something," and what effect that has on the experience. More ease, more peace, even as we're seeing something challenging.

And so we're seeing both the conditioning, the habits and patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion, how those tumble on. And we're also seeing how the wholesome qualities flow on, how they strengthen and develop as we practice. So we're seeing the conditionality on both sides: the conditionality of how greed, aversion, and delusion affect the mind, and how the wholesome qualities and the practice, the qualities of awareness and wisdom, affect the mind.

The Buddha described the conditionality of our reactive habits and patterns in the teaching of dependent origination. I think most of you are familiar, at least to some extent, with that teaching. And that's not the topic of tonight's talk, by the way, but I'm going to talk about it just a little bit right now, as a kind of framing.

The teaching of dependent origination describes the arising of suffering, describes the arising of the sense of self, describes how we get caught—the patterns of how getting caught works in our minds. It's kind of an amazing teaching, that the Buddha could see so clearly how these patterns work in our minds. It describes the conditioned nature of suffering.

In this teaching, there are some very familiar links in the chain. Particularly, there's a place in the teaching of dependent origination where it says that with every sense experience, we experience a feeling tone. And then from that feeling tone, what tends to arise is craving. That's one of the key places where we're taught to be curious. What happens? How does feeling lead to craving? Because it doesn't always lead to craving, and we can see that. And so we can understand in that experience.

The teaching says that when feeling arises, craving can arise. But it is not what might be called a cause. Feeling doesn't cause craving. There are other conditions that are in play for feeling to lead to craving. And the teaching of dependent origination offers one of the keys at the very head of the chain: the whole thing is kind of initiated, kind of started rolling, with ignorance. Ignorance about how suffering works, ignorance about impermanence, ignorance about unreliability, ignorance about not-self. So with that kind of functioning in the mind, when ignorance is present in the mind, feeling will lead to craving in that moment. When feeling is arising with ignorance in the mind, feeling is going to lead on to craving. And so we start to see the difference between when the mind has ignorance, when feeling leads to craving, and when feeling can just be feeling, and we understand it doesn't have to lead on to craving.

This teaching on dependent origination also includes, in some forms of it, that there are conditions that lead to freedom. Some of the conditions that lead to freedom are talked about with respect to dependent origination in this way: when ignorance is not arising, feeling may not lead to craving. Probably won't lead to craving when ignorance is not present. And when craving doesn't arise, clinging doesn't arise. And when clinging doesn't arise, becoming doesn't arise.

This is one of the ways that the teaching on dependent origination, in its simplest form in the suttas, is taught—just a very simple statement of relationship: when this arises, that arises.

When this is, that is. When this ceases, that ceases. When this isn't, that isn't. This formula offers a way to understand how, when craving is not arising, clinging doesn't arise. When craving ceases, clinging will cease. There's a way out of the pattern, out of the habits and patterns that our minds typically go through.

If certain conditions aren't present, suffering doesn't arise—the suffering connected with greed, aversion, and delusion. When feeling is met with mindfulness and wisdom, ignorance is cut through, and craving won't arise. The conditions for how those things might not arise are awareness and wisdom.

There's also an understanding that there can be cultivation of conditions that support the letting go, that support the ending of the habits and patterns which lead to suffering. Often we don't know how to let go. We can't do that letting go so much. But the Buddha points to conditions that will support letting go.

It's said he had a reflection after he became awakened. He got curious: the mind is free from greed, aversion, and delusion—how did that happen? What was the condition that supported that release? And he walked backwards. What was the condition that supported that? And what was the condition that supported that? He walked back through a number of different conditions in the mind.

This is actually quite inspiring to me. He walked back to suffering as a supportive condition for the launching towards freedom. And this is embedded in his teachings—he speaks of understanding suffering, the first noble truth. That's the head of another process, another teaching: the teaching of transcendent dependent origination.

I'm going to go through this teaching this evening, but I'm not going to try to walk through every single link. It's a twelve-link chain, as the teaching of dependent origination is also a twelve-link chain. I'd like to describe the flavor of it rather than going into depth with each link. There isn't really time for that.

Let me start with a few reflections on this teaching. The first thing that's inspiring to me is that the Buddha pointed out there are conditions that can support our freedom, that support the mind moving in the direction of freedom. The same lawful process that perpetuates dukkha—when this is, that is; when this arises, that arises; when this isn't, that isn't; when this ceases, that ceases—the same lawful processes that perpetuate dukkha also lead us to freedom.

I'm going to read through the links now. I won't define them just yet, but I'll list them. These are understood to be supportive conditions.

The condition of suffering supports the arising of faith. The condition of faith supports the arising of delight. The condition of delight supports the arising of rapture, which supports the arising of tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowledge and vision of things as they are. Knowledge and vision of things as they are supports disenchantment. Disenchantment supports dispassion. Dispassion supports release. And release leads to the understanding that freedom has been reached.

So, starting with suffering as a supportive condition for faith—this is interesting, and I think I'll spend some time with this link. Suffering leads to faith. But suffering also leads to ignorance.

has not really reflected on suffering in a way that includes an understanding of its workings. When we experience suffering—and certainly before I met this path—I was caught by my anger, caught by my self-hatred. It felt like there was no way out.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says this about suffering and faith: "Since it is suffering that impels us to seek the way to freedom, suffering is called the supporting condition for faith. By itself, however, the confrontation with suffering, even at the level of mature reflection, is not sufficient to generate faith. For faith to arise, two conditions are required. The first is the awareness of suffering, which makes us recognize the need for a liberative path. The second is the encounter with the teaching that proclaims a liberative path."

So for suffering to not just lead us back into the cycle of ignorance and the tumbling forward of feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, suffering, ignorance—for it not to just tumble on that way—something has to happen. There has to be a kind of reflection around suffering. What is this? Is it possible to be free of this?

It's said that the Buddha had this reflection or question around his own experience: Does somebody know a way out of this? There's a teaching in the suttas that says suffering will lead either to ignorance and confusion, or it will lead to search. And that's that question: Is there a way out?

I had this question for myself. I had tried just about everything to not feel like I was helpless, like I was being whipped around by conditions in the world—by what people did to me. That's how it felt: what people did to me and how my mind reacted to it. I was miserable. I was so miserable. And there was a question: Is there a way? Is there a way out of this?

Right around that time, a friend sent me a book about the Dharma. I didn't really understand much of what the book said, but I got a sense that there might be a way. The simplicity of the teaching I received from that book—I think I mentioned this earlier—was just: try noticing your difficult states of mind. So for me, anger in that time. Try noticing your anger instead of reacting to it. Try noticing your anger instead of following the anger.

I did not understand how that worked or why it would work. I thought, won't that just make me more angry? But I was in a place where I was willing to try just about anything, including something that didn't seem to make a lot of sense. There was suffering and the meeting of a teaching that said there's a way. Even though I didn't understand the connection, there was a willingness to try.

That willingness is a little bit of faith. That willingness to say, well, you know—for me it was kind of like I'd hit bottom, so nothing else had worked. I'd tried everything else I knew of to navigate my life. And here was another kind of out-of-the-blue crazy idea, but why not? Nothing else has worked. I might as well try this.

Within weeks I understood something about how and why it worked, and so faith began to be supported. At first it was just taking it on faith. Actually, I didn't just take it on faith from the book because my friend had said, "This stuff is really useful. It works." So I had that too, that piece in terms of the leap to faith. But fairly quickly I began to see the value and the benefit. This launched me onto this chain: faith supports delight, rapture, tranquility, happiness.

It put me onto that path.

The sutta in which this teaching is described presents this chain, this set of conditions, as a very natural unfolding. The image, the analogy that's used, is one of water running downhill. The Buddha says, just as when the rain falls from the sky and the water collects in rivulets and gullies and flows down the mountain to ponds and streams and rivers to the ocean—just as that happens, so this process towards freedom happens.

There's another sutta that speaks of some of these same links and uses slightly different language for understanding the naturalness, the onward-leading quality of finding our way into the path. It uses the phrase "there's no need for an act of will." That teaching begins with virtue. If someone is engaging with virtue, if someone is not harming, there's no need for an act of will: "May non-remorse arise in me." It is natural for non-remorse to arise in one who is engaging with ethical conduct. In one who does not have remorse, there's no need for an act of will: "May delight arise." It is natural for one who does not have remorse to experience delight. And this is where the chain links up and goes on. There's no need for an act of will in one who experiences delight. It is natural for rapture to arise.

Now I'd say this doesn't mean that we don't have to do work, because those patterns of delusion and ignorance are so strong. They get in the way. We see this, right? We see this. It's quite natural for delight to lead to rapture, and rapture to lead to tranquility, and tranquility to lead to happiness—when the mind is not caught in greed, aversion, and delusion. That's the movement. And so it's a natural movement.

And yet, we can think about that analogy. This occurred to me when I was giving this talk one time. The water falls on the ground, and not all of it gets to the ocean. Some of it gets absorbed into the ground and pulled up into the plants and then evaporates back into the air. Some of it just gets stagnant in a little pond. There's a little dam in the way, and the water just sits there and then evaporates and goes back into the air. So those processes also happen in our minds. The ignorance and the delusion are like the formation of dams for that process of naturally flowing.

This teaching of the naturalness of the unfolding—to me it's inspiring, but it also means we can't just sit back and say, "Okay, I don't have to do anything because it's natural." The defilements also have their momentum. They're also nature. And they will take over. So we do have to bring a practice for this natural process to unfold.

As this process unfolds, the process towards freedom, the way it's framed—faith supports delight, delight supports rapture, rapture supports tranquility, tranquility supports happiness, happiness supports concentration—it sounds like they're one step at a time. But really it's more of a spiral, and there are feedback loops in this process.

So in my story around meeting suffering, finding a teaching, and then being willing to practice with it—that was the work. I found that teaching. Now the other thing about the teaching that the Buddha offers: it's a teaching of engagement. It's not a teaching just to believe and think about. We have to put it into practice. And so the faith has to put us into motion—to act, to try what the Buddha taught, to try those tools: mindfulness, effort, looking at the wholesome, understanding the wholesome and the unwhole-

some, all of the teachings that the Buddha offered for working with our mind. And here we're exploring primarily mindfulness and wisdom—to observe, to have the curiosity around what's going on here in our minds.

That's the activity, that's how we engage. That's the doing part. And this particular practice does move more into not doing as much. When mindfulness gains momentum, we don't have to do much at all. But we've been talking about skillful means, ways to navigate. When we see the defilements get strong, we bring in some tools to navigate, to not be caught in them.

To be able to learn with them, as opposed to being pulled under by them.

These feedback loops are so important. I talked about that experience for myself—trying this thing that made no sense to me intellectually, but then seeing over the course of the next few weeks a very clear understanding of how this practice helped.

That first moment really of seeing—just seeing, "Oh my gosh, this stuff works!" I could see the mind kind of heading towards a pattern and it just let it go. It just vanished. And it's like, "Oh my gosh, I never would have thought that was possible." It's possible for the mind to let go of that pattern of anger. Wow, that's amazing. Delight and joy arose there. And there was also a kind of feedback loop to support the faith. So there was the faith to try it, and then as I played with it, there was the confirmed experience: this works. That supported more faith, which supported more engagement, which supported more seeing, which supported more delight and joy. The whole thing—it's like these feedback loops.

A little bit of faith will support a little bit of effort, which may begin to allow us to see something, and then there's some delight that supports more faith, there's more engagement, we may see something even more clearly, something new. Seeing some nature of something as impermanent supports it even more. We gain some concentration, which supports our mind to feel more stable and balanced. It's a spiral. It's a cycle.

This chain is teaching that in a way—it is pointing to conditions that are supportive for freedom. And yet there's a little bit of a paradox here, because the whole direction of this, the liberative teaching, points in the direction of non-clinging, not acquiring. So there's a kind of paradox: what does it mean to cultivate these conditions but not acquire them? Not have a sense of trying to hold on to them. What these conditions support is letting go, not clinging—even to beautiful states of mind.

The whole teaching of noticing when there's clinging, just that encouragement—notice when there's clinging—we start to be attuned to that. We start to be attuned to the feeling: contraction, distraction maybe. We start to be attuned to that experience, and we will feel it when we start to cling, if we start to cling to wholesome states. So the very direction of the teaching helps us to not cling to anything.

We may hold on to or cling to wholesome states of mind. I definitely knew there was clinging to investigation in my practice around investigating anger. I kind of knew that there was an identity there. I really knew that I was a good investigator. And yet, while I was clinging to that, while I was observing and knowing about anger, the suffering—there undoubtedly was some kind of tightness around the investigation. But while there was investigation of anger and self-hatred, the little bit of clinging around the investigation was not felt as suffering. And as the self-hatred and the anger fell apart, got really diminished, then I started feeling the clinging in how I was using the investigation. That's when I could really start to look at that part. What does it mean to investigate without clinging to investigation?

So the practice, as Gil Fronsdal sometimes says, is self-correcting. It will point out when we're clinging. And because that's what we're exploring, we'll see even when we cling to the practice. And we will feel the suffering of that.

These first few links—suffering supports faith, delight, rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration. To me there's some inspiration here in this set of links: that these beautiful qualities—delight, joy, happiness, calm—are part of the path. And the conditions of supporting them, of nourishing them, of their growth and development—they are nourished by being aware of them, by recognizing them. Delight is happening. Happiness is happening.

This, to me, is part of the beauty of this teaching—that these qualities of mind are firmly on the path. They are supportive conditions. They aren't the end of the path. They aren't what we're going for. They are supportive conditions that support the mind to be able to see. Moving to the next few links of the chain: for the mind to become concentrated and to see things as they are.

To see the changing, conditioned, unreliable nature of experience.

All of these conditions support the mind to become more stable. The concentration of mind and the different kinds of concentration we've talked about. Here we're exploring the moment-to-moment concentration more than one-pointed concentration, although one-pointed concentration can happen in this practice—but that's not really the point of this practice. So concentration develops, stability of mind develops, and we are

curious. The aim, that concentration with wise view, starts to get curious about experience as impermanent, unreliable, and not-self. Wisdom starts to show us things as they are.

This link in the chain—knowledge and vision of things as they are—impermanent, unreliable, not-self. I'm not going to spend a lot of time here; we've talked about this extensively over the last few weeks. But as we start to see this, as we start to see the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience, sometimes that's experienced as quite delightful. It can feel almost like a relief. Feeling the letting go of clinging around something, understanding that something is conditioned—it's just not me, not who I am—and something falls apart, and it's like, what a relief. So sometimes seeing things as they are does feel good. It has a relieving quality, a releasing quality to it.

And sometimes there's a deep rebellion against seeing things as they are. This is part of the process of how our minds work. Carol talked about the comfort we have in our habits and patterns—it feels like an old comfortable shoe. When those patterns and habits start to fall away, there can be this sense of, well, who am I without these things? There can be some resistance to seeing the nature of experience as it actually is. At some level, we don't like the fact that things are impermanent and unreliable. So there can be at times a kind of, no, I don't like this.

I would say this is in the terrain of the next place in the chain: knowing and seeing things as they are leads to disenchantment. As we start to see things as impermanent, unreliable, not-self, we recognize that our old habits and patterns are... yes, we become disenchanted with them. We see that they're based on an incorrect perspective of experience. We start seeing through. We've been enchanted. Actually, I like this definition, the framing of this link as disenchantment, because it points to how we have been in a spell of enchantment—thinking that having something will make me happy, that getting rid of something will make me happy. We've been enchanted by delusion, enchanted by ignorance, and through that whole process we think greed and aversion are actually doing something for us. Through this process of recognizing the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience, we start to see that no, actually, it's not the way our minds' magic showed us to think it was. We start to become disenchanted with our habits and patterns, disenchanted with greed, aversion, and delusion, with the ways we've been living our lives.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has this to say about disenchantment—the Pali term is *nibbidā*: "Nibbidā signifies the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which supervenes when the illusion of their permanence, pleasure, and selfhood has been shattered by the light of correct knowledge and vision of things as they are."

If only it was that easy. I think that serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena that happens when the illusion of their permanence, pleasure, and selfhood has been shattered—that's kind of the end of the process. Getting to that point is a challenging part of practice, where we are resisting tooth and nail. I do not want it to be this way. There are many different relationships we have to seeing the truth.

I'll spend a couple of minutes here. We start to see truth and we resist those truths, and there are emotional flavors that we have when we start to see the truth. I'll just name a few of these. *Nibbidā* itself, translated here as disenchantment—I like that one. That's the sense of seeing something that we thought was something else; we become disenchanted with the way we saw it. But the word is also sometimes translated as revulsion.

And this can be a flavor of the relationship, of seeing the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience—a feeling of "ugh." It doesn't have aversion in it. I think it's in the commentaries that this flavor is compared to a dog that has found a bone, but this bone has been sitting in the sun for ages. It's bleached, there's no nourishment left in it, there's no marrow in the bone. The dog picks up the bone, smells it, and just walks away. "There's nothing here for me." That's the flavor of nibbida. There's nothing here for me. There's no use in picking anything up. It's not going to nourish me.

As we explore other flavors of relationship to seeing, at a very deep level, the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience—sometimes it can be fear. There can be a sense of "Who am I?" or a feeling of vulnerability. My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya pointed out a flavor of homesickness. I like this one because there is a feeling at times of wanting to go back to delusion—if only I could just ignore the fact that things aren't the way I want them to be. There's this wanting to go back to the delusion we had, that feeling of homesickness, of returning to those comfortable habits and patterns, even though now they've been revealed to show suffering. So homesickness is another flavor. Sometimes there's a flavor of just disinterest, of boredom, of not wanting to practice. "Enough already. Enough already."

At this point in practice, when we're starting to really deepen through to see the nature of experience as impermanent, unreliable, not-self, this teaching that Sayadaw U Tejaniya points to—to notice the relationship to experience—becomes crucial. Because that's how the practice will deepen. All of these relationships are like the mind grasping at not wanting it to be this way. So as the mind is going through opening to truth, it reveals very deep and subtle levels of clinging. They aren't necessarily felt as subtle. This can be a pretty challenging time of practice. So notice those relationships.

Sometimes when somebody is talking about experiencing a lot of fear arising and they've been practicing for a while, I will ask, "Is there any content connected to this fear? Is there a story about it?" And often they'll say, "No, it's just... it just feels primal. It feels visceral." That can be the flavor. Feeling into the nature of experience as completely unreliable—vulnerability, fear can be a very natural kind of resistance to that truth. It's not about some story of abandonment as a child or something that happened ten years ago. It's much more related to the direct experience of meeting the nature of experience.

As the mind begins to attune to, to land with the truth and not resist it in these ways, it moves in the direction of dispassion. We're no longer drawn towards that which we were formerly enchanted by. This to me is like the serene withdrawal. There's been that recognition—we're just not interested in moving towards or away from anything. We're not interested in craving, clinging, becoming. The mind is not drawn towards or away from experiences. And there's an understanding that holding on to any experience makes no sense.

The word for dispassion, viraga—that word itself is often translated as dispassion, but it also has a meaning of something like fading. Raga can have the meaning of strong color; it also has the meaning of lust or strong desire. And the "vi" prefix means the fading of that. Viraga: fading of lust, desire. But the "raga" part also refers to the bright colors of cloth, like dye. And viraga is what happens when you put a cloth out in the sun—the cloth fades. There's a natural fading process that happens if you wash the cloth in soap and water and then put it out in the sun. The dye is going to fade over time. So this word, often translated as dispassion, also carries an analogy. And I take some comfort in this analogy, because the fading away of a dye is a long, slow, gradual process.

So this is another place where the Buddha is pointing to the gradual nature. The very word for the mind that lets go and stops moving towards and away from experience, the very word itself says this is a process. It's a slow process of fading away—the letting go, the release of the fibers of that rope. It's a similar image in a way. It's a gradual process.

The last few links, which I'm not going to say much about at all: dispassion is that place of the mind understanding that there's nothing to pick up. The mind doesn't move towards things or away from things. It understands that picking up anything doesn't make any sense. So dispassion is this deep understanding.

And when there is the depth of understanding with dispassion, the next two links—release and knowledge of release—it is said that dispassion is a decisive support condition. Release and knowledge of release will follow. So the earlier links all involve more

work, the practice, observation of experience and curiosity and investigation. But dispassion, the wisdom of not picking up; release, the heart experiencing the release of suffering, the recognition that suffering is not here; and then the knowledge, the intellectual understanding, the reflection—it's said that there does come a reflection: it is released. These follow quite naturally.

So this whole set of conditions, the path that we are on, the tools that we are exploring—they have put us in this flow. We hear these qualities in your descriptions of experience. We try to point them out. Notice the wisdom. Notice the delight. Notice the joy. Notice this process. Because the noticing of the process of the path unfolding is a supportive condition for the path to keep unfolding.

I'll read this last quote from Bhikkhu Bodhi about realizing the unconditioned. And the unconditioned is another way of saying freedom, nibbāna:

"Though the realization of the unconditioned requires a turning away from the conditioned, it must be emphasized that this realization is achieved precisely through the understanding of the conditioned. Nibbāna cannot be reached by backing off from a direct confrontation with saṃsāra to lose oneself in a blissful oblivion to the world. The path to liberation is a path of understanding, of comprehension and transcendence, not of escapism and emotional self-indulgence. Nibbāna can only be attained by turning one's gaze towards saṃsāra and scrutinizing it in all its darkness. The understanding of the conditioned is the way to the unconditioned."

To me, that comes back to that very first link. Suffering leads to faith. Suffering met with wisdom is a supportive condition for freedom.

CHAPTER 181

Wisdom and Trust

Andrea Fella · 41 min

In this talk from the Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella examines the profound shift that occurs when mindfulness gains momentum and wisdom begins to guide practice naturally. She describes how wisdom has its own "job description"—to understand and release dukkha—and how recognizing this function deepens our trust in the practice. Rather than feeling we must direct or control our meditation, we can witness how understanding arises and suffering releases, often in ways we could never figure out intellectually.

Fella addresses two common edges of trust that practitioners encounter as practice deepens. First, she explores the experience of mindfulness becoming "slippery," where we notice more gaps and slipping out of present-moment awareness. Rather than immediately intensifying effort, she suggests bringing curiosity to these moments of slipping, which can reveal doorways to unfamiliar yet valuable territory. She shares a personal example of discovering that what seemed like losing focus was actually the mind releasing into a broader, more settled space.

The second edge involves encountering unfamiliar states—experiences without words or labels, sometimes accompanied by unexpected imagery as the mind attempts to make sense of new terrain. Fella encourages practitioners to notice the discomfort of not knowing and the urge to identify or understand, while simply receiving whatever arises. She concludes with a surprising teaching: deepening practice doesn't always feel extraordinary. Sometimes it manifests as profound ordinariness—clear, simple perception that encompasses all of life. This ordinariness itself can be an edge of trust, challenging our expectations of what spiritual development should look like.

At times when mindfulness gains momentum, mindfulness and wisdom can see more of the processes unfolding inside. As has been said, and as we've pointed to, wisdom begins to take the lead in the practice. It feels much less like we're doing the practice, like we're guiding or directing what's happening. We can start to see the natural unfolding of wisdom—seeing conditionality, seeing impermanence, understanding the unreliable nature of experience.

A while back, I talked about noticing the job description of some of our mind states—noticing the job description of aversion, greed. I also mentioned noticing the job description of the wholesome qualities: How do they act? What do they do? There's a kind of trust in this, that we see how these mental formations are functioning. We're not doing them. We're watching their nature unfold.

We can also get curious and see how wisdom does its job. We can recognize how wisdom functions, seeing the release of suffering, understanding dukkha. That may be the key job description of wisdom: to understand and release dukkha. So seeing this, seeing understanding arise, witnessing the release—at times we feel it in the moment. Yesterday I talked about the gradual nature, that sometimes we don't see the release. We just recognize in retrospect that something has disappeared. And in that moment we see the wisdom, the understanding that something has been released, that something is not being picked up.

This deepens the trust, recognizing that wisdom does its job. We're not responsible for this understanding to happen. In fact, there's usually no way we could figure out how to release dukkha. I remember sitting in the meditation hall at one time, noticing the clinging to something, feeling the suffering of that clinging. And the thought that arose in my mind was, "I would let go of this if I knew how." So it's really clear sometimes that we don't know how to let go. And the seeing of wisdom doing that begins to bring a lot of trust to the practice and the natural unfolding of this practice.

We do begin to trust more and more the non-interference, just the witnessing, and the patience. We begin to trust this natural process, the gradual nature of the path. And there are some edges to that trust at times, where we run into things. Our practice reveals things that kind of throw us back a little bit. They make us feel like, "Wow, is this really trustable? Can I trust the mind here? Maybe I should start doubling down and trying to do the practice again, as opposed to just receiving, just witnessing. Maybe I should direct the attention to something."

There are a couple of edges I want to point to—places where we may tend to think we need to bring in effort. And maybe it's a place of patience, to begin to learn with whatever is there.

One thing I'll mention is that sometimes when the mindfulness gains momentum and there's a little more continuity, we start seeing gaps in our mindfulness. We start recognizing the mind slipping out more. Sometimes it can feel like the mind is wandering more. It can slip into thought or slip into imagery or random thoughts. At one point, doing some walking meditation, the mindfulness got more continuous and I could see

just these little jumps—mindfulness going out to something and then dropping back, losing mindfulness for a couple seconds and then coming back, a couple seconds and coming back. Really seeing the in and out of mindfulness.

We may have a tendency in these times of seeing more slipperiness of mindfulness, or the mindfulness kind of getting lost, to amp up the effort. "I need to hold my mind present." There can be a place for that. It's an interesting recognition, a difference in the quality of how the mind is slipping out.

You know, if the mind is charging out of the present moment and getting caught in things, that may well be a time for more effort—perhaps effort to notice the caught part of things. And sometimes the slipping out feels more like... it just feels slippery. The mind goes to nothing particularly sticky. It just loses mindfulness and drifts to a quiet space, getting lost in that.

So it may be the quality of where the mind goes when it slips, and some of that is revealed when mindfulness returns. When mindfulness returns, is it calm and easeful? Or is it caught in something?

In my own practice, what I've come to explore in these places where mindfulness slips out is to at least take some time, when I first notice that, to have curiosity about the slipping. Not to try to hold myself present, not to try to hold on to the experience, because that very activity of effort may obscure the subtlety of what's happening in the slipping. And we can see this—it is possible to see what the mind is doing. It can take patience, sometimes seeing a slip over and over again.

This lesson was really brought home to me at one point. I was doing a more directed practice, paying attention to the breath. As I was paying attention, I started seeing there was this slipping away from the breath, slipping out into non-mindfulness for brief moments, and then I would come back and wake up and return to the breath. At some point I recognized that as the mind was letting go of the breath, I could see that. I could see the release from the object. There was a tendency at that point to say, "Oh, come back to the object. Come back to what I'm familiar with." I couldn't see what it was letting go into, but I could feel the letting go.

So instead of trying to hold my attention with the thing I was familiar with, I got curious about what that slip was. And mindfulness could be there with that. The experience in the release, the letting go of the object, was a real broadening and settling—it was like a whole different space, one I was very unfamiliar with. There was a little bit of fear that arose, and then that needed to be seen.

So these times when it feels like mindfulness is gaining momentum yet we see more slipping out—rather than bringing in effort, hover in that space for a time, a little while, and see what can be learned by just receiving. Be willing to let the mindfulness slip out with curiosity, or almost with intention. It feels like intention to me. Maybe like dropping in the request: "Maybe the mind can see where it goes"—but then not trying to do it. That has been a way in my own practice that has extended the reach of mindfulness.

This brings me to the second area I was thinking of: places where an edge of trust often arises when we start to see unfamiliar terrain. Things we're not familiar with, things we've never experienced before, that we don't have words for and can't identify—we may find our mind wanting to figure them out, label them. We may start seeing strange imagery. I've seen sometimes the mind, in a space it doesn't quite understand, puts up an image. I remember one time seeing a field of wheat. "What's that about?" I reported this to Steve Armstrong, and he just said, "This is just the mind trying to understand the experience." It's the mind's way of perceiving an experience you're unfamiliar with.

So sometimes we may see this kind of imagery. You don't have to give meaning to it. The mind in perception just tries to make the best match. For me, looking out at that field of wheat was the best analogy for the state I was experiencing.

There are times with unfamiliar states when we might notice our mind trying to identify. We can just notice that—notice the searching for a label, the wanting to have some clarity, wanting to know, wanting to understand. As our practice gains momentum, as mindfulness and wisdom deepen, wisdom orients towards the deepening of practice, the deepening of seeing, and it will take us to places we don't know and cannot possibly know before we go.

So there's some trust there that we don't have to figure it out. It's an edge of trust—that it's okay if I don't understand this. What does it feel like? What's the experience? And what's the relationship?

Wanting to figure it out. Uncomfortable. Often the experience of unfamiliar experience is really uncomfortable. Notice the uncomfortableness—that's the relationship.

This is the simplicity of the practice: just meeting what's here and recognizing these edges of trust where our minds start to go, "No, I want to understand." If that's what's happening for you, simply notice that relationship, receive this.

Sometimes as mindfulness gains momentum, it does take us to these spaces of unfamiliar experience or more subtle experience. And we may kind of almost subconsciously use that as a signpost: "Oh, this is good practice. This means it's getting better,"

or something. And I'll just say that, kind of to my surprise, another experience that can happen, another way the deepening of mindfulness can be experienced—the momentum of mindfulness and wisdom—is that things feel really ordinary. Just ordinary. Ordinary perception.

And that can be an edge of trust too. We don't believe it could possibly be right. Surely I should be seeing something more extraordinary.

At one point I was noticing this at a three-month retreat, and I was reporting to Joseph and talking about noticing this ordinariness. At that point it was kind of like, "Wow, this is amazing. It's just ordinary, and it's so clear. I can live life like this." So I was getting a little excited. It's extraordinary that it's ordinary.

I went and reported this to Joseph, and he smiled. And he said, "Yeah, it can feel extraordinary. And then it just feels really ordinary."

To me, that was pointing to the attachment, the sense that the extraordinary is what deepening practice is. And he said, "Yeah, and it can just be really ordinary."

Everything is practice. Everything. Everything.

What's the experience?

CHAPTER 182

Awareness and Wisdom Doing their Jobs

Andrea Fella · 41 min

> *In this guided meditation from a long retreat at the Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella offers gentle instruction on resting in receptive awareness rather than actively seeking or figuring out experience. She distinguishes between simple awareness that meets what arises and wisdom that becomes interested in the nature of experience itself—noticing impermanence, unreliability, and not-self rather than focusing on specific objects like sounds or sensations.*
>
> *Fella emphasizes that we don't need to wait for special states to recognize the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa); every experience, including resistance, confusion, and wanting, reveals this same nature. When awareness and wisdom simply meet these arising conditions without trying to change them, there can be a natural release accompanied by ease and spaciousness. Yet even this pleasant experience is just the next arising to be received.*
>
> *Addressing practitioners nearing the end of a long retreat, she acknowledges that familiar habits and patterns may arise more strongly as departure approaches. With the momentum of sustained practice, there's greater capacity to feel even strong experiences without being swept away. She encourages both those leaving and those staying to simply check: Is awareness doing its job? This simple returning to receptive presence allows the natural functioning of awareness and wisdom to continue their work.*

Simple awareness. Just meeting this experience. Just this experience.

Perhaps there's a sense that you're already aware. Experience already known. Resting and receiving.

What is the truth of this moment? What is true right now? Not true in terms of thoughts and ideas, but the truth of the actual experience. Sensations arising and being known. Feelings, thoughts, perceptions arising and being known. What is obvious? Receiving. Awareness receiving. Awareness doing its job.

At times, wisdom taking the lead. Wisdom interested in noticing experience. Sometimes when wisdom is taking the lead, it's not as interested in the objects themselves—in the sights, the sounds, the smells, the sensations, the feelings, the thoughts—but more interested in the nature of the experience. Although sometimes that may be what is being received: the changing nature, the unreliable nature of experience. Slippery, nowhere to land. Or maybe the conditioned nature of experience.

Awareness and wisdom do this receiving. We don't have to look for anything, figure anything out. Just letting awareness and wisdom do their jobs. At times this is possible. And our conditioning, our habits of mind arise at times and resist what is being seen, what is being received. That too is nature. That too can simply be received. Resistance being known. Confusion being known. Wanting being known. Just another arising, also conditioned, impermanent, not-self.

We don't have to wait for some special experience or special state of mind to see the nature of experience. Every experience reveals this. Every experience has this nature: impermanent, unreliable, not-self. Whatever arises has the nature to pass away. Just meeting what is arising.

If we're noticing resistance or wanting, in the meeting of that, sometimes awareness and wisdom just meeting that, they can naturally release without our inclining or trying to do anything with them. A natural release. And at times of that releasing, there can be the experience of ease that comes with that release—of calm, of spaciousness. And that's just the next experience that awareness and wisdom receive.

Sometimes we can rest in a space of release and ease, and then perhaps a subtler kind of disturbance is revealed. Not a mistake. That too can be recognized. Awareness and wisdom doing their job.

After all these weeks of practice, there's quite a bit of momentum of awareness and wisdom. For those of you who'll be leaving in a few days, it's quite likely there are familiar habits or patterns arising. And those can be seen much more clearly with the momentum that's available. So check. If something arises that feels strong, if it feels like it's sweeping you away, notice if you can feel the sweeping. Likely there'll be much more capacity for that.

For those of you who are staying, you may feel some of the ripples of the energy of the departures. And that too, just an arising, a rising construction that can be known. Check the awareness. Awareness doing its job. So simple.

I notice not many of you have been taking the opportunity. And that's okay. It is a really valuable opportunity—with the level of momentum of practice that's here, to recognize the possibility of being aware with this very difficult object, with the speaking. Just a reminder that it's available, and it is optional.

CHAPTER 183

Mindfulness

Andrea Fella · 1h02

> *In this talk from the three-month retreat, Andrea Fella offers a detailed exploration of mindfulness through close examination of a single sentence from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). Rather than surveying the entire discourse, she unpacks the rich meaning contained in the Buddha's description: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."*
>
> *Fella examines each key term—abides (viharati), observing, ardent (ātāpī), fully aware (sampajañña), and mindful (sati)—revealing how they point to a practice of relaxed yet alert receptivity. She distinguishes wise mindfulness from our ordinary capacity for self-awareness, noting that mindfulness itself is neutral and must be shaped by the other factors of the Eightfold Path. The word "abides" evokes a sense of being at home and dwelling in experience, while "ardent" points to wholehearted curiosity rather than forceful striving.*
>
> *Particularly valuable is her discussion of receptive awareness as foundational to all meditation practices. Using the analogy of a radio receiver, she explains how we can attune to specific aspects of experience—like the breath—while maintaining a receptive rather than grasping quality of attention. She emphasizes that the effort required in each moment is actually quite light; difficulty arises when we project forward to sustaining attention for an entire sitting. The phrase "free from desires and discontent" is reframed as an active process of "freeing from"—describing what naturally unfolds through steady, curious practice.*

Tonight I'd like to talk about mindfulness, exploring it from the texts, because as Dawn mentioned last night with her real resonance with the texts, this is also the case for me. I've often found that even a sentence—and that's what we're going to look at today; we're not even going to look at a whole sutta, we're going to look at a sentence—can be deeply illuminating. We'll look at all those different words in that sentence and how they resonate, how they affect us, and what they mean about what mindfulness is, what our practice is.

I've found that this kind of exploration, really unpacking or exploring the texts in this way, has been very meaningful for me. It feels supportive in terms of making the connection between what the Buddha taught and what we do in our practice.

The main meditation instructions, or some of the main meditation instructions in the Buddha's teachings, are found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta—the teachings on the four foundations, sometimes called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. I like Bhikkhu Anālayo's translation: The Four Establishments of Mindfulness. This is a sutta that really collects many of the instructions about how to practice, gathered around four basic areas, the four establishments. Those four areas are the body, feelings, mind states, and dhammas.

The foundation of the body contains a number of instructions that explore connecting with the physical body through breathing, through daily activities, through our postures, through contemplating the elemental nature of our bodies, through contemplating the parts of the body and the nature of our body to decay.

The foundation on feelings is an exploration around what we could call the felt sense aspect, the feeling aspect of experience. In the Buddhist understanding of feeling, this means experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. In all of our sense bases, in all of our senses, the understanding is that experience can have one of these flavors: pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is a whole foundation, and we will talk about it. I'm not going to talk about it tonight, but we will be talking about all of these over the course of these weeks.

The third foundation is looking at the qualities of our mind—whether there's greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind, or the absence of greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind; whether the mind is concentrated or not. It's more the state of the mind that it's pointing to. Know these things. All of these foundations are pointing to ways to recognize what's happening in our experience. These things are always happening in our experience. It's more of a pointing: this is a useful way to explore knowing what's happening in our experience through these foundations.

The fourth foundation is a little more complex. The first three are kind of simple in a way. We recognize body experience, the feeling tone experience, what the quality of our mind is. The fourth foundation is in a way almost about investigation of our experience through some of the frameworks of the Buddhist teachings. We're encouraged to understand our experience through the framework of the hindrances: Are the hindrances present or absent? Are the enlightenment factors present or absent? How do we recognize the sense bases? Do we understand our experience in terms of the aggregates? And understanding our experience in terms of the Four Noble Truths.

This is all direct experience, not thinking about it. All of these instructions are connecting to what is the actual direct experience.

So this is the broad picture of what satipaṭṭhāna is: the establishment of mindfulness with these different areas of experience, different establishments, different foundations.

At the very beginning of that sutta, the Buddha offers a phrase, describes what satipaṭṭhāna is in just a few words. He offers a sentence that describes what mindfulness of each foundation is. This is the sentence that we're going to look at today.

We'll look at some of the words in this sentence. It starts with a rhetorical question: How does one practice the foundations of mindfulness? "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."

And then it's repeated for each foundation. "One abides observing feelings as feelings, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desire and discontent for the world. One abides observing mind states as mind states, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desire and discontent for the world. One abides observing dhammas as dhammas"—phenomena as phenomena, another translation for dhamma—"one abides observing phenomena as phenomena, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."

There are a number of words in that sentence, and they're all pointing to what we might call supports for our mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is in there, but there are many other words pointing to how to be present and what to be present with.

Since we are all more familiar with mindfulness, I'll start there. The more I practice, the more it seems to me that I'm not sure I can really say what mindfulness is. There are some approximations we can make, but it's kind of mysterious sometimes. We have some general words, some basic definitions: being present, being aware, witnessing, observing, connected with, being with experience, knowing what's happening while it's happening. That might be a good working definition—knowing what's happening while it's happening.

The mindfulness of our practice, the mindfulness of what the Buddha describes as wise mindfulness or right mindfulness, is related to a very ordinary capacity of our minds: the capacity to be self-reflective, to know that we are aware, to know what's happening for us in the present moment. This aspect of our minds is human, natural, familiar—and yet we often use that capacity in the service of greed or aversion. We use that capacity to know what's happening in the present moment in order to get what we

want, to get rid of what we don't want, to shape our environment so that it feels pleasant. So that capacity in and of itself—to know what's happening in the present moment—isn't quite what the Buddha meant by wise mindfulness.

In fact, in the suttas, the quality of mindfulness is understood to be a neutral quality that can be shaped towards either right mindfulness or wrong mindfulness. Right mindfulness is shaped by wise view, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort—which then proceeds to wise mindfulness. And wrong mindfulness is shaped by wrong view, wrong intention, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort. At least that's the definition in the suttas of wrong mindfulness.

The suttas point to how mindfulness itself can be shaped. As I said a few moments ago, knowing what's happening for us in the present moment—that quality of mind can be harnessed in the direction of being curious about present moment experience as present moment experience. That might be another good working definition of something closer to wise mindfulness: knowing an experience in the present moment as an experience in the present moment, and being curious about it as an experience in the present moment.

It sounds like almost nothing, but that's not our usual perspective. Normally, when we become aware of something in the present moment, we're interested in acting on it in the service of getting what we want, getting rid of what we don't want. We're not interested in asking, "What does this feel like? What is this experience like?" We want to get rid of unpleasant things. We want to hold on to pleasant things. We're not interested—or often not quite interested—in exploring what that experience is actually like. That's part of what we're nourishing here: that curiosity. What is this experience?

We get curious about what it feels like right now. How is it arising in this moment? If what's arising is reactivity, rather than acting on it to try to get rid of it, we ask: What does this experience feel like? That begins to help the mind understand suffering. We understand that those qualities of mind—reactive qualities like greed, aversion, delusion, anger, frustration, confusion, hatred—when we recognize them in the present moment, we understand them as suffering.

This is actually looking at the First Noble Truth. We're encouraged to understand suffering in the First Noble Truth—to understand this through experience. What is this experience of reactivity? How does it affect the body?

How does it affect the mind? And perhaps learning something about how it comes to be, and how it goes away when it goes away—as opposed to asking, "How can I get rid of this? How can I fix this? How can I change this?"

Paradoxically, the very exploration of what this experience is as a human experience tends to change it.

This quality of mindfulness—the Buddha understood this everyday ordinary capacity of mind to be aware in the present moment, to know what's happening in the present moment—when shaped, when cultivated from a particular perspective, is very freeing. And you all know this, or you wouldn't have signed up for a six-week retreat or a three-month retreat. How freeing this is. You've had a taste of that—that sense of the freedom that can be there with this curiosity. What is this experience in the present moment?

And so this sentence in the Satipatthana Sutta I understand as a kind of pointing of the perspective—the perspective of how to cultivate mindfulness. How do we cultivate this quality, shape this ordinary quality of mind so that it leads to freedom?

We'll explore this sentence from the perspective of the body: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world."

I love this first word: abides. Even as I say it to myself, I feel a kind of relaxation. Abide. And it's actually a very good translation of the Pali, because the Pali word *viharati* means something like abode, home, dwelling place. The Brahmaviharas are the divine abodes—this is the same root word, *viharati*, abide.

And so it evokes a quality of being at home. Abiding. Resting. Receptive. Contentment perhaps. A dwelling. Maybe a sense of intimacy, because being at home there can be a feeling of comfort, of intimacy. I feel it also points a little bit to this receptive quality that we've been emphasizing with mindfulness. When we're at home, relaxed, we can be available. We don't have to be on guard. We can just be receptive. We can be available.

So: abide. How does that word feel for you? If I just say right now, just abide, just abide. For me it feels like rest, just a resting, a relaxation.

This relaxation—I think Devin brought it up, Nakowai brought it up, Dawn probably brought it up, we've all brought it up—this is abiding. This is that beginning to be able to land and to dwell in our experiences, finding a home in our experience. Relaxation supports this.

We can explore, and I find often at the beginning of a retreat, spending some time consciously relaxing is really helpful. Scanning through the body, doing a little bit of bodily relaxation—Devon did that in the guided meditation a little bit. Just scan through

the body and relax the body. And as you relax the body, it's a condition that supports the mind to relax. Especially when you relax the face. Right now, just explore if you can soften the face. See what happens in the quality of your mind as you relax your face.

Relaxation is not counter to attention. We might think it is, but we can be relaxed and attentive. This quality of relaxed attentiveness—the relaxation and attention, the receptivity of mindfulness—can have that quality of relaxed attention.

If right now you don't try to look at anything, don't try to find any particular experience, just relax—what's obvious?

Is there something that's being received already? You don't have to look for anything. There's something here in the experience. We don't have to look for anything.

So if you had a sense of that—of just relaxing and just receiving whatever's here—you could play with it. Just receive a breath. There's a breath happening, so can you receive a breath?

This quality of relaxed, receptive attention is supportive for any form of meditation practice. It's useful for concentration practice. It's useful for insight practice. It's useful for mettā practice. It's useful for open awareness practice. This understanding, or stepping into that relaxed, receptive awareness of being mindful—it's really the foundation.

I spent a lot of time striving and pushing and looking, and it created a mind that was pretty tight. Then I kind of had to let go and back off and let the mind relax for a while. On one particular retreat, after really holding on to that breath—"I am going to stay with this breath"—and getting so tight, I spent a day or so just relaxing. And then after that: wow, that breath is really easy. I didn't have to work for that one. And that next breath. And then the mind would grab onto it.

So I began to appreciate that cultivating that receptivity, that relaxation, was kind of primary. The practice unfolded more skillfully when that was the ground out of which the practice was unfolding—as opposed to "I'm going to do this, I'm going to hold on to it, I'm going to figure this out."

As I began to see this pattern around working with the breath and then relaxing and settling back, I noticed that at the beginning when I'd come back to the breath, it was quite easy and restful. Then as soon as I saw the mind get tight around it, I would let go: "Okay, let's relax." So instead of taking three days of getting tight and a couple days of relaxing, then three days of getting tight and a couple days of relaxing, it would be like a few breaths. A breath of getting tight, a breath of relaxing, then try again. It was much

more just playing with that edge—a couple of breaths and then noticing how the mind began to get tight, and then, "Okay, relax, step back." The relaxation became more primary.

"One abides observing." This is a simple word—noticing what's here. The two words together, "abides observing," to me kind of encourage both the relaxation, the receptivity, and the meeting of experience. So there's something that we're observing.

And to me, observing here is not so much thinking about or looking at—it's feeling. Feeling into. What does it mean to experience the present moment? And what we are experiencing in this sentence is the body. What does it mean to observe the body, to know the experience, the direct present-moment experience of the body? To abide with relaxation, observing, being with the body.

The sentence here is interesting: "One abides observing the body as a body." This repetition points to some of the wisdom that is being carried into how we practice mindfulness. This is: know experience as experience. Know the experience in the present moment as experience in the present moment. Know the body as a body. Know the breath as a breath. Know vibratory energy in the body as vibratory energy in the body. Know pressure as pressure. Simple, connecting, direct. Abide observing. The body as a body.

Let's play with it now with the breath. Abide. Relax. Connecting with, meeting the breath as a breath. Simple. Just a breath. What is the experience of the breath—as opposed to our ideas about the breath?

What is the experience of body as opposed to our ideas about the body? What's the direct, felt experience of the breath?

Sometimes we feel it in the nostrils, in the mouth, in the throat. Sometimes in the chest. Sometimes there's a broader sense of the whole body. This is direct experience. The breath is a breath. The body is a body.

This approach also encourages, I think, a non-judgmental and non-interfering awareness of experience. The body is a body. This is a human body. It's impersonal. It's just a body doing its thing. This is a way to point toward exploring the experience of breath and body as human experience, rather than thinking about it as *my* breath or *my* body. It's a human body. A human body that does its thing.

There's a phrase later in the Satipatthana Sutta, throughout the foundation of the body, where after each instruction on how to practice with a particular area—like the breath—it offers a few other little pointers. And one of them is: one recognizes there is a body.

Sometimes it can be that simple. Joseph points to this instruction a lot. *There is a body*. Even saying that—as I say it right now—it just creates for me a sense of the whole body experience. It's very direct. One understands there is a body.

Sometimes understanding the body as a body has more specificity. We feel into sensations of the breath, or the sensations as we're walking, our feet on the ground. There's more of a sense of specific sensations. But sometimes it's more: there is a body. There's a broad range of ways to meet our experience. It doesn't always have to be narrow and focused on some detail. Sometimes it can simply be: there is a body. And what is the experience?

One abides observing the body as a body. Another translation for that: one abides observing the body in and of itself. Again, a pointing to the wisdom side of what we are actually interested in exploring here.

What is the Buddha, in giving these instructions, saying? He's saying these instructions are onward leading. Noticing your experience in this way is useful. Try it. Come and see. *Ehi passiko*—the Dharma is *ehi passiko*. Come and see. Try it for yourself.

It's not something that we can necessarily understand just from hearing it. The first time I heard an instruction like this, I thought, "Well, what good is that going to do?" Somebody sent me a book that talked about mindfulness meditation. I was experiencing a lot of anger at the time. And what I got out of this book was: try noticing that you're angry. Try noticing what anger feels like. And I thought, "What good is that going to do?"

So we may have to take it on faith at first. The Buddha says this is a useful way to explore. Come and see. Try it for yourself. You will find out for yourself that it is useful to explore experience—noticing the body as a body, as a human body, just as experience.

I spoke about receptivity, that quality of abiding and observing, of receiving experience. I want to talk just briefly about how sometimes we might think of receptivity as something we only practice in open awareness—that we settle back and don't choose an object.

and we just receive what's arising. That's a way sometimes people think about what receptive awareness means. But mindfulness itself, I think, is receptive—it just depends on where the attention is, what it's receiving.

If we think about a radio, a radio is a receiver. If you have a tuner on the receiver and all of the tunings are gone, it's just going to receive all the frequencies at once. That would be kind of like receptive awareness—a broad receptive awareness, receiving many frequencies and just noticing lots of different things. But with a tuner on a radio, you can pick a channel and tune to a particular frequency and listen to a particular channel, hearing that channel clearly.

So we can tune the radio, and then the radio doesn't go out into the air and grab those airwaves. It's not reaching out for that frequency—it's receiving. It's just attunement to a particular frequency or channel. We can think about the receptivity around our breath meditation, for instance, as a kind of attunement to the breath. We just attune to the breath, but then we receive. We receive that channel. We receive that aspect of experience. And we don't even have to think of it as narrowing. It can be that we're just saying, okay, let's see what's in that channel. There may still be stuff going on around it, but we're just letting this be the preference of what we're receiving. Just receiving.

Try this right now. What is it like for you if you're just, again, abiding? That relaxation. And there's a breath. Just receiving the breath, however it's showing up. You don't have to dive in and find any particular detail about the breath. Just receive it as it is. An in-breath, an out-breath, as it is. And then another one, as it is. There can be sound going on around, but you can still know. Just receive the breath as it is.

In my experience, this simple receptivity—attuning to a particular channel like that—the attunement begins, just over time, as you attune to that particular aspect of experience, the continuity of mindfulness there begins to reveal more detail. We don't have to try to dig in and see that detail; it becomes available. Not by forcing or holding or pushing, but just through steady, gentle perseverance. Receiving.

One abides observing the body as a body. Ardent. This word has some connotations that might, in our language, feel a little hard. But ardency has a connection to heartfelt. The word itself is even related to heart. The Pali word is *ātāpī*. It's connected with this sense of wholehearted, gentle perseverance, heartfelt interest, curiosity. These qualities are brought in with ardency.

For me, the biggest flavor around ardency is curiosity. What is this experience? What is this human body? How does it do this stuff? And I can see I'm not in charge of it. What is this? It's got that quality of heartfelt interest. It's rapt, it's connected, it brings in those heart qualities. The word ardent also points to the steadiness, the gentle perseverance that Don was speaking about last night—the steadiness and continuity that both Don and Nakowai mentioned. That we keep going. There's that sense of wholehearted commitment.

And abide. These two—abide ardent—they're kind of like relaxation and alertness. I think ardency also brings in that quality of alertness. In my experience, relaxation and alertness are not on a continuum. You might think that relaxation is over here and alertness is over here.

But the mind that can be extremely relaxed can also be very alert. Now, that doesn't always happen. Sometimes when we're really relaxed, we fall asleep. But it's possible—the relaxed mind can be quite naturally very alert. So we shouldn't think about them as necessarily separate ends of the spectrum. We can play with this, the quality of relaxation and engagement in that relaxation. "Abide observing"—that also kind of brings those two together. Abide, observing, ardent.

In terms of continuity—and I'm sure we'll speak more about continuity over the coming days—it's really helpful, and Dawn was speaking of this too, this kind of gentle persistence, a light touch of effort, a light touch of application of energy. It actually doesn't take much to be connecting with something in the present moment for a moment, for a split second.

Right now, can you notice a breath? What about the sensations of your hands? The contact of your hips against where you're sitting? When I name each of those areas, it probably wasn't hard. It was almost like it was just there. Sometimes, at least if you're listening, it probably just popped in. Oh yeah, there are the hands. There's a breath. That's all the level of effort you need in a moment. Just a light touch of effort to connect—this breath, this half a breath, and then this half a breath, and then this half a breath.

Where we get caught, I think, is when we think, "I have to do this for forty-five minutes." But the level of effort in a moment? It's very light. It's not actually possible to pick up the amount of effort we think we need. I've done this, you know, sitting down at the beginning of a sitting: "Okay, I am going to be aware for this whole forty-five minutes. I'm going to bring up this energy and I'm going to do it." You can't do that. We'll exhaust ourselves very quickly trying to do that, and then the mind will wander, or we'll just get really tied in knots.

Just the light touch. Just enough for this moment. Connect. Connect again. Connect again. And notice when the mind says, "Forty-five minutes?" Just this moment. Just this moment. And then the mind will wander, of course. And then it'll come back and you just start again. Just starting again. That light touch of effort, over and over again.

One abides observing the breath as breath, ardent, connected, wholeheartedly connecting, fully aware.

The next word, "fully aware," is *sampajañña*. Some of you may be familiar with this one, sometimes translated as "clear comprehension." Many people are familiar with this phrase from the first foundation of mindfulness—the instruction on clear comprehension is kind of about daily activities, being aware of all activities in the day. Knowing when you're reaching, arms bending and extending, going and coming, using the toilet—it's in there—and eating, and being silent, and talking. All of these daily activities are pointed to, and the instructions there say something like, "One acts in full awareness while going and returning. One acts in full awareness, or one clearly comprehends, while going and returning. One clearly comprehends while reaching and extending the arm."

So the activities themselves aren't necessarily what clear comprehension is. But that seems to be mostly what people associate with that teaching of clear comprehension—the continuity and the practice with, you know, the continuing throughout the day. And that may be partly what's pointed to here: keep practicing, continue.

But there's another place in the suttas where this term "clear comprehension" is actually defined. The definition of what it means for somebody to clearly comprehend something is that experience—feelings, thoughts, perceptions, body sensations, experience—is understood as it arises, remains present, and passes away.

So if we put that phrase into that section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it would sound something like: "While bending and extending one's arm, one understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, remain present, and pass away."

That's the other piece of the definition of clear comprehension: one understands feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, remain present, and pass away while being aware. This is bringing the mindfulness to a whole new level, actually. It's pointing to a broader sense of what's happening in experience. One observes the body as a body, fully aware—the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and pass away.

In my experience, that level of awareness comes over time through the gentle persistence of being curious about what is here. Slowly, over time, the mind begins to see the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions that are arising in relationship to what's happening in the body. This is also pointing to impermanence—the understanding of impermanence and the importance of understanding impermanence as we are exploring our experience. And again, this isn't something that we try to do. It's more of an understanding, more of an insight.

So this aspect of clear comprehension and full awareness, to me, is beginning to point to the insight nature of this practice—where it's heading. This will get unpacked over the course of many talks, what we're exploring over these weeks, what this aspect of this sentence means. But I think we can just rest with: what does it mean? What's the feeling of "fully aware" to us? Sometimes Joseph uses the phrase, "Well, are you just more or less aware, or are you fully aware?" And so it kind of brightens the mind a little bit to explore the possibility of full awareness. Full awareness. It also brings to me a sense of full body, full immersion—an immersion kind of feeling.

The last part of this phrase: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, free from desires and discontent for the world." Now this phrase, again, in a way it's pointing to where we're headed. We're probably not going to be free from desires and discontent for the world anytime soon. We may get little respites from being free from desire and discontent for the world. But often at the beginning of retreat, we sit down, we notice the breath for a few moments, and then we think about what we want to go do next, or what's for lunch, and there's desire there. So we are going to be working with desires and discontent.

It's interesting to me that this phrase is part of the definition of mindfulness. To me, it kind of points to where we're headed ultimately. But there's also something that Bhikkhu Anālayo pointed out that I really like—his take on this. He said that the Pali term for "free from" can be understood in the active verb tense, so happening simultaneously to this process of mindfulness. So he translates this as "freeing from." We could put a little bit of "freeing oneself from" in there: "One abides observing the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing oneself from desires and discontent for the world."

The process of freeing is what happens as we do this practice. I love that perspective because that's my experience. I don't free myself—the freeing happens. Freeing from desire and discontent from the world.

Anālayo also says we could understand it as "setting aside." And this sometimes can happen. Sometimes we can consciously say, "Yeah, I'm not going to go there right now. I can just set lunch aside for now and come back to the breath." So we can do that sometimes, and that's a skillful practice. That's skillful. But sometimes those thoughts are very strong, and the process of mindfulness there is not to beat ourselves up, like, "I'm not free from desire and discontent."

It's to notice what's arising. Desire is arising right now. Discontent is arising right now. What is the human experience of desire? What is the human experience of discontent? That's where the process continues.

It's not a mistake when we experience desire and discontent in our practice. And so we explore allowing when they arise. We abide observing. It shifts in a way to another aspect of mindfulness. If we're noticing the body, abiding observing the body as a body, and desire and discontent arise, then we perhaps begin exploring the mind state. We begin noticing, oh, this is what the mind state of desire is like. And this is how it affects the body.

So can we allow whatever arises? There are times, as I said, when we can set them aside. But there are times when they're so strong that we cannot. And so we observe them. We get curious about that as human experience. Understanding desire in and of itself. Discontent in and of itself. And this is the process of freeing from. This is how it works.

One abides observing the body as a body. Feelings as feelings. Mind states as mind states. Phenomena as phenomena—ardent, fully aware and mindful, freeing from desire and discontent for the world.

May it be so for all of us.

CHAPTER 184

Untangle the Tangle

Andrea Fella · 54 min

In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella investigates the nature of dukkha from multiple angles—as obvious suffering, as the unreliable nature of all conditioned experience, and as the stress created when we cling to what is impermanent. Drawing on the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa) of aniccā, dukkha, and anattā, she explains how suffering isn't caused by the world failing to meet our wishes, but by our relationship to experience through greed, aversion, and delusion.

Fella introduces a compelling framework: our suffering emerges from a "tangle" between life's core truths (impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable) and our core wishes for well-being (the brahmavihāra aspirations to be happy, healthy, safe, and at ease). When these threads collide, fear and confusion arise because our minds don't understand how they can coexist. Rather than cutting out this tangle with a scalpel, she suggests we honor it through mindfulness—placing it in a "lubricated warm bath" where wisdom naturally untangles the knot.

Through a personal story of fear following the September 2001 attacks, Fella illustrates how opening to suffering can reveal the mettā wishes hidden within reactive states. She emphasizes that wisdom doesn't ask us to abandon our wishes for well-being, but to embrace them while releasing our craving for particular outcomes. The talk concludes with the Buddha's response from the suttas: those established in virtue and wisdom, developing mind and heart, can untangle the tangle as lust, hatred, and ignorance fade away.

So much of our practice and our journey looking at our minds and beginning to understand what's going on in there is around recognizing and understanding dukkha.

Dukkha is the Pali term usually translated as suffering, but the English word suffering doesn't really capture the depth and breadth of dukkha. Dukkha can be quite obvious, and often that's where we really start to know it—in the obvious realms of our minds fighting with themselves or fighting with the world. And yet dukkha is really quite deep, extending to the very subtle level where we simply don't like things the way they are.

There's another translation of the word dukkha, another framing or perspective. Sometimes in the texts dukkha refers to what we would call suffering, and sometimes it refers to the nature of experience itself. There are phrases in the suttas that say all conditioned experiences, all conditioned phenomena, are impermanent; all conditioned phenomena are dukkha.

It's not true that all of our conditioned phenomena are felt as suffering. Joy isn't experienced as suffering. And yet all of what arises in our body-mind is impermanent. Because it's impermanent, it's not a reliable place to land for lasting happiness. This is another meaning of the word dukkha—that there's no experience arising in our mind and body that is a reliable place where we can say, "Yep, that's going to do it for me. I can hold on to that or be there forever," because it will pass. So this is another meaning of the word: unreliable.

I'm sure many of you have heard of what are often called the three characteristics of experience: impermanent, unreliable, not-self—anicca, dukkha, anatta. This framing of the nature of experience as anicca, dukkha, anatta points to the unreliable nature of experience. We can't count on anything to last, so it's unreliable. And everything is conditioned, not me, not who I am, uncontrollable in a way—we don't have ultimate control over what is happening in experience.

These three are the nature of everything that arises in our experience. This is one of the key wisdom teachings of the Buddha: all conditioned experience is impermanent, all conditioned experience is unreliable, all experience is not-self. I won't go into the distinction there right now; that's not where the talk is headed. We'll leave that for another day, another talk.

This is understood to be some core wisdom of the Buddha—this understanding that what arises has the nature to pass away. Clinging to what arises, which will pass away, creates suffering. There's stress. There's an image I heard a long time ago, and I believe the teacher said it came from some yogi. So who knows where this image came from? But it's very apt.

The sense of suffering when we're clinging to something impermanent, something going to pass, is like rope burn. When a rope is slipping through your hand, if you're trying to hold on to it, it's going to burn. That's what clinging does. When we're trying to hold on to something that is slipping through, it burns—it's suffering.

So the Buddha's teachings on dukkha come from both the perspective of the unreliable nature and the perspective of that rope burn. What is that clinging? What is the mechanism at work in our minds by which we end up trying to cling?

So much of our journey is around this exploration. We meet dukkha as we sit and walk and look at our hearts and minds. This is really right in line with what the Buddha taught. He pointed to, in the Four Noble Truths, that there is dukkha—both the unreliability of experience and this experience of struggle, stress, suffering, clinging. And he said of this noble truth: dukkha should be understood.

And he didn't mean think about it to figure it out. He meant really investigate. Know the experience of dukkha. Know what is happening there.

So this is where we've been when pointing to this investigation of experience. I would say Mia's talk last night was wholly about this topic of understanding dukkha and those hindrances—understanding them, opening to them, familiarizing ourselves with the experience of them. That's the understanding that the Buddha was pointing to. Not that we could think it through.

From an ordinary perspective, we often think of suffering as something that happens to us. Something that's out there, happening to us, and we're just being blown around like leaves in the wind. We think stuff out there is what's making us suffer. In Mia's talk, she really pointed to this. Especially with greed and aversion, we think that the problem is with what we're averse to, or with what we want and not having it—that's the problem. But the Buddha's pointing to something different: notice the experience of the wanting, of the aversion. That's where the dukkha is. It's not the not having that's really the dukkha; it's the aversion to not having. It's the aversion to being in association with something that we don't want, or not having something that we want.

So one way to look at dukkha—in terms of that experience we call suffering or stress or unsatisfactoriness, that sense of things not feeling right—is that this kind of dukkha is not about the world not meeting our wishes. It is really about our relationship to that. The states of mind experienced as suffering are rooted in greed, in aversion, in delusion. These are the states of mind we've been talking about, like feeling contracted. When we feel them, we know the suffering of them. But so often we're so focused on the object—like with greed, as Mia described last night—we're so focused on the thing we want that we miss the suffering of the wanting. The idea, the fantasy of getting that thing takes prominence in our mind. We experience the pleasantness of the fantasy while missing entirely that there's a feeling of lack, a feeling of suffering around the wanting itself.

Our struggle, our stress, is not inherent in what's happening in the world—whether we get something or don't get something we want, or are associated with something we don't want. The suffering isn't really about that. It's really about our relationship to it.

And this is actually good news. Because if it were because of the world that we suffer, it would not be possible to be free from suffering. But because those qualities of mind—the aversion, the greed—are really where the suffering is experienced, freedom becomes possible. You can see this even in small moments when you notice greed fall away. When we feel that wanting fall away, as Mia pointed to last night, we feel the release of that. We feel that we didn't need to get what we want to feel okay, to feel content. When we experience that, when we touch into that, when we see the aversion fall away or the greed fall away and the world hasn't changed—it's our minds that have changed—this is huge for our understanding of what the Buddha was talking about.

It's possible to change our minds. It's possible to change our minds.

Now, I will say there are situations in the world, situations of injustice, of people behaving unethically, that we may feel like the only rational response is to be angry about. But we can explore, and can actually experience, what it might mean to essentially align ourselves with: well, this is what's happening. Injustice is happening in the world. People behaving unethically in the world. This is happening. And recognizing that without hatred—it is possible. It's challenging, but it's possible. We feel a different relationship with the world, one of compassion, one of care, wanting to alleviate suffering as opposed to annihilating those who are perpetuating what we don't like. Or what is objectively unjust, treating other beings cruelly. And yet there is the possibility of responding from a heart that is not constricted. It is possible.

There's a beautiful quote that I love around this topic. Because essentially what this is about is aligning with, recognizing: this is the truth. This is what's happening in the world. In that recognition, not fighting it, but also not saying, "Yes, things as they are"—that's not what equanimity really is.

Here's the quote: "To accept means to receive what is offered. Circumstances of life give rise to conditions, and our acceptance of these conditions is just the acceptance of things as they are. What is not meant by the idea of acceptance is any agreement or disagreement with the way things are. Acceptance is about basing ourselves in reality, not about making judgments of liking or disliking or of agreeing and disagreeing."

To accept the situation is to be grounded in the actual state of things without getting lost in ideals or fantasies of how we would like it to be. We then have a good basis from which to see what action may be called for. Acceptance does not imply inertia. On the contrary, to be grounded in reality gives rise to a true response—a response from the heart, a response from compassion, rather than a response from hatred, from greed, from aversion.

When our mind is caught in aversion, it will tell us there's no other rational response to this situation. It cannot understand. The mind that is averse can't understand that there might be another way to meet the situation. And so it takes a little bit of a leap of trust, of faith, to explore that possibility—recognizing, okay, there's this situation and there's injustice and there's aversion to it. Just even that, recognizing there's aversion to it rather than blindly following the aversion, will be more skillful.

I would sometimes, in a situation like this, recognize, "Yep, I don't like this," and then kind of broaden, opening to whether I can find an attitude of compassion—connecting to the suffering of the situation to act rather than connecting to my anger about the situation.

In our minds here on retreat, suffering arises and over and over again we see the habits and patterns unfold. We see it many times. For myself, self-hatred was a big thing—anger at the world and hatred of myself, a lot of that arising. And I could see it over and over again. I could see the suffering of it. I could feel the suffering of it. There were times when it would be like, "This feels really painful. I would let go of this if I knew how to let go of it." Sometimes our minds are caught, and sometimes it would release—and then three minutes later it would come back. There were times when I would see something released like that, anger released or self-hatred released, and think, "Oh, phew, okay, done with that." No. Not quite.

We see how much suffering these patterns create, and it might make us wonder: why on earth do our minds do this? Even after we've seen it, it comes back again and again. Why do our minds do this?

I've thought about this a lot, and I'd like to offer a perspective on why our minds do this. I think as human beings, our human system wants to move in the direction of well-being, wants to have ease and peace, wants to be happy and healthy and safe. And yet there's something in our human minds, in our human system—we are fundamentally confused about what well-being actually is.

All living organisms have this kind of movement towards the pleasant, towards nourishment, towards safety, and away from noxious environments. Even a single-celled organism will do that. This movement towards the pleasant, away from the unpleasant, is natural. And I think at some level it's based in this movement towards well-being—essentially the wish of metta, wishing to be happy, healthy, safe, at ease. This is deep. I call these core wishes. At a very deep level, this is what our system actually wants.

But our minds are pretty complex things, and it seems like at times our moving towards what we think of as well-being is taking the shortest route towards getting something pleasant, without recognizing the suffering in the wanting itself. We move towards that—"get that thing, get that thing." Even if we know at some level that getting those things is impermanent, even if we know at a reflective or experiential level that, yeah, this happiness will be here for a while, we think that well-being would consist of stringing moments of happiness together—getting what I want, getting rid of what I don't want, creating and constructing my environment to be the way I want it to be. If I can just keep doing that over and over again, that's as good as it gets.

This is our orientation towards happiness and well-being before we meet the Dharma. We think that happiness would be arranging our environment to get what we want. And yet, seeing the way things actually are, coming back to the nature of experience—experience is impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable, not self. I can't be in ultimate control of orienting and arranging the world. That project of stringing together moments of happiness is doomed to fail. And we start to see that. Things are impermanent. Things are unreliable.

Things pass. What we love, we lose. Sometimes we have to be in proximity with things that are challenging and unpleasant. It's just the nature of life.

So it's not a mistake when we're in association with things that we don't like, or when things that we love, we lose. It's not a mistake. It's the nature of life. And so a lot of our suffering, I think, results from fighting with this nature—resisting the impermanent nature, wanting to hold on to things that we want. That rope burn. We get that rope burn. Losing things that we love is not a mistake. It's not. And yet we suffer around it. We resist the truth, we resist the nature of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable experience.

So that's one side of the suffering—that we're resisting the truth. And what the quote pointed to really was taking in what reality is. This is the way things are.

At the same time, some of our suffering also feels like it's connected to these deep wishes for well-being—the deep wishes to be happy, safe, healthy, and at ease. And these collide with the nature of experience being impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. It's like our minds don't understand how these coexist.

I think of these as the nature of experience—impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable—being kind of the core truths of life. And the deep wishes for our well-being, those metta wishes essentially, are basically the core wishes of us as human beings. The suffering that we experience often comes when these two get tangled up.

I can think of these as threads—the threads of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable, and the threads of wanting to be healthy, happy, and safe. These come together, and our minds don't understand how they can coexist. I want to be safe, and it's unreliable. There's vulnerability. I'm not safe. And so the reactivity is born here. We get tangled. There's a tangle between these different threads of our experience. The tangle of these core truths and these core wishes.

This image of the tangle is in the suttas: "A tangle within, a tangle without." I think we can relate to that—the tangle inside. It sometimes does feel like a tangle. How do I navigate this? A tangle within, a tangle without. And the world seems tangled. The world seems a confused mess. "A tangle within, a tangle without. This generation is entangled in a tangle. I ask you this, O Gotama, who can untangle the tangle?"

So that's a piece of the exploration. I want to explore the tangle a little bit and understand what's going on there.

There's reactivity, there can be reactivity born around the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience. It just doesn't seem right sometimes, right? The way things are, that loss happens. There's just this kind of "no" that comes up inside. No, it shouldn't be like this. And so there's a resistance to that side of the truth.

We often do resist that. And then, you know, on the side of the wishes—that we want to be happy and healthy and safe—there's the sense that these two don't jive. It's kind of like, well, either the truths can't be right, or our minds would say it's either/or. Either things are impermanent and unreliable, *or* I should be able to be happy, healthy, and safe. But feeling that these could work together just doesn't seem possible.

And so sometimes something can happen where we may recognize, okay, yes, things are unreliable, there's vulnerability. And we may have the sense that, seeing that things are vulnerable and unreliable, I shouldn't *want* to be safe. I've had people say this to me in practice discussions: "I know things are unreliable, so I shouldn't want to be safe." But that wish for safety is valid. That wish for safety is completely valid. What happens is that we *cling* to the wish for safety. We demand that things be a certain way, that safety look the way we want it to look. And that's where some of the suffering comes from.

It's a kind of misunderstanding about the wishes themselves—and this is what we're exploring in the metta practice. The wish: May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be safe. May I live with ease. Those wishes are valid all the time. Even if there's something

going on, like... sometimes people struggle with wishing well-being for someone who is terminally ill, for instance. It's like, wishing them to be healthy? That's delusion. I shouldn't wish them to be healthy. But the wish—the wish itself—*is* the metta.

I sometimes play with this notion or this idea: if I could wave a wand and say all beings would be healthy, would I do it? Yeah, I would do that. And so that's the wish. The wish is valid. And we have to acknowledge the truths—the truths of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable.

So this notion of, well, okay, being human is vulnerable, so I shouldn't want that, shouldn't have that wish—this can become a kind of spiritual bludgeoning. Using wisdom to say you shouldn't want, you shouldn't wish for well-being or happiness. But the wish is valid.

The meeting of these two—I mean, it's like the tangle, right? The impermanent, unreliable, running up against wanting health, happiness, safety. It gets tangled. Fear, confusion arise. And for a while in my own practice, when I ran up against knots—and they feel like knots sometimes, they feel like tangles, they feel like knotted messes of stuff—I thought, especially around things like self-hatred, that the whole complex of messy, yucky feeling, that tangle, was wholly bad. That I needed to get the scalpel and excise it, cut it out.

But think about having a knot like this, a tangle in threads. If you take scissors and cut out the knot, you end up with a hole in the cloth. The knot, the tangle, is composed of the threads of the truths and the wishes. The tangle, the fear, the confusion, the anxiety—it's just a confusion of those truths and those wishes intertwined.

Sometimes I talk about or think about what we do with mindfulness practice as taking that knot and, instead of taking a scalpel to it or scissors to it, we put it into a lubricated warm bath. We honor the tangle. We meet the experience of the suffering, and that meeting begins to untangle the tangle. We can't actually do the pulling apart of all the threads ourselves, but wisdom and mindfulness do the untangling. It is the honoring of that tangle—I think of it as the honoring of the suffering—meeting it, opening to it. It begins to reveal the truths and the wishes for well-being.

Within any state of suffering, I think it's like that. The willingness to meet it is a direct opening to wisdom on the one hand and our heart opening into love on the other. Whatever tangle there is, that tangle has these threads—threads of recognition that, yes, impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable, this is the truth. And the threads of our wishes for well-being and happiness and ease.

I'm not quite ready to say that every suffering has this composition, but I'm getting close. You know, that self-hatred—there was some part of that that thought it was helping me out somehow. The anger definitely thought it was helping me out. And so the wish for well-being was pretty buried in the self-hatred. But it was in there. Wanting to be loved and feeling like I was unlovable.

So if we honor our suffering, opening to the tangle with wisdom, with mindfulness, it begins to reveal these threads. We start to see, and begin to have the trust, that these truths and these wishes can coexist in a weave. It's not intuitively obvious how that works. And so there's the exploration.

I've had some experiences where this kind of investigation has really pointed me to this connection between the suffering and, in particular, the metta wishes.

At one point in September of 2001, I had flown back to visit my family. While I was there, the attacks on the World Trade Center happened, and so my flight home was delayed—I had ten days or something. When I got on the plane, there was some trepidation. There was bad weather where my parents lived, so the plane was delayed leaving. I had a layover in the Houston area to get back to California, and I missed my flight. There were no further flights to California that evening, so I had to get a hotel.

I was in the hotel that evening and the power went out. This was at George Bush International Airport, and George Bush was the President of the United States at the time. Initially I thought, oh, it's just a power outage, but it went on for a long time. It was really dark—I had to use my Indiglo watch to navigate to the bathroom. It was so dark in there. I went to the window and looked out, and it wasn't just the hotel. As far as I could see, the power was out.

In that kind of experience, in seeing that, I thought: terrorist attack. That's where my mind went. George Bush International Airport, named after the President of the United States. What a symbolic gesture. So the mind was doing some proliferation, obviously. But there was a lot of fear from this, obviously from what had happened a few weeks before. The conditions were there supporting that.

So I was feeling into the fear. And the suffering of that—there had been enough practice. I had started practice probably four years before that. The suffering kind of kicked the practice in, and I started just being with the fear.

Then what happened was that metta started up. I began with the phrases, and when I got to "may I be safe," it's like, yeah, that one really landed. May I be safe? Yes, that's what I want. There was just this feeling of really landing with that wish for safety.

I also noticed that as I was connecting to these metta wishes, the fear was not there. And then I landed with the wish, "may all beings be safe." That one was even stronger. Yes, that's the wish. That's what the heart really is opening towards. May all beings be safe.

Then the mind would slip into a little bit of thinking, papañca, and the fear would resurge. The fear was very strong, but equally so was the metta, the wish. And the disappearance of the fear was quite interesting when the metta was strong.

And that really gave me the understanding that the fear was composed of those threads of the wish for well-being. The medicine was really connecting with the wish. It was quite something.

So wisdom and love, the truths, the core wishes—they kind of work together. Wisdom asks us to let go of the expectations, the hopes, the craving for a particular outcome around the wishes. And the wishes connect us. I don't think that wisdom asks us to let go of the wishes. I think wisdom asks us to embrace those wishes—to embrace the movement towards connection and care and love and compassion. Wisdom is asking us to stretch, for our hearts to hold both the truths and the wishes, finding that weave instead of the tangle.

The tangle is untangled not by pulling things apart, but really through honoring: wow, this is what it's like. And that's what happened for me with the fear. It's like, oh, this is the fear. This is what the fear is like. And then in the midst of that opening to the fear, the mettā wishes arose. They were right there—really pointing to the deep connection between how we kind of misinterpret or misunderstand. The fear, the reaction to either the truths or the wishes, is a fundamental misunderstanding.

The Buddha responded to the question: "A tangle within, a tangle without. This generation is entangled in a tangle. I ask you this, O Gotama, who can untangle the tangle?" And he said, "One established in virtue, wise, developing the mind and wisdom, a practitioner ardent and discreet—this one can untangle the tangle."

I feel like really it should say the wisdom and the ardency untangle the tangle. It's not us that do it.

And then it goes further: "Those for whom lust, hatred, and ignorance have faded away, for them the tangle is untangled." The fading away of greed, aversion, and delusion happens through that engagement, through the honoring of the tangle. Coming back to the First Noble Truth—understanding dukkha. This whole talk has really been pointing to that: understanding dukkha. Not resisting the suffering. The suffering is going to show us the way. The tangle, the suffering, will show us the way to love and wis-

dom. Right in the midst of that suffering are the threads that can allow us to see the truth—impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable—and connect deeply to those wishes for well-being, for ourselves, for all beings.

Thank you for your practice. It's so wonderful to be participating in a community where this exploration around looking at our minds and transforming our own minds is what we do—because it will affect the world. So thank you for doing this. It's not easy; I know that.

CHAPTER 185

Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)

Andrea Fella · 1h04

> *In this comprehensive talk, Andrea Fella guides practitioners through the Buddha's profound teaching on dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda), the twelve-link chain describing how dukkha comes into being. She references the famous exchange where the Buddha gently corrects Ānanda's claim that this teaching appears "clear as clear," emphasizing its genuine depth and profundity.*
>
> *Fella walks through each of the twelve links—from ignorance (avijjā) through mental formations (saṅkhāra), consciousness (viññāṇa), mental and physical processes (nāmarūpa), the six sense bases (saḷāyatana), contact (phassa), feeling (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), clinging (upādāna), becoming (bhava), birth (jāti), to aging and death (jarāmaraṇa). She offers practical examples from her own meditation experience, including how habitual aversion shaped her consciousness to perceive predominantly unpleasant experiences during choiceless awareness practice.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes that this chain describes both the arising of suffering and the process of selfing as interconnected patterns. Drawing from the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta (MN 9), Fella explains that understanding any single link with wisdom—seeing its arising, its cessation, and the path to its cessation—can interrupt the entire cycle. She encourages practitioners to recognize that suffering is conditioned rather than personal, and that mindfulness and wisdom introduce new conditions that can transform these ancient human patterns.*

Last week I talked about dukkha and how it comes to be in relationship to the basic truths of experience and our wishes. Tonight the topic is dukkha again—I actually like talking about dukkha—and the teaching the Buddha offered on how suffering comes to be: the teaching of dependent origination.

It's a fundamental teaching in the suttas. It's also quite challenging, we could say. For those of you who are not familiar with it, it consists of twelve links, twelve conditions that follow each other, that tumble forward, tumble onwards to the creation of dukkha. We could say it's a detailed elaboration of the second noble truth. The first noble truth states that there is dukkha, and dukkha should be understood. The second noble truth states that there is an arising of dukkha—that dukkha arises with craving. Sometimes that's framed as the cause of dukkha is craving. This teaching of dependent origination looks in detail at how craving comes to be and how it leads onward towards "the whole mass of suffering," as the Buddha says in the teachings.

Aspects of this teaching can seem obscure. There are certain parts of it that are easier to map onto our experience, and some parts that seem a bit opaque at times. The Buddha actually acknowledged that this was a challenging teaching. There's a famous story of Ananda coming to the Buddha saying, "It is wonderful, it's marvelous how profound this dependent origination is and how profound it appears. And yet it appears to me as clear as clear." And the Buddha says, "Don't say that, Ananda. This dependent origination is profound and appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this, that this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe."

The Buddha was a little bit chastising Ananda for calling dependent origination clear, because the Buddha understood that Ananda didn't fully understand the teaching. There was some sense in Ananda that "I understand this," and the Buddha responded, "Well, I don't think so. It's very deep. It's very profound."

So we're probably not going to be able to understand it tonight. And yet, in my own practice, pieces of this teaching—even just little pieces—have been extremely powerful. The continuation of exploring and reflecting, of looking at how these various links play out in experience, has been transformative. And it's not just about thinking about it. It's about looking in experience. The encouragement really is, with each of these links, to understand experientially what's described and what the relationship is to the links around it. There are actually a lot of feedback loops in this chain, so there are many ways we can see the conditionality playing out.

The name of this teaching is dependent origination, or dependent co-arising. It is essentially a teaching on the conditioned nature of suffering. We can begin to see how conditioning plays out in our practice, how conditioning plays out in the construction of our reactivity. It's a very clear description of how suffering comes to be as a human pattern.

For me, that's an important aspect I resonate with—that it's describing how human minds work. We can recognize this in our own minds. The fact that the Buddha looked at this and talked about it 2600 years ago, saying this is how human minds tangle themselves up in knots, and that it's still how human minds tangle themselves up in knots, means I'm not alone. The patterns being witnessed in this mind are similar to the patterns that have been played out for the entire duration of human experience.

So we can see suffering as human. It's not personal that suffering is arising here. It is the nature of our human experience when mindfulness and wisdom are not available. The tendency is for the human mind to fall into this pattern. All of us have experienced

this, maybe not seeing it in this way exactly, but this is playing out over and over and over again. We can begin to understand suffering as human. It's described simply as what happens in our minds.

The other piece of overview is that what arises and is experienced as suffering is conditioned. Certain patterns—

And the other piece around this description is that it's describing suffering as arising from what's happening in our minds. The kind of suffering that we can be free of is the kind of suffering that our own minds put together. And that is actually what we call suffering.

We may not believe that at first. We've talked about this a bit—that we tend to think suffering is something happening out there to us. But when we start to look at the experience from this perspective, we see that it is our relationship, how our minds work, that creates what we call suffering.

Yes, there is unpleasant experience, pleasant experience. We've talked about the feeling tone of experience, and often our relationship to that is that we suffer around it. We feel like when something's unpleasant, there's no way to not suffer around it. But we can start to see that there's an option. We can see this in our own minds, in our own experiences.

I think Gil Fronsdal has said—and I don't know if it's original to him, but I heard it from him—unpleasantness, physical painful experience, that happens. Suffering is optional.

So given that the chain of dependent origination describes conditions that lead to suffering, and they are described as conditions, some of those conditions are stronger than others—in particular, ignorance. When ignorance is arising in the mind, feeling will lead to craving. When the mind does not understand that things are impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable, feeling leads to craving. The ignorance is a very powerful condition for suffering. We will experience suffering when ignorance is present in the mind. It's almost more like a cause there.

When craving is arising, we will be experiencing suffering. We may not recognize that we're experiencing suffering. We can delude ourselves into thinking we're not experiencing suffering when we're experiencing craving around something pleasant—focused on the pleasant and missing that the craving is actually really painful. But that stress of the craving is part of the human experience and is creating suffering, even if we're not clearly aware of it.

Given that suffering is conditioned, the good news is that when conditions change—and in particular when mindfulness and wisdom are brought into the equation—a whole different process begins to happen. A whole different direction of the path. Faith can arise. Delight, joy can arise. The sense of confidence that this is possible, that there's a path. Concentration. Understanding arises. Leading onwards, there's a whole different teaching of dependent origination called transcendent dependent origination that points to the conditions that lead to freedom.

And so we're on that path here, bringing mindfulness and wisdom to our experience. And what do we see as we do that? We see these patterns, these conditioned patterns of the habitual ways that our minds have been caught in suffering.

One of the other things I'll point out briefly about this teaching, these links, this cycle—it does loop around on itself, and it's often pointed to as describing the arising of suffering. And yet the very same cycle, a certain piece of the cycle, also describes the process of selfing. So it's the very same process that leads to the arising of suffering and leads to the arising of selfing.

We can look at it this way: whether we are noticing the experience of suffering—of reactivity, of aversion, of confusion, of reactive mind states—we may experience that as becoming familiar with what it's like to be aware of suffering. And sometimes we can actually notice the experience of the identification in there. They're both happening. It's just that sometimes the interest in the mindfulness is oriented more towards noticing the identification and the selfing, the experience of selfing. And sometimes it's more interested in noticing the experience of suffering.

So the links, the twelve links. Typically the twelve links begin with ignorance. With ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. With mental formations as condition, consciousness. With consciousness as condition, mental and physical processes come to be. With mental and physical processes as condition, the six sense bases. With the six sense bases as condition, contact. With contact as condition, feeling. With feeling as condition, craving. With craving as condition, clinging. With clinging as condition, becoming. With becoming as condition, birth. With birth as condition, old age and death. And there arises the entire mass of suffering.

That entire mass of suffering—the tendency of that entire mass of suffering is to lead onward into ignorance again. We typically meet our suffering with not understanding suffering.

And so the cycle loops on itself. While the classical teachings start the description of dependent origination with ignorance, I find these first three or four links—ignorance conditions mental formations, mental formations condition consciousness, consciousness conditions mental and physical processes—to be some of the most challenging to both understand conceptually and understand in experience. So I'm going to start this description in a place where you've probably already been experiencing some of what's described here.

We have a conscious mind and body, mental and physical processes tumbling on. These include our five usual physical senses—seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching—and the sixth sense base of the mind. So we have this mind and body with these physical sense bases. Those are two of the links, and I'm not going to go into much detail about those right now. We just know we have a body and a mind, and we have these senses. That's fairly easy to connect with.

Each sense door, each sense base, is a very sensitive receiver, we could say. The eye takes in light waves. The ear takes in sound waves. The sense base is almost like an antenna—it receives the field of its base. The eye receives sight, the ear sound, and so forth. When that happens, that's called contact. In the physical realm, it's very clear: there's a sensation, there's a contact, we feel it. Contact is that meeting of the object of the sense with the sense base. There's contact with the sense door—the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste, the touch, the experience arising in the mind. That contact produces the experience for that sense base.

Each sense impression—contact—each sense base conditions contact. Contact conditions feeling, feeling tone. Each of those sense impressions, whenever there's contact with the sense base, there's a feeling tone associated with it. We've talked about this quite a bit, so just a quick overview here.

With each contact at a sense base, there's a feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. As we explored the other day in the instructions, that quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral arises based on conditions. It's not inherent in the sense experience itself. Sometimes we might experience a particular contact as pleasant, sometimes as unpleasant, sometimes more pleasant or less unpleasant, just depending on the conditions. It might depend on the conditions of your own body and mind, or it might depend on external conditions. There's that feeling tone for each contact, and we can get familiar with this as an experience—the contact and then the feeling tone.

The understanding about feeling tone in particular is that it's just part of being human, we could say. The teachings point to arahants, people who are fully awakened, as still experiencing feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. That's just part of hav-

ing a human body. So up to this point in the chain of dependent origination, people who are fully awakened have the physical sense doors, the physical and mental processes, the sense doors, the contact, the feelings. These are all just part of being human.

Based on feeling tone, our habitual response—the response of the mind that does not understand suffering—is that we want to hold on to, lean into, or get pleasant experience. We want to get rid of unpleasant experience.

We may not notice neutral experience. It may not rise to the level of awareness. Or if it does, we may react to it with a kind of boredom—again, a wanting it not to be neutral. We like the highs and the lows. We don't particularly like it when it gets neutral. This is the habitual response.

Now, a person who's fully awakened would not have this habitual response. It would not lead from feeling to craving. And yet this is our habitual response, and it happens over and over again. We get to see this over and over again—this craving, this wanting. Like we're a simple automatic machine that automatically moves towards the pleasant, moves away from the unpleasant, and ignores the neutral. The neutral is not important, so we ignore that part. This is craving: the wanting to move towards the pleasant, to move away from the unpleasant. And again, this is very human, and yet it is not necessary. That's hard to understand, so you might have to just take that on trust or faith for a little while. A long while sometimes.

We often habitually act on this craving. The craving can arise just in the mind—you know, just "I want, I want, I want, I want." When it rises to the level where we start to take action on it, that's when it moves to clinging. We begin to hold on to something or actively start to push something away. Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about the distinction between craving and clinging using an analogy. He says that as a thief is going through a house to steal things, the reaching out to something is like the craving. When they actually pick it up, that's the clinging. So it's almost an intensification, but there's a range there from craving to clinging. The clinging is where we have picked it up. We hold on to the experience. We try to hold on to something that's pleasant. Sometimes we can get stuck to something that's unpleasant, trying to get rid of it. That's clinging.

I didn't initially understand what it meant to cling to something that was unpleasant. That language didn't make much sense to me. But then I realized, as I looked at my experience, when it was really unpleasant, I was clinging to "not this." It's like, "anything but this." And I would find myself—if this table were the thing that I didn't like—I would find myself stuck to the table, trying to push it away. Actually clinging to the thing I wanted to get rid of, thinking that was going to be how to do it. That's clinging.

The next link is becoming. This one I'll describe a little bit more. One of the monastic teachers in the Thai forest tradition, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, says that when we cling to something, it's like all of our intentions and motivations start to—he uses the phrase—"rally in the service of clinging." Our intentions and motivations kind of join up and say, "Yep, we're going to go with this one." That's becoming. There's a sense of congealing or a movement towards "Yes, this is me needing to do this." There's the beginnings of a movement towards a sense of self. You can say becoming is like the intentions toward a self.

We like becoming. Becoming can feel good—that sense of "I know what I want and I know where I'm going and I know how I'm going to get it." That movement of becoming feels like I'm in control, like I've figured it out. We like that feeling. I think this is one of the sticky links here, because it feels good.

Following on from becoming is birth, this full-blown movement into identification. Something becomes mine, or me, who I am. I'm in control. This thing is mine.

I am the person who does this or that. This is the birth of a sense of self. It can take obvious forms, like "this is mine," or it might be more subtle, like "I'm the kind of person who does this."

Following on from birth—this full-blown taking of "this is who I am"—suffering inevitably follows. Actually, suffering follows inevitably from craving. Craving itself is already suffering, in my experience. But suffering also follows from birth because there's no way to sustain the clinging. There's no way to sustain that identity forever. It will fall apart.

Sometimes this feels good. When my self-hatred identities fell apart, that was pretty good. But when there's an identity that we feel attached to—like "I figured it out"—it's different. The flip side of my self-hatred identity was this sense of "I figured it out, I can do this." And then when it was proven, perhaps ten minutes later, that I didn't have it figured out, self-hatred arose. Because it's like, "Well, if I can't control the figuring out, if I can't keep that, then I must be a failure." Those identities—the "I figured it out" and the self-hatred—were kind of two sides of a coin. I began to see that. Suffering inevitably follows this whole process.

Let me offer an example, something I have actually experienced, as a way of thinking through dependent origination. Contact with the sense door: an idea from hearing teachers, an idea arises in my head about what it might mean to be a good yogi, what kinds of experiences I might have. So thoughts arise about that. There's the contact with

the thought: "I could be a good yogi, maybe." For me, this arose with the frame of a fantasy—telling the teacher that I had seen something, that I had discovered some insight. I hadn't discovered any insight, but I had the fantasy. That was a pleasant fantasy.

So there was contact with the sense door, and then the pleasantness of that fantasy. There was a desire to have that fantasy become reality so I could go to that teacher and tell them I'd had an insight. The clinging results in movement toward "Okay, what are things I could do?" and the belief that this is necessary in order for me to be happy. "I will accomplish this. I will do this." That's the clinging.

The becoming is like the whole priorities of behavior and thought that arise in dependence on this idea of what it's going to take to have this insight. Ideas arise: "Okay, what do I need to do? I need to move really slowly—lifting, moving, placing—being sure everybody thinks I'm doing it well, looking really good, sitting long in the hall, being the first one in the hall in the morning." All of those things, born from that becoming.

Taking birth might be, for instance, if this does lead to some kind of success and there was some understanding that arose. There was that sense of "Oh, I figured it out." That's birth. "I've got it. I'm a good yogi." There's that sense of "Yep, okay, got it figured out."

And then, as I said, I experienced at times a fluctuation between "I'm a good yogi" and "I don't know how to meditate"—within seconds. I would experience feeling a step: "I can feel that step. I'm such a good yogi." And then the mind would wander: "Oh, I'm such a bad yogi." Flip, flop, flip. Identification. It's all just identification. It's all the mind making up the idea of being a good yogi and being a bad yogi.

It's just experience.

So the suffering of the bad yogi is immediately apparent—the kind of self-flagellation, the beating myself up around that was immediately apparent. The suffering of the good yogi was not as immediately apparent until there was the sense of failure. And then there's a falling apart of that identity, the not being able to be in control of human experience.

So let's come back to the links earlier in the chain. We've gone through basically body and mind, physical sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, aging and death. That's the last of the chain, and from there arises suffering.

The first link in the chain is ignorance, and it is conditioned by suffering. This is where the chain becomes a cycle. The arising of suffering tends to lead to ignorance. We don't know how to relate to it. We've been caught in this cycle of ignorance around suffering for our whole lives, for multiple lives perhaps. Certainly all of humankind has been perpetuated by these confusions around suffering.

So suffering often leads to confusion. What did I do wrong? How can I fix this? Why is this happening to me? Why me? Why my family? This is related to suffering—the sense of "why me?" The feeling of the struggle, the stress. It's suffering.

A main definition of ignorance is not understanding suffering, not understanding the Four Noble Truths: not knowing about suffering, not knowing about the arising of suffering, not knowing about the ending of suffering, not knowing about the way leading to the ending of suffering. This is ignorance.

Another way to understand what it means to not understand suffering is that we are caught by misperceptions. We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. We tend to take what is unreliable to be reliable as a lasting source of happiness. We tend to take what is not self to be self. This is also ignorance—when we're caught by these misperceptions, when we are acting as if things are permanent, reliable, and self, we are caught in ignorance.

So the basic condition for suffering to lead to ignorance, the loop of this cycle, is for suffering to not be understood. If suffering is not understood, it perpetuates this cycle. We are lost in our views and ideas and ignorance, believing I can control things, believing things are permanent, reliable, self.

Because the condition for suffering to lead to ignorance is not understanding suffering, understanding suffering is a key to break this cycle. When we bring mindfulness and curiosity to our suffering, we are actively undermining this perpetuating pattern. And yet we don't undermine it enough, so we get caught in the cycle. There's ignorance that follows from suffering—we're kind of living in that. By the time we come to practice, we have lived many, many lifetimes of suffering leading to ignorance. We have cemented this process, habituated this process.

So suffering has led to ignorance. With ignorance as condition, mental formations come to be. Not understanding dukkha, that ignorance, taking things to be permanent, reliable, self—we choose things, we decide things. The whole framework of not understanding suffering leads us to choose and decide to act in certain ways, usually to

choose and decide to act to keep pleasant, get rid of unpleasant, to follow our habitual tendencies around that. This is choosing, this deciding based on our conditioned habits and patterns. This is mental formation.

Mental formations includes a wide range of experience. It includes all of our mind states. It includes our thoughts. It includes emotions. It includes views and beliefs. And I think views and beliefs are some of the most—

sticky and unseen aspect of mental formation.

And then, ignorance leading to mental formation—even the ignorance of "this thing is permanent." That's a kind of view. This idea that there's something permanent that I could get and hold on to, that's a view, a deeply conditioned view. "There must be something reliable out there. If I found it, I could have happiness." Those are views embedded in that ignorance. And these views really shape our choices. They shape how we relate to things.

So this is mental formations. Our mental formations come into being not just here in our—I mean, it sounds like this is just something happening inside a human mind and body, but we are social beings, and many of our views and beliefs... some of them are human, like the misunderstandings around "there must be something permanent, reliable, self"—those kinds of things are human delusions, human confusions. And yet also in our social lives, we absorb views from our families, we absorb views from our cultures, that shape how we relate to things.

This is where so much suffering comes from. The ideas about who we are, who others are—the whole selfing and othering thing. The realm of political division right now, like "us and them." All of that is views. And a lot of our views come in not because somebody sits down and says, "This is what we believe." Some of it does come that way. But a lot of it comes from just how the people we're around behave. Our views are absorbed in that way.

So this is where a lot of our mental formations come from. I didn't choose to have the views that were inculcated in me in grade school and in my family. That's just what my conditioning was. And yet it's crucially important to understand our views and to see how views, when clung to, lead to so much suffering in the world.

I like to encourage people at times—when you're noticing some kind of reactivity in your experience, when you can hang out with it and really feel into that space of reactivity—it can be useful to just acknowledge, "Okay, yep, I'm feeling this. I don't like this.

This situation is not good." And just feeling into that not-goodness. When you can really feel that, drop in the question—not trying to find the answer, but just drop it in: "What is being believed?"

Beliefs are so under the surface. They're often not visible, but they are sometimes amenable to being seen if you invite them. Sometimes they show up. I talked about one of those the other day—a view that was shaping the whole aversive experience in the walking hall. A view of somebody being weird, and realizing, "Wow, that is based on nothing. It's based on bare feet." And seeing when that belief was seen, when that view was seen, it fell apart.

Now that doesn't always happen. Sometimes when we see a view, we recognize, "I am on board for that one. I believe that one." Notice that. Even just seeing that a belief is a belief is different than just taking it to be true. "So that's a belief, and I really believe it." And you might see too that beliefs—it's not like on or off with beliefs. There's a gradation. Sometimes it's a little, sometimes it's medium. Just recognizing that, noticing that, is very powerful.

So mental formations shape consciousness, the next link in the chain. Ignorance shapes mental formations. Mental formations shape consciousness. Our views, our habits, our patterns, these perspectives that we've absorbed—they condition what our consciousness receives.

An example of this, a really simple example: My mind has a very aversive tendency, and early on in my practice, when my teacher taught me this open awareness practice that we have been exploring the last couple of days...

And he did it for me in a guided meditation during an interview. He said, "Just let go of directing the attention and notice where the attention lands." I did that silently for a while, and after two or three minutes he asked, "So what have you noticed?"

I said—and he had used the term "choiceless attention" or "choiceless awareness"—I said, "I don't see how this can be choiceless, because every single experience that my attention landed on was unpleasant."

I understand now that this kind of tendency is shaped by the deep pattern of aversion. I wasn't experiencing aversion in the moment—it wasn't like I was feeling aversion. But the tendency of the mind to be aversive means that the mind orients toward looking for things that are unpleasant so that it can get rid of them, so that it won't have aversion. That's its orientation. So when I stopped making choices about what to attend to, the habit that was conditioned by aversion found all the unpleasant experiences. Or maybe not all of them, but each one it landed on was unpleasant.

This is mental formation—the tendencies of the mind, the habits of the mind—shaping what comes into consciousness, shaping what I became aware of. It was kind of amazing. I know intellectually that the entirety of my experience is not unpleasant. But when I just let the attention land on experience, everything was unpleasant. This is the shaping that mental formations do to consciousness.

Based on emotions, states of mind, agendas, and views, our mind tends to orient toward looking for information that confirms those views, that reaffirms those emotions. The modern psychological name for this is confirmation bias. When we have views, we tend to look for things that confirm our views. This is a very sticky kind of pattern.

To see how this works, to recognize when these views are happening—this is one of the values of recognizing that there's a view present. It orients our minds to look for certain things, to recognize certain things. It creates a filter that screens certain things in and other things out. We will notice certain things and we won't notice other things. Consciousness will not become aware of certain things with some of those perspectives operating.

And the perspective that we're bringing here—curiosity, mindfulness, hearing the teachings of wisdom—these begin to put new views into the mind to help us see things. Like I saw: "Wait, everything was unpleasant. What's going on there? I know everything's not unpleasant. What's going on?"

With consciousness as condition, our mental and physical processes are in turn shaped. That's the next link—nāmarūpa in Pali, meaning bodily and mental processes. Consciousness shapes feeling, perception, mental formations, and body.

If we reflect on this: when the state of our consciousness has been shaped by anger, for instance—or in my case, as I was describing, the state of my consciousness was shaped by a habit of aversion, even though I wasn't experiencing aversion in that moment—what happened was that physical and mental processes tended to notice unpleasant experiences.

But if we look at a more striking example: when there's something like anger in the mind, the mental formation of anger is shaping consciousness. How does that affect the body and mind? It tends to make the body tense, maybe distorts our face. It tends to make feeling tone unpleasant. It tends to have us perceive things through the lens of anger. It tends to shape more anger. The state of our consciousness affects our mental and physical processes.

And now we're back to where we started in the chain. When I began, I said we've got a body and mind, we see things, we hear things. We might think initially that we're seeing and hearing things like cameras and microphones—just taking in everything. But now you can see that this place of the inputs, the contacts, it's not like cameras and microphones. It is completely shaped by the qualities in our minds. We're not starting from a neutral place when there's contact. There's already conditioning playing out.

Our filters, our perspectives tend to reinforce themselves. And so it's no wonder we tend to cycle in this chain. It takes a lot of commitment and dedication to begin to see through it.

It's not easy. And yet we can see through it. The conditions can change. What we are doing here is changing the conditions of our conditioning.

This chain describes conditions that support the arising of suffering. Bringing mindfulness and wisdom to what we are experiencing adds something new to this whole process. The main way the conditions are changed is through mindfulness, wisdom, and love.

The teachings often emphasize mindfulness of feeling, and I'm sure many of you have heard that aspect of the teaching. Mindfulness of feeling is a kind of place to break the chain. Certainly the Buddha emphasized this—that when we really get to see feeling, to know feeling, that can short-circuit the process. If you see feeling with wisdom, it won't lead on to craving. It's just, "Oh, there's feeling." When wisdom is meeting feeling... whereas, as I said earlier, when ignorance is arising with feeling tone, it will lead to craving.

That head of the chain, ignorance, is continuously arising with all of those links. When ignorance arises, it's like the entire twelve links are picked up in a split second. When ignorance arises, feeling leads to craving and craving leads to clinging. Clinging leads to becoming—all of that in a split second. And so seeing actually any one of the links with wisdom can change the whole pattern.

There's a teaching in the Majjhima Nikāya, a teaching on right view—Majjhima number nine. It describes a process or a practice around each of the links. For each of the links, it's a similar pattern. I'll say it for clinging for now, but it's the same for all of the links: One understands clinging. One understands the arising of clinging, seeing how it arises. One understands the ending of clinging. And one understands the way leading to the ending of clinging.

That's the framework of the Four Noble Truths. Actually, it's pointing to the Four Noble Truths as practices or understandings that can arise with experience. With each of those links—it doesn't matter which one it is—becoming, birth, sense of self arising: when one understands the sense of self arising, one understands the sense of self, understands the arising of the sense of self, the ending of the sense of self, and the way leading to the ending of the sense of self, one here and now makes an end to suffering.

So while, yes, there's a strong emphasis on the feeling-craving link, this teaching points to something important: it doesn't matter where you wake up. Maybe you've been lost in a chain of thoughts and you wake up into a sense of self, or you wake up into stress and suffering. The mindfulness right in that moment—"Oh, this is suffering. This is craving."—that begins the process of dismantling the suffering.

The last piece I'll say is that this chain is fairly complex, and there are times when you can kind of see it playing out. Occasionally you can really see feeling, craving, clinging—you can see the little way it's happening sometimes. You can see the cycle unfold at times. But I found in my own practice that if I'm not seeing it from that perspective in that moment, even just the reminder and the deep knowing, the deep understanding, "This is conditioned"—that's really helpful.

Sayādaw U Tejaniya would use a phrase: "This is nature." That one really resonated for me. This is what's arising right now. It's arising because of causes and conditions. This tree is what's growing right now. This blooming bush of anger and self-hatred—that's what's arising right now. That is nature. It's arising in dependence on causes and conditions.

Just understanding that can create so much space to be able to then have some curiosity about, "Well, what is that experience of that dukkha?" You begin to see into where you are in the moment. And that's all that's needed. We don't have to back up and say, "Where was the feeling? Where was the feeling that I was craving about?"

It doesn't matter. Right now, you can see this.

Let's just sit for a moment. Let the words go. You don't have to remember any of it.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 186

The Four Noble Truths as Direct Experience and Insight

Andrea Fella · 1h04

In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella guides practitioners beyond a conceptual understanding of the Four Noble Truths toward direct experiential insight. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and the Buddha's description of his own awakening, she emphasizes that these truths—dukkha, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its end—are meant to be seen clearly in each moment of experience.

Fella illuminates the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness (dhammānupassanā), explaining how we observe phenomena through the lens of the Dhamma itself. She outlines the specific actions associated with each truth: suffering is to be understood, craving is to be abandoned (through wisdom's natural releasing), cessation is to be realized, and the path is to be cultivated. Through vivid personal stories—including her transformative experiences with loneliness, wanting, and anger—she demonstrates how these insights arise organically through sustained mindful investigation.

The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing these truths in daily meditation: noticing when dukkha is present or absent, observing how craving constructs suffering, witnessing moments of release, and recognizing wholesome qualities as expressions of the Eightfold Path. Fella suggests that deep insight into these truths naturally unfolds in sequence, culminating in the profound recognition that "this works"—the direct understanding that the path itself leads to liberation.

One of the most central teachings of the Buddha is the teaching on the Four Noble Truths. This can be understood as where we need to begin to start the path of practice. The Eightfold Path leads with Right View, and one of the key definitions of Right View is an understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

At the beginning, this is of course a more intellectual understanding. But that perspective—an intellectual understanding of suffering, what suffering is—is where we must start. We need to begin with some kind of understanding of what the Buddha means by suffering: this aspect of our experience that is created by basically wanting things to be other than they are.

The Four Noble Truths also offer a causal relationship. The Second Noble Truth is the truth of how dukkha arises—dukkha arises when craving arises. So we begin to get curious about how craving relates to this experience of struggle, of stress, of not liking the way things are. By definition, craving is not liking the way things are.

The Buddha discovered that what we call suffering, and his whole path, his whole journey, was about one question: Is it possible to have freedom from suffering? He understood through his own practice, his own investigation of his experience, that the very things we do thinking they will make us happy are actually the very things that create suffering. It's not the not having that makes us suffer—it's the wanting to have that makes us suffer.

At the beginning, we need to understand some of these teachings so that we can begin to explore in our own experience and see for ourselves that yes, actually, when wanting is arising, when craving is arising, there's already suffering happening. We start to see this, we start to recognize these experiences in our direct experience. All of the Buddha's teachings really point to looking at our experience, our direct experience.

The Four Noble Truths—the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause or origin of suffering, the truth of the ending of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the ending of suffering—at first we need to understand what he meant by all of this. And then the encouragement, over and over again, is to look at your experience. See how the truth of suffering is experienced.

The Four Noble Truths convey what the Buddha understood: that craving, wanting things to be a certain way, is actually what we call suffering. When we are experiencing suffering, there is something we want to be otherwise. This is not actually obvious. We think we need to have things be otherwise in order to be happy, and we don't realize that it's the wanting itself that is creating the suffering.

The Third Noble Truth points out that it is possible to have this kind of suffering come to an end. When the wanting comes to an end—the statement of the Third Noble Truth says it's the ending of this craving that is the ending of suffering.

The Fourth Noble Truth teaches that there is a way, a path. The Buddha's own journey and his brilliance allowed him to describe the path of practice: the Eightfold Path of wise view, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration. This is what will support us to see for ourselves the truth of suffering, the truth of how craving is intimately connected with suffering, and the truth that it's possible to be free of that craving and be free of suffering.

At first, teachings about the Four Noble Truths help us enter into the understanding the Buddha offered. But direct understanding of the Four Noble Truths is the way the Buddha described his own awakening. He said, "I directly knew as it actually is: this is dukkha, this is the arising of dukkha, this is the ending of dukkha, and this is the way leading to the ending of dukkha. Knowing and seeing thus, my mind was liberated."

He pointed to a direct experience of understanding around these Four Noble Truths. And then he unpacked it for us. He brought in the Eightfold Path—the tools that can support us to begin to see this for ourselves. He brought in teachings around each of the Four Noble Truths, an action associated with each: that we should understand suffering. By understanding, he meant not just the intellectual side, but understanding through experience. What is this experience of suffering? How does it come to be?

Seeing how it comes to be, we start to see the Second Noble Truth—how suffering arises. That seeing begins to support us through data gathering, just gathering data on understanding suffering. We begin to see how craving leads to suffering, how craving actually is suffering. And then the wisdom begins to let it go.

And this is the action associated with the second noble truth—that one lets go of the craving.

Now, that letting go is often, as you all are well aware, not something you can just say: "Be gone, craving." I mean, if we could do that, we would. I remember sitting in this hall saying, "I am suffering so much. If I knew how to let it go, I would." And sometimes when we're in that kind of space, what's being asked of us is to understand the suffering.

So that instruction, that encouragement from the Buddha—understand the experience—that recognition... I didn't in that moment actually recognize this. But at later times I did. It's like, "All right, this is suffering." Understanding that this experience happening right now is suffering, and this is what the Buddha suggested I understand—that's an insight.

That shift of relationship to suffering... the Buddha spoke of these actions in association with each of the noble truths in three parts. The first is simply knowing the truth, recognizing: this is suffering. And then recognizing that suffering should be understood—that itself is an understanding. The difference between believing I need to do something to get rid of it, to fix it, to change it... that's not the perspective of "suffering should be understood." That's a perspective of craving around suffering. And then the third understanding or insight that comes along with that action of understanding suffering is: suffering has been understood. We begin to recognize how craving leads to suffering.

So with each of these truths there is an action, a practice essentially. With suffering, it's understand it. With craving, it's let it go—but mostly it's allow the wisdom to let it go. Create the conditions of understanding the suffering, and wisdom begins to weaken and ultimately will release it. There are times when we can consciously set something aside, turn away, say "not now," put our attention on something else. That's a kind of form of letting go, but it's not the letting go that frees the mind.

The third noble truth is meant to be realized—this truth of release, the truth of the release from dukkha. That is meant to be realized. And the fourth noble truth, the path, is meant to be cultivated.

So there are these practices that come along with each of the four noble truths. And in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, there's also an instruction around the four noble truths that much more sounds like the understanding the Buddha had on the night of his awakening. The Buddha said, on that night, "I directly knew, as it actually is: this is dukkha, this is the arising of dukkha, this is the ending of dukkha, this is the way leading to the ending of dukkha."

The instruction or mindfulness practice in the fourth foundation of mindfulness has very similar language. It's pointing to seeing the Four Noble Truths through experience—the direct experience of recognizing this is suffering, this is how suffering arises, this is how suffering ends, this is the way, the path leading to the ending of suffering. A direct experience of that.

So this is how I want to explore the Four Noble Truths: through this teaching in the fourth foundation of mindfulness. Let me offer a little overview.

We've talked about each of the foundations—not so directly as much, but we've explored the experience of each of the first three foundations: body, feeling tone, and mind states, the quality of the mind. We've talked a lot about noticing how the mind is in relationship to experience. This is a way of understanding the third foundation of mindfulness.

The fourth foundation of mindfulness is basically asking us to look at our experience, and the word for this foundation is dhammānupassanā. Dhamma in this context means something like phenomena. The word has multiple translations or senses depending on the context in which it's used. Dhamma with a small "d" means basically phenomena. I talk about dhammas arising—everything that arises is a dhamma, an experience.

So the fourth foundation encourages us to notice our experience from perspectives of the Buddha's teachings. We could say it's looking at the dhamma, the small "d" dhamma, through the lens of the Dhamma, the capital "D" Dhamma. There are five explorations in this where we notice... In this fourth foundation we are essentially opening to all phenomena. It is the movement towards receptive awareness, choiceless awareness. We're opening to every experience.

And then there's an encouragement at times perhaps to notice how experience can be understood from the perspective of various Buddhist teachings.

With each of the practices—there's a practice about the hindrances, the aggregates, the six sense bases, the seven factors of awakening, and the Four Noble Truths—we explore experience. We simply recognize experience, and then bring a little curiosity about how it might be connected to this particular lens of the Dharma. With each practice, we notice the experience in terms of the teaching.

Each practice begins with the phrase: "And how does one abide observing Dhammas as Dhammas? Here one abides contemplating Dhammas as Dhammas in terms of the five hindrances." Or: "One abides contemplating Dhammas as Dhammas in terms of the seven factors of awakening." Or: "One abides contemplating Dhammas as Dhammas in terms of the Four Noble Truths."

So we receive experience as experience in a simple way, and then notice in terms of the particular frame.

At times, we might notice—for instance, around the hindrances—the presence or absence of sense desire. In a moment of experience, sense desire will either be present or absent. So we open to what's happening and bring a curiosity: Is sense desire present or absent? Is ill will present or absent? Is restlessness present or absent? There are other instructions about the hindrances that encourage us to notice and get familiar with how they arise. But it's basically really simple.

The instruction for the Four Noble Truths asks: How does one understand Dhammas as Dhammas, or phenomena as phenomena, in terms of the Four Noble Truths? And the instruction says: One understands as it actually is, "This is dukkha." One understands as it actually is, "This is the arising of dukkha." One understands as it actually is, "This is the ending of dukkha." One understands as it actually is, "This is the way leading to the ending of dukkha."

In a moment of experience, one of these four things is possible to see. Either suffering will be present or it will be absent—the first and third noble truths. We may actually see how suffering is put together—the second noble truth. We may see that directly in experience, in a moment, how suffering is coming together. Or in a moment of experience, we may see how the path is being cultivated.

If you're curious about how the path is being cultivated: well, first of all, if mindfulness is happening, that is cultivating the path. If we're applying effort, that is cultivating the path. If there's stability of mind, that is cultivating the path. These qualities, these wholesome qualities that we've been cultivating, these are expressions of "This is the path."

The language in the Fourth Foundation really emphasizes present moment experience, not simply a conceptual understanding of the Four Noble Truths—which is necessary to recognize that this is dukkha in our present moment experience—but it is emphasizing the recognition: In this moment, this is the experience of dukkha.

And this is an insight. We can understand the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha said that on his Night of Awakening, these are the insights that woke him up: "This is suffering. This is the arising of suffering. This is the ending of suffering. This is the way leading to the ending of suffering." These are insights. They're understandings. They're not just concepts to think about. They can be seen in the moment clearly, and free the mind.

Over and over again in the suttas, this kind of seeing is emphasized. This kind of seeing: "This is something. This is X." In the talk on dependent origination last week, I mentioned that with each of the links of dependent origination, there is a teaching that points to understanding any of the links from this perspective. One understands, "This is clinging." One understands, "This is how clinging arises." One understands, "This is how clinging ends." And one understands, "This is the way leading to the ending of clinging." The same thing repeated for feeling.

Same thing repeated for mental formation. Same thing repeated for becoming. This pattern of the Four Noble Truths is understood to be an insight that can illuminate wherever we are in experience. It can be an insight for wherever we are in experience—to see this is what's arising, this is the experience that's arising, this is how craving is happening in this moment, this is the ending of craving, the non-arising of craving in this moment.

To make sense of these insights, for me it's helpful to reflect on the fact that there are a couple of different ways that dukkha is understood in the suttas. The first way is that dukkha is understood as the suffering that arises when greed, aversion, and delusion

are present. Craving is present, suffering is arising when greed, aversion, and delusion are arising. And the ending of suffering is talked about as the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion—visible in this life, this possibility of greed, aversion, and delusion ending in this life, the ending of suffering in this life.

So in this case, this is the dukkha of craving, clinging, becoming—the constriction around greed, the constriction around aversion, the constriction around delusion. The experience is around understanding the presence and absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. This is the understanding of the First Noble Truth: seeing the presence of greed, aversion, and delusion. When we see that greed, aversion, and delusion are present, we feel into the truth of this is suffering. When we have moments—perhaps brief moments—of greed, aversion, and delusion falling away, we experience the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. The Third Noble Truth.

So seeing aversion, for instance, and knowing it as dukkha—that is an insight. And I think we begin to understand the insight nature of it by seeing how experience shifts when we do understand aversion as "this is dukkha."

I felt it. I felt it at one point in Burma. I was practicing with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and the first couple of weeks were really hard. The shift of practice style was challenging because I was used to really focusing, and that kind of approach let me just go right into not having a lot of dukkha—just focusing on the breath. But the style I was learning there was open from the beginning, and there was a lot of dukkha, a lot of reactivity.

After about ten days, I thought, "You know, if I was doing another practice, I'd be way more settled by now. There is so much dukkha, there's so much suffering right now." And I actually heard myself say that: "There's so much suffering." And I was like, "Right, suffering. This is what the Buddha said we're supposed to understand."

There was a shift in that moment. The shift of seeing, "Oh, this is dukkha" as an understanding, not as a "poor me, this is dukkha." This is dukkha. This should be understood. It was kind of that flavor of the insight around the action—right, this is dukkha, this should be understood. And that shifted my relationship so that there was more interest in observing the experience of dukkha. That's an insight. To recognize it as dukkha is an insight.

Sometimes we might see the conditions putting suffering together. We start to see how it's arising. We see how the mind is latching on to something.

Early in my practice I was exploring a pattern of loneliness. I felt it pretty much every night as I went to bed. And I was not terribly confused about why I was experiencing loneliness—my partner of ten years had just broken up with me. So I wasn't partic-

ularly confused about it, but I was interested in seeing and understanding. It was kind of interesting to me that it happened regularly, so I thought, "Okay, I'm just going to get to know this pattern." I watched it regularly every night.

And one night I noticed that while I was setting my alarm clock to go to bed, the loneliness started. It's like, what? That did not make any sense to me. Going to bed by myself—that's the kind of idea I thought the loneliness was about. But setting the alarm clock? I noticed the loneliness just arose.

It was very clear seeing the arising. So I just kept watching, and then over the next few nights I began to see that when I was setting the alarm clock, there was a memory that arose of being with my ex-partner. We were in a place where we were having a lovely time in Disneyland, and we were looking up at a marquee that had a clock on it. It was a memory that had a clock in it, and I could see the connection between the digital clock I was looking at and the digital clock in the memory.

I could also see that the loneliness was a response to the memory. So that was the trigger, the cause in that moment. The mind had jumped onto that thought, and it was like, "Poor me, I'll never be happy again. I'll never be able to go to Disneyland and be happy ever again." That kind of mindset. This was the craving, the clinging. And it was a memory. So that was seeing how the loneliness had been put together—seeing how the mind latched onto the memory and created a story around it and suffered around that story.

The next night was actually even more interesting in a way. I mean, that was fascinating to me, that I could see all of that. But the next night was even more interesting because as I set the alarm clock, of course the memory was there. Of course I thought about that experience. And the loneliness did not happen. It was as if having seen how it was put together, it no longer had the power to put itself together.

This is the power of seeing, of the data collection essentially. The seeing how the craving had arisen created the conditions for the letting go. It wasn't exactly that I experienced the release in that moment, but I noticed the absence. The suffering did not arise in that experience.

Sometimes we see the suffering when it ends. In that story I didn't see the suffering when it ended—I mean, I saw it didn't arise the second night. That first night when I saw it, I saw the loneliness and I saw how the loneliness had been put together. I don't particularly remember seeing how the loneliness ended there. And the next night I didn't see the loneliness end. The loneliness never arose, which is actually even better.

But sometimes we actually get to see the ending. We get to see how the suffering falls apart.

So here's a story of doing walking meditation—there are lots of stories in this talk. I was doing walking meditation and there was a lot of craving around looking at people. I think I mentioned this earlier—wanting to look at their faces. It would come up a lot during walking meditation. I was doing walking meditation just out in the front here, and when anybody would walk by, I would see this intensity of wanting.

At first I was doing, "I'm not going to look." It was kind of a guarding the sense doors in a way, but there was a little bit of aversion in that guarding. "I'm not going to look. I'm not going to look." I did get to see to some extent that there was wanting there, but it was being repressed by this "I'm not going to look."

At some point—because I was here on a three-month course and had plenty of opportunity to see this happen—I got curious and thought, "Well, okay, this is happening. This is happening every day. I might as well look at the wanting as opposed to repressing the wanting," which is what I was doing with the "I'm not going to look."

So I started getting curious about the wanting. And what I noticed is that wanting sprang into being as soon as somebody entered into my field of vision. That was the arising of the wanting—as soon as somebody sprang into my field of vision. I got curious about this. "Wow, okay, there it is."

I felt the wanting, and it felt like such a strong urge to look. So I was feeling that urge and not looking. I was using mindfulness to just be curious about the wanting, which is a form of guarding the sense doors, by the way. Mindfulness can be a guard of the sense doors.

So I saw that there was seeing, I saw that there was wanting, and through the curiosity of watching the wanting, I didn't look at the person. I just watched the wanting. And as the person got further up in front of me, and then walked right in front of me—it would have been so easy to flick my eyes up—the wanting got so intense. It grew as the person moved more into the field of how easy it would be to look at them. The wanting got stronger. So I noticed the strengthening of the wanting.

Then, standing and doing the walking meditation out here—I was standing at this point—just watching the wanting. And the person went up the stairs and into the door, into the building. The wanting vanished in that moment. It felt like being released from a vice grip, seeing that wanting end. It was a very cool experience. I thought, "Wow, that is so cool."

So I kind of got into watching people and watching the wanting, and then when they would disappear, watching it go away. I really got into that. That was fun. I spent—I don't know how long—a couple of weeks really looking forward to having the wanting arise so I could watch it go away.

And at some point, in the middle of watching this whole thing unfold, I realized that I was clinging to the wanting in order to see it go away. In that moment, it released—even though the person was standing right in front of me. That was a deeper kind of understanding around the letting go. The stimulus, the thing that I had wanted, was right in front of me, and I no longer wanted it. That wanting was just gone.

So these examples are pointing to ways that we can see these truths, ways that we can see these Four Noble Truths in experience. And it comes about through curiosity about suffering, curiosity about how suffering arises, and getting to witness it falling apart. Sometimes actually seeing it fall apart—and in the seeing of the wanting fall apart, there was another kind of learning there about just how much the wanting was suffering. Because of the feeling of the wanting going away, there was so much... it's like the mind had been so tight.

We don't usually recognize just how tight the mind is around craving. Until we see it go away and we feel the freedom of that, the release and the ease of that, we don't really understand. And then suffering starts to be felt more clearly as we experience the kind of purification I was pointing to the other day. We start to experience the freedom, and when it comes back, when the suffering comes back, we feel it much more clearly. It's not a mistake.

Sometimes there's a question about the sequence of these four truths: why is the third noble truth, the ending of suffering, talked about before the fourth noble truth, how we get there? There's a couple of different ways of understanding this, why this might be.

There's a kind of familiar framing of the Four Noble Truths as the Buddha being a physician, and this is how you go about looking at an illness. The first thing is there's the illness: suffering. There's the reason for the illness: craving. There's the prognosis: is it possible to cure it? Yes, possible to cure it. And how? The prescription: the Eightfold Path.

So that order is kind of how you would go about seeing a doctor. You'd go to the doctor and you'd go through the experience of your illness in that order. That's one way to understand why the fourth noble truth is at the end—the path is at the end, the way leading to the ending of suffering is at the end of the four noble truths.

Another way to understand it is through the cause and effect relationship between the first two noble truths and the second two noble truths. The first noble truth is a statement of what happens, and the second noble truth is a deepening into how it happens. Likewise with the third and the fourth noble truths. The third noble truth is a statement of what's possible, and the fourth noble truth is how it happens. So there's a causal connection, a kind of conditionality, between the first and second noble truths—craving is what leads to suffering. And in the third and fourth there's a parallel framing. The fourth noble truth describes the conditions that lead to the ending of suffering. That's another way to understand why the fourth noble truth is the last one.

Stephen Batchelor had a perspective on this that I found really interesting for a while. He was pointing to the first three noble truths, noting that as mindfulness strengthens, we tend to see those first three in order. The first thing we usually see is the suffering. Before we see the ending of suffering, we see the suffering. Then as we deepen into recognizing the suffering, we start to see how it's put together. As mindfulness strengthens, we start to see that. And then we begin to see how it falls apart. So those first three noble truths do happen in a kind of order.

Then he described the cultivation of the path by unpacking the analogy of the path itself. A path is—there are all these paths in the woods here, and you know they didn't just appear yesterday. They stay paths because people walk on them. Likewise with the Eightfold Path, Stephen Batchelor said those first three noble truths are how we walk on the path. We are cultivating the path by walking on it, keeping the path clear for those coming behind us. That's essentially how paths work. We are all participating in keeping these paths in the woods clear, and we are all participating in keeping the path of practice alive by what we're doing here. This is a way to think about cultivating the path.

There's another way that in my own experience, reflecting back on some of my insights, some understandings that have arisen, there's a way that sometimes we can see these Four Noble Truths actually arising in that order in experience. To me, those three ways of thinking about the path as being the last of the Four Noble Truths were more conceptual. They're all more conceptual ways to explain why the path might be at the end. But I had a particular experience that really pointed this out to me in retrospect. I did not see this at the time, but this was one of those understandings or insights that was so powerful that it keeps arising in my experience. New understandings continue to happen around it. Some of our insights can be that way.

When these Four Noble Truths actually happen as insights, as deep insights, I think they actually happen in this order. The way the Buddha framed it in his understanding: "I understood as it actually is—this is suffering, this is the arising of suffering, this is the ending of suffering, and this is the way leading to the ending of suffering." The understanding may have arisen in that order for him. I had an experience where they arose in this order for me.

I'm going to go through this. It's quite a detailed story, but I'm going to unpack how this happened. This was early in my practice, in the first few months. I was working with anger, working with a lot of anger. I spent a couple of months just getting familiar with anger and beginning to understand that anger is dukkha. The very first time I noticed it—I had read this book that said, I was very interested in understanding my anger because I was being whipped around by it. There were times when I was completely non-functional around the anger. I would find myself frozen at the computer, just non-functional.

The invitation was simply to get to know your anger, get to know it. And the very first time I actually recognized "I'm angry, this is the experience of anger," it was shocking to me how much it hurt. Because frozen in that space of mind, in the story of the anger—this is the same partner who broke up with me, about the same person—the story of the anger was "that person is going to be so miserable when I'm angry at them."

that I was miserable. And so that was a shock, but it also was an insight. This hurts. This is suffering. And I spent a couple of months kind of getting familiar with anger, getting really familiar with the fact that it was suffering. And just that—just that part of the practice—was really useful.

I learned a lot of different things. I learned that piece around, "I thought this was going to hurt that person, but it's hurting me first." I also saw that this practice was making it easier to see the anger, that I wasn't in such a rage. Even that was huge for me—just to be able to see that the anger was happening and not be caught in that mind that was just in the rage. I would find myself frozen at the computer, and that stopped happening.

So I spent a couple of months getting familiar with anger. Then one day I was in my kitchen, and I was cutting an apple. As I was cutting the apple, there was a lot of mindfulness present—I wasn't trying to be mindful, you know, but there was a lot of just mindfulness there. And I think my attunement to mindfulness connecting with the anger had created the conditions for the mindfulness to arise in this moment.

So I was cutting the apple, and what I'm going to describe happened in a split second. It's going to take me a couple of minutes to describe, but it happened really fast.

I was cutting the apple, and there was a memory of being with my ex-partner at a fruit stand. I could see the connection, kind of like I described with the alarm clock—I could see the connection between what I was doing and the memory. In this case, the mindfulness was right there as the memory arose. And I saw this kind of impulse, this gathering. We talked about intention. This was an intention. I felt the gathering of impulse to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry. I was not angry in that moment. I could see that I was not angry in that moment, but I felt the urge, the pull to get angry.

In that moment, that's seeing the second noble truth, essentially—the craving. There was the craving. I wasn't actually angry in that moment, but there was the urge, the movement towards the anger. So I saw that impulse. Seeing that impulse, the thought that came up in the mind was, "You don't have to get on that train." And it didn't happen. The impulse went away. And the anger never arose.

So that was the third noble truth—seeing how that impulse, even the impulse, had a little bit of a sense of suffering to it. It was not the full-blown anger. It was not anger at all. But that craving fell away. That's seeing the third noble truth. I saw that. That happened.

And in the next moment, I was standing there and kind of waiting to get angry, because I had not had this person arise in my mind without anger arising in a very long time. So I was standing there waiting to get angry for a moment, and it didn't happen. And in that moment there was the recognition—actually, I sank to my knees. It's like, "This works." This that I've been doing, this path—this is a path, this is a way. I saw in a moment that it was possible to not get angry. This is a path.

That kind of recognition, sinking to my knees—I found a path. I knew that anger was going to arise again. I was not deluded about that. But I saw that what I had been doing was a way that anger could be released, could be overcome, could ultimately be let go. So that recognition—"Oh, this works"—that's how it expressed itself in my mind.

This works. And it was like, this is amazing, this works.

I understood how it worked even. I understood something about how it worked because I could see that it had been those couple of months of getting familiar with anger and feeling the suffering of it that was what had the wisdom there that said, "You don't have to go there." That way lies suffering. You get on that train, suffering will follow.

The mind understood how the practice worked in that moment. So it not only understood that it was a path, it understood something about the nature of how the path works.

In that moment, I knew I'm going to be doing this for the rest of my life. This is a path. That is the insight of the Fourth Noble Truth—that recognition. And it can come in a lot of different ways. These kinds of insights can come in a lot of different ways.

Sometimes, just to finish about the four insights, I don't think you can have an insight into "this is the path" without going through those first three. How could you? That insight followed the freedom, the freedom of the letting go of suffering. The realization "this is the path" followed. So I think that's the way that they arise—in a moment of deep understanding, a moment of deep seeing, clear seeing.

Sometimes I think this particular seeing, especially around the Second Noble Truth, the seeing of how the suffering was put together, the recognition of the thought, the conditionality of the thought, the craving to jump on that thought, to think more thoughts—that was seeing quite a bit of detail in a very short time. So that understanding around the Second Noble Truth had quite a bit of detail. The understandings that I had developed over the earlier months around dukkha, like the recognition of "oh, this hurts"—that was a pretty simple insight.

So sometimes the insights, and more and more in my own practice now, it feels like the insights are getting simpler and simpler. There's a release from dukkha and there's not even a knowing what was released, but there's the understanding it is released. Just a recognition that something has let go. That's enough. That's enough.

These insights sometimes can have a lot of detail and sometimes can be really simple. The detail is revealed. That's not something that we do. I could not have done the seeing of that. It was the momentum of the mindfulness that saw that.

This instruction can be instruction around noticing the Four Noble Truths in experience. Just a simple way to understand our experience. Dukkha. This is dukkha. Sometimes even just bringing that in as a reflection, a wisdom reflection, can help our minds. This is dukkha.

Sometimes if we're finding ourselves walking back and forth and wondering what's being cultivated right now, and there's not particularly anything flashy happening—maybe it's patience, and maybe that's cultivating the path. So when it doesn't feel like there's much happening but there's not clear dukkha either, maybe there's wholesome qualities. Maybe this is the path. And it can be just a reflection to support the mind to stay with experience.

And then sometimes when mindfulness is very stable, it opens into very clear seeing. And this is one way that this can happen.

Thank you for your practice. It's an amazing thing, an amazing journey that you're on. And thank you for being on it, for being on this path.

CHAPTER 187

Disenchantment and Dispassion

Andrea Fella · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella guides practitioners through the transformative territory of disenchantment (nibbidā) and dispassion (virāga)—two crucial qualities that naturally arise as mindfulness deepens and we begin to see the impermanent, unreliable, and not-self nature of all experience. She begins by grounding the teaching in the Buddha's description of Nibbāna as freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion, emphasizing that this liberation is "immediate, visible in this life."*
>
> *Drawing from the khandha teachings and the Buddha's instruction to cultivate the perception of impermanence, Andrea explains how clear seeing leads to a natural process of letting go. She offers an honest exploration of the emotional terrain practitioners encounter—fear, overwhelm, boredom, homesickness, and even revulsion—as the mind resists these truths. Rather than viewing these reactions as obstacles, she reframes them as revealing where clinging still exists, encouraging practitioners to meet these relationships with mindfulness.*
>
> *The talk illuminates virāga through the analogy of cloth fading in sunlight—a gradual, natural process. Andrea distinguishes between the release of suffering and the deeper aspect of dispassion where craving simply doesn't arise. She concludes by emphasizing that the path to the unconditioned is through direct understanding of the conditioned, not through escapism, offering encouragement for this challenging yet transformative journey.*

The topic tonight is an exploration of some of what happens to us on the journey, especially as we start to touch into and see these truths—the nature of experience as impermanent, unreliable, not self.

We might think that journey, as we begin to see these truths, would be smooth sailing. But actually, very deeply, our human system resists these truths, and so it's a bit of a bumpy ride at times.

I want to start with the possibility where the Buddha said this practice leads: freedom. We've said a number of times what the definition of freedom is. In some ways, when we say the word freedom, we think it's freedom to do whatever we want. But in this context, freedom means freedom *from*. Freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, freedom from delusion. And this is the definition for what the Buddha called Nibbana.

Nibbana, the ending of suffering, is primarily described by what it is not. It's non-clinging, the ending of craving, the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. So it's not about accumulating or getting or having anything. It is this deep release. And in fact, the word Nibbana can be translated as release. It literally means something like "cooling."

The cooling process is understood to be a natural process. Greed, aversion, and delusion are often talked about as being fires—the fire of greed, the fire of hatred, the fire of delusion. When we have a fire, it's adding something; it's adding heat to the system. But when we stop doing that, when we stop adding that heat, the natural process is for that thing that was being heated to cool down.

So that's the imagery. Nibbana is really a kind of metaphor, an image, an analogy for what happens as we let go, as greed, aversion, and delusion are released, are given up. There's a cooling, a release from suffering.

I have some readings on Nibbana. These are from several different sources, gathered together by an author who put together a whole collection of readings on the Third Noble Truth. I liked the way they flowed together:

The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called Nibbana.

Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed, with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin nor at the ruin of others nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is Nibbana, immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.

And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing remains to be done. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so, neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, nor tastes, nor contacts of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is the mind, gained is deliverance.

This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbana.

There are a couple of pieces in these readings that are particularly inspiring to me. Maybe you don't think about enlightenment as being your goal. Maybe there's something about what we think of enlightenment—some altered state, or blissful floating, I

don't know. We have ideas. But the Buddha basically says: the ending of greed, the ending of aversion, the ending of delusion. When lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one experiences no mental pain and grief. That sounds pretty good.

The other piece that really points to here is this: it is immediate, visible in this life. Here and now, it is possible. That description of Nibbana, of freedom—the falling away of greed, aversion, and delusion. Maybe we get little tastes of something approximating that, and we have a sense of what it might be like in this life. To me, this sounds achievable in this life. The ending of greed, the ending of aversion, the ending of delusion. And so this is what he says: it's possible in this very life.

The path that we're practicing here, what we're doing, what we're exploring—the perspective of mindfulness that's curious about experience as experience—begins to stabilize the mindfulness so that we can see what's happening. At first, we experience quite a few hindrances; that's what's been happening in our minds.

We get to see what's been happening, and so we see that. We see a lot of the hindrances. But over time—and many of you are experiencing at least even short stretches of the falling away of the hindrances—we get a little taste of that freedom, a little taste of that.

And as there are times of the falling away of the hindrances, we start to recognize some of the qualities of experience that all experience has in common. These qualities, these characteristics of experience that Nakaway spoke to: the impermanent nature of experience, the unreliable nature of experience, the not-self nature of experience.

The texts also offer some descriptions of what happens as we start to see impermanence. When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates sensual lust, it eliminates ignorance, it uproots the conceit "I am." And that conceit "I am"—it's kind of the subtlest form of identification. The more obvious forms, the identity view, we've talked about a lot, seeing into how we identify. But even seeing through that, there can be just this subtle sense of "I am." And that's conceit. It's said to be one of the very last clingings that falls away.

And so the Buddha points to cultivating the perception of impermanence. He told his son to do this. He said, "Cultivate the perception of impermanence and it will uproot the conceit 'I am.'"

So the understanding of impermanence, seeing impermanence—and I actually said this to somebody today in the practice meeting—we can incline, when we notice that the mind is a little more stable, we can kind of incline towards: How is impermanence showing up? But seeing impermanence deeply is an insight. It's not something we do.

It's something that's revealed. And yet there can be that kind of turning towards when we see that the stability of mindfulness is present. We could just kind of check: Is change being noticed right now? And how is change being noticed? But it's not so much a practice of something we do.

And again, the description here is that the clear seeing of impermanence leads to a process of letting go. And here's that description. You may recognize this list—Mario Line spoke about it the other night, the list of the five aggregates:

Form is impermanent. Feeling is impermanent. Perception is impermanent. Volitional formations are impermanent. Consciousness is impermanent. Seeing thus, one experiences disenchantment towards form, disenchantment towards feeling, disenchantment towards perception, disenchantment towards volitional formations, disenchantment towards consciousness. Experiencing disenchantment, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, the mind is liberated.

And so it describes a kind of natural process with seeing impermanence. There's this description of the mind becoming disenchanted with experience, basically. Disenchanted with the experience of the body and mind processes. And so these two words, disenchantment and dispassion, are descriptions of what happens for us as we start to see impermanence.

These two words I'd really like to explore. These two words are spoken here as being the natural result, in a way, of clear seeing. Seeing thus—seeing form is impermanent, feeling is impermanent, perception, volitional formations, consciousness—seeing that it's impermanent, one experiences disenchantment. One experiences disenchantment seeing impermanence. So it's not like it's saying you have to make effort to do this. It's the seeing of impermanence that begins to disenchant the mind, basically. Disenchant the mind with the idea that something will be worth clinging to.

So these two words, disenchantment and dispassion. A deep opening to the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. We start to really thoroughly see—as we see the impermanent nature of experience, impermanence really kind of pokes holes in this idea that something would be worth clinging to.

Because whatever is happening, the steady mindfulness shows it to be changing—and actually changing quite rapidly. It doesn't last for more than a split second.

And so this disenchantment is becoming... we really begin to see that our usual ways of relating to the world—trying to hold on to pleasant things, trying to navigate around and get rid of unpleasant things—this is just not the strategy. We actually see, when we see impermanence clearly, that there isn't anything to hold on to. What we think we're holding on to is also something the mind has made up.

This was kind of shocking for me when I first really recognized this. I realized that I could clearly see that the suffering was my mind doing something—holding on or pushing away. I saw that the suffering was created by the mind. And then I began to recognize that what I was clinging to was also created by the mind.

There is nothing that can be held onto. No wonder we suffer. We're trying to hold onto something that is not possible to hold onto. When we're holding onto something, we're essentially holding onto a perception—something that the mind has created. Everything that we experience is something our mind has created. And so we have the perception about what we're experiencing, and we cling to perceptions.

We can fool ourselves for a little while because perceptions can stabilize in the mind. Perceptions can stabilize for some stretch of time. This is actually the way concentration works—one-pointed concentration. In one-pointed concentration, we stabilize on a perception of something. It's called the nimitta. That is what the nimitta is: this perception the mind has made of the object that the mind clings to, absorbs into, shifts into. And it can only last for a certain amount of time. Even that level of stabilizing a perception will only last for a certain length of time. Most of our perceptions last way shorter than that.

Suffering is created by the mind. What we're clinging to is created by the mind. And the belief that we need to cling to it is a view created by the mind. It's all the mind having enchanted itself to believe that holding on to a perception will make me happy.

So we start to see that our habits of clinging are based completely on mistaken understanding, based on illusion, misperception. And so we start with seeing the impermanent nature of experience, and seeing that perceptions change very quickly also. What we're clinging to is changing quickly. We get disillusioned. It's a good kind of disillusionment. This is the disenchantment.

The reason we cling is because we have views and ideas—beliefs, essentially—that clinging will make me happy. But that's just enchantment that we've picked up through our own experience, through how we've been taught. And these beliefs around clinging to things making us happy—it's not just a few of us that do this. It is families, parents, it's what we learn. It's like the best that we think it can get is to hold onto something

and be happy. We haven't had the understanding. Until we meet the Dharma, we probably haven't heard anything like: clinging, trying to hold on to things, will make you suffer, will create suffering.

So as we see the changing nature of experience, we see we've been caught in a spell of misperception, of ignorance, delusion. Seeing that that ignorance is happening, when we start to recognize that we've been caught in that kind of spell—seeing the spell, seeing the ignorance—is the first step to disenchantment. Even recognizing the belief, the view, "having what I want will make me happy"—that's the delusion that's embedded in greed. "Having what I want will make me happy." Even recognizing that as a view is a beginning. We start to see that it's an idea, it's not the truth.

When views are not seen, we just take them to be true. And so we can begin to see through these delusions—beginning to see through the taking of things to be permanent that are impermanent, taking things to be reliable that are unreliable, taking things to be self that are not self.

These are fundamental misperceptions, views that we hold: that there are reliable things out there, that there are things that could be permanent out there that would make me happy if I just found them. So even though we may still be woven in the spell a little bit, we start to see through these views, these ideas. Maybe it starts at a reflective level. It starts by reminding ourselves, "Yeah, things change."

Bhikkhu Bodhi, the scholar monk who translated many of the suttas that we share here, wrote about the experience of disenchantment. The Pali term for disenchantment is *nibbida*. He uses that term here: "Nibbida signifies, in short, the serene, dignified withdrawal from phenomena which supervenes when the illusion of their permanence, pleasure, and selfhood has been shattered by the light of correct knowledge and vision of things as they are."

In my experience, it's not quite that easy. That may be the end stage of disenchantment, but we kind of go kicking and screaming through that process. Seeing that things are impermanent, unreliable, not self, uncontrollable often—some part of us as humans just goes, "No, it should not be this way." And so we resist. We resist as we start to see the impermanent nature of experience, the unreliable nature of experience. It's not like our minds just see it and go, "Oh yeah, no problem. I'll stop clinging."

The whole process of the path requires that we see impermanence over and over again, and see how we are resisting it. There are so many ways that we resist these truths, and this is part of our journey. It's not a mistake that we find ourselves in what

can feel confusing—we start to see impermanence and think, "Oh, smooth sailing," but we find that the mind has relationships to this. It doesn't like seeing impermanence. Quite a lot of the time it goes, "No, it should not be this way."

So there are many emotional flavors of our relationship as we start to see impermanence, unreliability, and the changing nature of experience. I think a lot of these emotional relationships are to what is essentially the corollary of impermanence: unreliability. When we see that things are impermanent, we realize there's nothing there to rely on. And our emotional relationship is largely about this unreliability. We so want to have something to rely on. Our whole structure of how we've been raised as human beings is to find something to rely on. So seeing that there's nothing reliable, we don't like that.

There are many emotional flavors of terrain that we go through as we start deeply seeing the unreliable nature of experience, feeling into the vulnerability of being human. I think these different emotional flavors of relationship are connected to the deep resistance to these truths. They are ways that, seeing these relationships, we're still clinging to not wanting things to be impermanent, unreliable, not self. When we start to see these emotional responses to impermanence, to unreliability, to the uncontrollable nature of experience, those relationships are revealing where we're still clinging.

So it's not a mistake. This is firmly on the path—seeing these relationships, these reactions to impermanence.

There's one translation of *nibbida* that sometimes describes it as disgust or revulsion. I don't particularly like this translation; I much prefer disenchantment. But there are times I've experienced the flavor of relationship to seeing things change as one of revulsion. It was kind of a surprise—just like, "Oh, yeah, I don't want to see this." It felt so wrong. And several suttas point to the understanding of the danger in clinging to things that are impermanent.

In a way, seeing the danger of clinging to something impermanent, the mind could recoil against it. It's similar to how we might recoil when we see a rattlesnake—there's a danger there.

I had this happen once. I was walking one evening at Spirit Rock, and there was a crack in the sidewalk. I was just about to step on it when it coiled up and started rattling. I was pretty mindful, and I don't remember feeling fear in that moment. But I watched the body step back. It just moved away from that danger.

This is perhaps another way to understand that sense of revulsion. When we see clearly the danger, the mind withdraws from it. This is that description from Bhikkhu Bodhi—the dignified withdrawal from phenomena, which supervenes when we really see the impermanent nature of things.

So with nibbidā, the mind understands the danger of clinging. Sometimes as we start to see the impermanent nature, we understand that way lies suffering. Clinging to that, that way lies suffering. The mind just says, "No, not going to go there."

There's another analogy, I think actually in the Visuddhimagga, describing how if a dog were to find a bone that had been completely dried out in the sun, with no nourishment left in it at all, he would go up to it, maybe sniff it, and just walk away. There's nothing here for me. And that's described as the dog having disgust for the bone. There's no nourishment there. It's not worthwhile, not valuable.

That's a sense of what we begin to see—that what we have taken to be nourishment, the clinging to something to make us happy, isn't actually nourishment. It's not moving us in a direction of freedom.

There are other flavors of relationship to seeing impermanence clearly. Fear. Mia spoke of this last night. Fear can arise with respect to seeing the changing nature of experience. And I think that fear comes up because of the understanding. As we see impermanence clearly, we recognize that it's not reliable. And the fear is: but there must be something that's reliable. If this thing isn't reliable, what can I rely on? So there's that movement toward searching for something reliable, a fear that we're not going to find something we can depend on.

The whole path points us toward finding an ease and a happiness that is completely unlike anything we've experienced before—the happiness of not picking something up, of letting go, of not needing to have something be stable.

At times when impermanence is showing up in a very rapid way, when we're seeing things change so quickly, some of the early experiences can actually be very delightful. So this is also a relationship, and we can cling to that. It's like, "Oh, I figured it out. I'm enlightened." We see how things are just coming into being and falling apart and coming into being, and everything seems so easy. There's nothing to hold on to. It's like a magic show, and it seems so delightful.

So that's also a relationship worth noticing—that sense of "I figured it out," or the delight, the joy. At one point, talking to one of my teachers and describing this delight of seeing these truths, he said, "Okay, we have to talk about the imperfections of insight." The defilements related to insight. The ways we can cling to insight itself—like, "Oh, I've got it, I figured it out."

So, noticing these relationships. But sometimes when we start to see impermanence in that particular way, it seems like we know the object that's arising. It's clear. It pops into being.

We know exactly what it is, and then we see it fall apart. Sometimes impermanence is going so fast we don't even know what the objects are. We tend to like clarity. We tend to like knowing what we're seeing. And that kind of experience starts to feel uncomfortable. Sometimes things go so fast it can feel overwhelming. So that kind of experience of fear is like, "How do I navigate this?" That overwhelm or fear at the rapidity of change can even feel as strong as terror sometimes.

I'm going to say a few more, but before I go on to name a few more of these kinds of relationships—the path unfolds. This is a terrain, a place in the path where the path unfolds by meeting the relationship. And so when this is happening, our practice is not to try to force ourselves to be with the rapidly changing experience, but to be with the fear itself. And you may find in being with the fear that it also starts to rapidly change. So the path unfolds through noticing the relationships to impermanence, noticing the relationships to that unreliability, noticing the relationship to dukkha. Because that experience of things changing rapidly is a flavor of dukkha. It's a flavor of seeing the unreliable nature of experience.

A couple other experiences we may have around this exploration of seeing impermanence: my teacher in Burma, Sayadaw U Janaka, pointed this one out. He's the only person I've heard call it this. He says sometimes it can feel like homesickness. And to me, that flavor is, again, the flavor of disenchantment. It's kind of like, "I wish I could go back to not seeing this. I wish I could go back to believing that there was something reliable, or that experience was controllable." And so there can be a longing for what we had—that comfortable fit of our hindrances. We get a longing for that flavor of homesickness.

And then, as we start to see this nature of experience as impermanent more and more, we move through some of these relationships. Then there can be another one that's just like boredom. Like, okay, I've seen this enough already. Another flavor can feel like oppressiveness—we feel like we're just being impinged upon. Like we're in a

house with eighteen teenagers having a party and they're just poking at you. So much stimulation. It just feels overwhelming—that kind of being bombarded by sense impressions.

And then it can shift into this sense of just, "Okay, I've seen this, been here, done this—how long do I have to watch this?" Boredom is another relationship. Notice the boredom. Sometimes in this place it can shift from boredom to disinterest. It's like, yeah, this is just not interesting anymore. Had enough of this. It can also shift into the flavor of not wanting to practice.

All of these can be seen. I was practicing in Burma, and at this particular monastery we kind of lined up and got to hear the reports of the person ahead of us. I was fortunate to be last in line, so I got to hear everybody else's reports. This one person—who I could tell was further ahead of me on the path, this was a number of years ago—her reports were so clear. And at one point she described, "Yes, while I was practicing, not wanting to practice arose." And I thought, "You can actually report that?"

It was such an aha moment. It showed me that that state which had arisen in my mind—that too was just a state that had arisen in my mind. Not wanting to practice had arisen. It's something that can be seen. "Oh yeah, not wanting to practice is happening. Okay, we'll keep walking and I'll notice not wanting to practice." Simple.

Before that moment, I had this idea that somehow I either had to believe it and stop practicing—I actually felt betrayed by my mind. It's like, "No, I really know I want to practice. Why is it telling me I don't want to practice?" Or I had to get rid of it.

I thought I had to get rid of that arising because it was wrong. But it's just another arising. All of these relationships to seeing impermanence are just more arisings. They're ways that we're clinging, ways that we're relating to the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience.

So as our practice deepens through opening to these relationships to impermanence, the mind begins to move much more in the direction of actually letting go. And this is the dispassion—experiencing disenchantment, one becomes dispassionate. Again, it's the natural unfolding here. There's an image given of water flowing down a mountain. It's just the nature of water to flow down the mountain and gather in rivulets and streams and ponds and rivers. That's its nature. And likewise, from disenchantment, dispassion follows.

The Pali word for dispassion is *viraga*. The word has the connotation of—it's almost an analogy—it's used in terms of cloth. If a cloth is sitting in the sun for a long time, it will *viraga*. The dye in the cloth will fade. So *viraga* means to fade. The term itself sug-

gests a gradual process. Think about how long it takes if a cloth is sitting in the sun, or curtains hanging at a window. How long it takes for the curtain to fade. It's a slow process, but it's also a very natural process.

To me, this whole process of disenchantment and dispassion is reflective of the gradual nature of the path. There are a number of analogies the Buddha gave around this gradual nature, and this imagery of *viraga* is one of them. Over the course of our practice, we may see the fading away of different kinds of attachments. Different levels of desire can fade. We might first start seeing the fading away of some of the ways we clung to our big reactivity. For me, the anger and the self-hatred—those were some outer layers of craving, clinging, and aversion that over the years I began to see. Looking back, it's like, yes, wow, at this point I'm not reacting in the same way that I used to. We see the fading. We're starting to see the fading away of the ways that we cling—a fading away of the attachment to wanting things to be my way. And then we might start also seeing a fading away of attachment to pleasant states of concentration, even a fading away of attachment to insight and understanding.

Over the course of our practice, we can see this. The Dalai Lama famously said, don't try to look at your practice day to day to see what has been released or let go of. But look back over five years, ten years. You will notice a difference. You will see that there are things that have been released. And we can see that the practice has contributed to that.

This fading away—it's not quite like the cloth hanging in the window where it's a gradual, continual fading. It's more like it comes and goes. We see a release of something, and then the next moment or hours later we've picked it up again and we're craving and clinging to that thing. So it's more like a wave, a wave that gradually dampens in the release.

There's that fading-out aspect of dispassion. There's also the letting-go aspect of dispassion. It's just the mind fundamentally letting go when we see that there is nothing to cling to. The mind lets go.

I said earlier that freedom is not about getting anything. All of the descriptions of freedom are about what's not here, what has been let go of. One definition of freedom—this is peaceful life—I read this earlier: "This is peaceful, this is sublime, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana." Here, dispassion and nibbana are understood to be synonyms. This is the freedom. Dispassion is the freedom.

We may not like the word dispassion, but it really is losing the passion around greed, aversion, and delusion. That's what we become dispassionate about. Compassion, the sense of caring and connecting—that becomes stronger. The heart that is not tied up in the knots of greed, aversion, and delusion feels, connects, cares. The Brahma Viharas are a natural expression of a heart that is not clinging.

The feeling of mettā, the expansive feeling of mettā, at times may be touching into that. The feeling of muditā, the feeling of joy in the joy of others. The feeling of compassion, of feeling the suffering of others and not constricting around it. We might think about dispassion as being something very flat. But the quality of the heart that is open is anything but flat. It is so resonant and responsive to the world.

The letting go aspect of dispassion—we can think of it also as the release of suffering. And the feeling of that, that's a flavor of what we touch into when we feel the release from suffering. Sometimes we can actually experience this. Like my description of seeing how craving let go when the person disappeared into the building. Seeing the release from that and feeling like I had been released from a vice grip. Sometimes we can get a taste of that, of the release. And as I described in that example, I got attached to wanting to see the release.

The deeper aspect of dispassion is the non-arising of craving. It's like it's not even picked up. So there's nothing to let go of because nothing has been picked up.

We might be able to feel into this a little bit if we think back to childhood. For disenchantment, think about what was your favorite game or toy when you were five. The attachment to that we had at the time—maybe not wanting to share it with friends, or maybe only under certain conditions. There's that kind of attachment. And yet there's a lot of joy and delight that we get from that toy. But as we grow up, I found there was a clinging, a kind of homesickness feeling. I wish I still liked playing with those dolls. I really used to like playing with those dolls. So that's a little bit of disenchantment. We're outgrowing what we had been attached to. We're seeing it's just not satisfying anymore. We're seeing that it doesn't provide what we thought it had provided. One begins to let go of that. There's this experience of just not being interested in that toy anymore.

As an adult—maybe now you've remembered that toy—but how long has it been since you thought about that? As an adult, we don't even think of picking up that game or toy. Interest or disinterest, neither one is relevant. There's not the picking up.

I'll close with a quote about freedom. The Buddha described another word for freedom. Nibbāna is a word used for freedom. Another is the unconditioned. That term also the Buddha defined as the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion—the unconditioned,

the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion. Maybe a flavor of the unconditioned nature of freedom, again, is in the not picking up. Interest and disinterest are not relevant. There's not even the sense of needing to let go of anything. It's just not picked up. This term, the unconditioned, is used in this final quote. It is another synonym for freedom, nibbāna.

Though the realization of the unconditioned requires a turning away from the conditioned—everything in our experience is conditioned—it must be emphasized that this realization is achieved precisely through the understanding of the conditioned. Nibbana cannot be reached by backing off from a direct confrontation with samsara, the world of suffering. Nibbana cannot be reached by backing off from a direct confrontation with samsara to lose oneself in a blissful oblivion to the world. The path to liberation is a path of understanding, of comprehension and transcendence, not of escapism or emotional self-indulgence. Nibbana can be attained by turning one's gaze towards samsara and scrutinizing it in all its starkness. The understanding of the conditioned is the way to the unconditioned.

And so this place of scrutinizing the conditioned in all its starkness—it feels that way sometimes. We feel the suffering of the world sometimes, and we feel ourselves constrict around it. This is our journey. It's not an easy journey that we're on.

And yet, we also see, as we practice—all of you have seen the value of the practice. We go through these cycles of purity and purification, back and forth. And that is the fading of the dye, a slow process of the release of greed, aversion, and delusion.

Thank you for your practice. This is such a challenging and amazing path that you're on. Carry on.

CHAPTER 188

Opening to the Attitude about Experience

Andrea Fella · 1h02

In this dharma talk from a retreat on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, Andrea Fella guides practitioners beyond simply noticing what is happening in meditation to exploring how we relate to our experience. She explains that while awareness of the six sense doors reveals the 'what' of experience, true liberation requires uncovering our hidden attitudes—the deeply conditioned perspectives rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion that often operate beneath our conscious awareness.

Fella introduces a practical technique of periodically dropping in the question 'What's the attitude?' as an invitation rather than an analytical inquiry. She describes four basic flavors of attitude: those connected to greed (wanting more of pleasant experiences), aversion (wanting unpleasant experiences to go away), delusion (disconnection, boredom, or unexamined beliefs), and wise attitude (ease, balance, and curiosity). Drawing from the third foundation of mindfulness, she emphasizes that noticing both the presence and absence of unwholesome qualities reveals the wholesome states naturally present when reactivity subsides.

The talk addresses common beliefs that create suffering in meditation—such as thinking certain states are required for practice, or that sleepiness and restlessness are obstacles rather than valid objects of awareness. Fella shares her transformative experience of finding freedom while observing self-hatred, illustrating that insight can arise with any experience when met with curiosity rather than resistance. She emphasizes that the very seeing of unwise attitudes is the medicine, and that we discover wise attitude not by transcending our mental states but by meeting them with friendliness and investigation.

It's really such a privilege to sit in a room with more than a hundred people who are interested in exploring their minds in a deep way. I was just sitting here feeling this gratitude for you and your commitment to the practice, to doing this work, which isn't easy. It's said to be a rare thing, this interest in the Dharma. I really want to express my appreciation for that.

Even just the precepts that we take—if you think about what we're doing there, committing to non-harming through taking these precepts. Even if we just looked at the first precept, refraining from killing, and even just looked at that in terms of refraining from killing other human beings, much less animals and bugs—if everybody on this planet today decided to follow that precept, we would live in a different world. It's not a small

thing what you're doing here. We can get myopic at times looking at our own experience and feel like we're maybe just navel-gazing. But what we are doing is so helpful for the world. So thank you for that.

This afternoon in the instruction period, Will mentioned this sense of often looking for the why—that's our tendency when things are going on. We look at why things are happening. He mentioned this particularly around emotions, that we want to know why, we think about the why. How was I conditioned in the past? What was the why of that? And the why, as he said, often gets into the thoughts, thinking, reflecting, problem solving. He pointed instead that what we're doing here is looking more at the what and the how.

We've talked a lot about the what we're experiencing: the six sense doors. All of our experiences at the six sense doors—this is the what of our experience. One way of understanding the how of experience—and there are different perspectives on this—is to have a curiosity about how we are in relationship to what is happening. We've talked about this, about exploring the attitude, the relationship. Another phrase for this would be: how am I in connection with what's happening?

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, my teacher, has this phrase: awareness alone is not enough. My understanding of what he means is that just noticing what is obvious—that's a lot of what we're emphasizing. The what of experience is what is obvious. We sit down and we notice what's obvious: body sensations, emotions, moods, sights, sounds. All of the what of experience.

But if we're just noticing what's obvious, we may be missing these hidden perspectives that are so deeply conditioned into our minds. Habits, habitual ways of meeting experience. We could call them hidden views or hidden perspectives that we're so familiar with, so conditioned to meet experience from, that we don't often even notice they're happening. They kind of fly under the radar. We wouldn't necessarily notice them if all we're noticing is what is obvious.

So it's useful to begin to be curious about how we relate to experience, to begin to recognize these habits and patterns that we carry with us. If we are just noticing what's obvious, these hidden perspectives are operating in the background. They're simple perspectives often, just almost taken for granted. Like when something unpleasant happens, we don't like it and we want to get rid of it. That's just what we do. We don't normally think to recognize, to know, to be aware of the not liking.

So that's what this investigation or curiosity into the how, into the attitude, is exploring: What are these perspectives? And how do they feel, basically? This is useful, and as Sayadaw said, awareness alone is not enough. The hidden perspectives of agendas or habits and patterns of how we usually meet experience—often those patterns and habits have been shaped by greed,

wanting to get what I want, aversion, wanting to get rid of things that I don't like, and confusion or delusion—beliefs, attitudes, beliefs about what should be happening or shouldn't be happening, views and opinions.

If we're not aware of those beliefs, in noticing the what, in noticing what's obvious, we are unwittingly reinforcing those perspectives. If we are observing something—knowing, for instance, an unpleasant experience from the perspective of "this has to go away"—then we are actually cultivating that perspective. If we're not aware of it, if we don't know that it's happening, we're reinforcing that perspective.

One of the famous quotes of the Buddha: "Whatever one frequently ponders becomes the inclination of the mind." And this is intuitive. We know this from experience. If we think about something a lot—or as someone mentioned, if we hear something a lot, if we hear a particular song repeatedly—then that tends to happen. We tend to think about it more. Whatever we put into our minds gets reinforced. We put certain things into our minds consciously and we can see how those things get reinforced. If we think about a particular person frequently, we tend to think about that person even more.

These hidden perspectives, these attitudes that we're not so cognizant of, they get reinforced not because we're aware of them, but because we're acting on them, because we're following them. And most of the reasons why we suffer, why we struggle—they are found in this terrain of these relationships to experience. So looking at this and beginning to uncover these habitual, often hidden perspectives is a direct path. This looking at these hidden agendas, beginning to uncover them, this is also a very direct way to freedom.

One of the definitions of freedom in the Buddhist understanding is the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. Greed, aversion, and delusion are understood to be the engines of why we suffer. And these are the baseline motivators of many of our habitual perspectives. So beginning to be curious about these hidden perspectives, we are making a direct line to see the ways that our minds contribute to our own suffering and contribute to the cycles of reactivity internally and externally.

We've said many times here—I think we've said it at least three times a day, if not more—what is happening, the experience that we are knowing, is not what we're cultivating. It's not about the experience. We are cultivating a way of attending to experience. And so this way of attending to experience includes looking at, or being curious about, what is the perspective that we're bringing to the observing.

Because this is often hidden, it's useful to have a way to begin to invite it to show itself, you could say. Not so much that we're digging for it, but it's more like, "Hey, any attitude there that wants to let me know it's there?"

So just a couple of examples around attitude. I think you basically have the flavor, but I mentioned there are actually four basic flavors of attitude. I've mentioned three of them that are related to greed, aversion, and delusion—those three qualities of mind that underlie the habits and patterns that tend to lead to suffering.

A simple example for each one: If something pleasant is happening, we tend to like it and want more of it. There's a greed, a leaning into it. If something unpleasant is happening, we tend to not like it and want it to go away. We want to fix it, to change it, to problem-solve around it. Those are some flavors that can come in with aversion.

Delusion is a little subtler. It can be obvious in some ways—it can just be a kind of disconnection from experience. But boredom can have a flavor of delusion to it. It's like, "Yeah, that's not important," and we get bored with something.

This is a bit of a tangent, but whatever experience is happening, the Dharma can be seen with it. There's no experience, no matter how seemingly trivial, that does not reveal the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience. Whether it's reaching for a door or feeling an emotion, there's no particular experience we have to find in order to see the truths that lead to freedom—the understandings, the insights. So if we're bored and think, "Yeah, this isn't so important," that's delusion. Delusion is at work there.

So that's a form of delusion. And that attitude of "yeah, this isn't important" — it may not be important with respect to some task we have to accomplish at work. The fact that we know we're seeing might not be important in terms of accomplishing a goal we're doing at work. There are different kinds of relative understandings we may have around what's important and what's not important, what's trivial, what's worth our attention. But in our practice, there's nothing that's not worth our attention.

If we find we're bored in our meditation, that's an example of a relationship that involves delusion. There are lots of them. I'm not going to go into that right now, though I sometimes do — I've actually given a nine-part series on delusion. There's a lot to say about it.

These attitudes, these flavors of attitude that are related to greed, aversion, and delusion — when we see those, we're in the terrain of seeing the hindrances. We're seeing the reactivity. In terms of noticing these attitudes, I'll talk more about what happens when we notice the attitude in a moment. For now, I'm just going to describe what the attitudes are.

So we have these three basic kinds of attitudes related to the unwholesome qualities of heart and mind: greed, aversion, and delusion. The fourth flavor of attitude is related to the wholesome qualities of heart and mind. This is a relationship we can have with observing experience that is basically a relationship of ease, of balance, of calm. It's a relationship that allows us to be at ease with whatever is happening.

When I said a few moments ago that we can see the Dharma in any experience, this kind of attitude — we could call it wise attitude — is a perspective that allows us to be at ease with whatever is happening and to see its nature. We can start to see its impermanent nature. We can start to see its unreliable nature, that it's not reliable as a place for lasting happiness. We start to see that it's not "my" experience — it's an experience, a conditioned arising.

That fourth kind of attitude, wise attitude — we could say right attitude — is a flavor that's actually also useful to notice. Sometimes when we begin to notice our relationships to experience, we can notice this balance of mind. This is useful to recognize. It's in the terrain of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, in the third foundation of mindfulness, which is actually the terrain of what we're talking about here: the attitude of mind, the state, the qualities of the mind. In that sutta, it talks about noticing the presence and absence of greed, aversion, and delusion.

We're more attuned to noticing the presence of things. It's easier to recognize when something is there. But we can also notice: when greed is not there, what's it like? When aversion is not there, what's it like? When delusion is not there, what's it like? There are many flavors of mind that can be present when those are absent — calm, ease, peace, equanimity. There might be a flavor of love, of compassion, of patience, of joy, delight, contentment. It can be experienced in many different ways.

When greed, aversion, and delusion fall away, it can be very interesting to see what's here. For myself, this was useful because I was so oriented towards noticing greed, aversion, and delusion. It was much harder for me to begin to recognize those wholesome qualities. They were there — I could see, "yeah, no problem." But it was interesting to rest in that place. What does "no problem" feel like? Oh, there's actually joy here. There's peace. There's curiosity here. What do those qualities feel like?

There's a kind of investigation, a curiosity that we can begin to recognize — wise attitude as well. Now, it's not a problem particularly to have unwise attitude, as long as we are recognizing it.

The problem with attitudes connected to greed, aversion, and delusion is when they remain unseen. When they go unrecognized, as I mentioned a few moments ago, they reinforce themselves.

I spent a lot of time doing this, actually, with an aversive quality—or perhaps more accurately, there was a holding on to observing an unpleasant experience because I had discovered that when I looked at an unpleasant experience, it could go away. The motivation in my mind at a certain point became to make these unpleasant experiences disappear. I was looking at them. It wasn't that I was trying to push them away. In fact, I was holding on to them in order to make them go away.

That attitude contains a little bit of greed: "If I look at this just right, if I really get in there and look at it just right"—that's the greed side. "It will go away"—the aversion side. I spent a lot of time doing that without seeing it clearly, and that reinforced those habits.

So again, when we start to recognize these perspectives that are operating, the very seeing of them is the medicine.

If we can be curious—this checking of attitude or exploration—I think I mentioned on the first day that from time to time we can be curious about what the relationship to experience is. This is a tool we can use in our practice. We mostly spend time noticing what is happening, noticing what's obvious. And from time to time—perhaps every four or five minutes—we can check in: what's the relationship to what's happening?

This begins to get more familiar. As we cultivate this checking in, this curiosity about what the attitude is, it starts to become more natural. At a certain point, it's something we don't have to think about doing. It simply becomes part of how we know experience. But at least for me initially, there needed to be a little bit of conscious checking in—dropping in the question every now and then. What's the attitude? What's the relationship to experience? It can be that simple.

One particularly useful time to do this is whenever there's any kind of suffering. If there's suffering happening right now, if it feels hard to meditate, if there's a struggle going on, there's an attitude in there that hasn't been clearly seen. So if there's any struggle in your practice, it's a great time to ask, "What's the attitude?"

This checking in, this asking of the question—we're not trying to think about it, not trying to figure out what the attitude is. As I said at the beginning, it's more of an invitation. We're dropping in an invitation: is there an attitude available to be seen right now?

The question itself—"What's the attitude?"—is just a dropping in of an invitation to the mind. Think of it like sitting in front of a still pond and dropping a pebble into the water. Ripples will naturally result. You can sit there and watch as the ripples happen. Dropping a thought into the mind while meditating will have ripples. You don't have to do anything more to try to find the answer.

So you can simply drop that question in: What's the attitude? Different language may be more helpful for different people. Sometimes the phrasing "What's the relationship to what's happening?" works well. Or "How am I with what's happening?" It could be that simple. Maybe just, "How am I? How is the mind with what's happening?" Drop that question in and then just keep noticing the obvious.

What is obvious? That question dropped into the mind is going to shift the experience a little bit. And maybe something will show up. Sometimes something shows up really clearly. Like, "I don't like this." It's just blindingly obvious what the attitude is. Sometimes it shows up more as a feeling shift. For instance, it might be that you're noticing some pain in the body. And then you ask, what's the attitude with that pain? And what you become cognizant of, the ripple that you notice, is a feeling of bracing through the whole body. A kind of holding. That's an expression of an attitude, we could say. That bracing is a kind of holding back, a kind of pushing away. So dropping in that question may change the feeling of what's happening, or it may come as an actual thought in the mind.

For myself, when I drop a question into my meditation—and I do use questions, it's kind of an inquiry—I learned this from my teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, to use questions from time to time. He taught it very much in this way: you just drop the question in and then you just keep practicing. You see what the result is, what the ripples are.

I've learned that when I get an answer or response through words in the mind, I hold that really lightly. Maybe, maybe not. That's an interesting idea. That's an interesting perspective—perhaps that's what's motivating this. When I get a response in the felt

sense of experience, I'm more trusting of that. And this speaks a little bit to what Will said last night, that real connection is not about the conceptual. So when there's a response to that question through concept, I hold it lightly. It's not that I dismiss it, but I also ask: Is there a feeling with that? Does that really resonate? Because we have all kinds of ideas about our relationships to things. And sometimes when we ask that question, what might pop up is the most obvious thing we've thought about—"Of course there's fear in the middle of this," or whatever.

So just explore that dropping in of a question without following thoughts or thinking about it. See what happens as you drop in that question. If you get some kind of sense of a response, then all you need to do is notice that. A lot of times when I talk about working with the attitude, somebody will say, "Well, when I notice an attitude, what do I do with it?" You just notice it. There's nothing more you need to do with it. If you become aware of a perspective that you're looking through, then you've become aware of it. And now it is one other thing in the whole field of what you're noticing that is also being noticed.

An analogy I used the other day involves perspective. We may be looking through blue glasses—blue sunglasses or something. And we may forget. I've forgotten sometimes that I'm wearing my sunglasses and I'm looking for them, and then I realize I've got them on. I've forgotten because I've gotten adjusted to looking through them. So it's not so obvious that they're coloring the world. But then I can notice, "Oh right, they're on my eyes." And then I might be able to recognize there is a blue tinge to the world. We can begin to see that. So that might be one shift that happens as we begin to notice an attitude—we just begin to notice how that perspective is tinging experience. That attitude or perspective of aversion is tinging how we're looking at things.

This perspective—I'm a real connoisseur of aversion, we could say. I have looked at it a lot, and so when I see it arising in the mind, I can see that it influences. Like I look at a tree and it's like, yeah, I don't like that tree. It affects how we meet experience.

And so seeing a perspective, we can begin to recognize, okay, it's tinging things. We can begin to notice the effect that that has. We also might be able to actually begin to know, yeah, I'm looking through those glasses. We can begin to see—I need to really look through them, but I know they're there. It's almost like the glasses get taken off and you're looking at them rather than through them.

Sometimes that happens as we notice an attitude. It's like that becomes the thing that we're noticing. Rather than the thing that we were having that relationship to, like an unpleasant experience, we're more attuned to the aversion to it. We begin to get curious about the aversion itself.

So in noticing an attitude, there are different levels or layers at which we can be noticing it. But at each of these layers, we can begin to see a little bit of a shift. Even just noticing, yeah, I'm looking through blue glasses, I'm looking through that perspective of aversion—there can be a little bit of an "oh, that's what's happening." We know that. It shifts the whole experience because now we have an attitude of curiosity about the attitude of aversion. We have this bigger kind of field in which we're noticing the attitude of aversion. And maybe it even becomes interesting to be curious about the aversion. It becomes perhaps one of the more predominant things that we're noticing.

We don't have to make that be what happens, but that can happen. That would be like we're looking at the sunglasses. Oh yeah, look at that. I can see that on the other side, it's blue. And where it's up here, it's not blue anymore. We can begin to see something about how that attitude works, begin to see the way that those attitudes influence our experience.

If the mind can shift from looking through the attitude to being with it, to seeing it as an experience, we can feel a shift. There's a shift of understanding, and we know the difference. You've talked about it in your groups—seeing, "Oh, I see what's happening. Yeah, there's an aversion here." And when we see that, it's not like it goes away immediately, but there's more ease in the mind.

This is a really important thing to know: as we start to get curious about looking at these unskillful attitudes, these unwise attitudes, that's what allows us to move in the direction of wise attitude. We get curious about seeing these patterns instead of being driven by them. That shift—instead of looking through it, we're knowing it's there. We can know it's there and be okay. That okay quality is wise attitude.

One of the things Sayadaw U Tejaniya says is that we get to know wise attitude by being really curious about unwise attitude. We don't get to wise attitude by somehow magically transcending our states of mind. We get to know that the meeting of our experience is what helps us learn about how to meet experience.

This reminded me of a phrase that Joseph Goldstein sometimes used. He'd say, we want to understand dukkha—because that's what the First Noble Truth says, we need to understand dukkha—we want to understand dukkha without experiencing dukkha. And it doesn't work that way. The very understanding of dukkha comes through meeting it. But meeting it with a perspective of curiosity. Meeting it with a perspective of friendliness. That friend that says, "Yeah, you can be here too."

And so this checking the attitude – it's really a simple tool to help us recognize that there's a pattern or habit in the mind that hasn't been clearly seen, one that might not be willing to just show up in terms of what's obvious if we simply keep noticing what's obvious. But as soon as we give it that invitation and it shows up, then it's just something else to know. There's nothing magical or special we do with it. It's just another experience to recognize.

As I said at the beginning, it doesn't matter what we are attending to. We can see the impermanent nature of an attitude also. Actually, some of my most heart-opening understandings have come from seeing the impermanent nature of my really persistent patterns of mind. Self-hatred. Watching self-hatred. Seeing the resistance to it. And seeing in the midst of watching it that it's just a thought being believed. That's what's going on – this thought that's being believed. And the recognition that the mind doesn't have to believe that. It's just a belief this mind made up. That belief was an attitude, a really deep perspective applied to that thought. Right in the midst of seeing self-hatred – freedom. Freedom. It doesn't matter.

I actually thought at the beginning of this retreat, which I now call my self-hatred retreat because I spent a lot of time feeling and experiencing self-hatred – at the beginning of that retreat, I thought, "Well, I guess this is the retreat where I don't get enlightened." I thought I wasn't even going to have any insight. I thought that the self-hatred had to go away before I had any insight. And then I discovered that right in the midst of looking at self-hatred, the mind can understand the impermanent nature of it, the conditioned nature of it. Just seeing: this is what's arising.

So this checking of the attitude helps us to uncover these hidden perspectives. I'm going to talk about a couple of hidden perspectives – these are examples of common attitudes that we carry without recognizing them about meditation itself.

This is an interesting piece about attitude. Often our attitudes are related more directly to the experience of whatever's happening. An unpleasant experience will tend to create an attitude of aversion; a pleasant experience tends to create an attitude of greed. But we can have beliefs – and this is in the realm of delusion – we have beliefs that we don't think of as greed or aversion. We just think of them as true. This is true. And a lot of attitudes about the meditation itself can be this kind of belief.

We may have attitudes that are related to agendas around our meditation. An example that I think many of you probably are familiar with is that you may have the attitude that sleepiness is not a good meditation object. Now, we've talked about this, so

maybe you don't have that attitude anymore, but you probably have had that attitude. The idea that I can't be meditating while I'm sleepy. There's a little bit of aversion in that, perhaps, because we feel like the sleepiness is unpleasant sometimes.

But the experience of sleepiness – and this is an interesting thing to notice about how beliefs and attitudes work – the experience of sleepiness is only unpleasant because you have the idea that you shouldn't have it while you're meditating. The experience of sleepiness itself is kind of inherently pleasant. But when it arises during meditation, we have this idea: shouldn't be happening. That idea creates a filter that affects the experience of sleepiness, and we experience it as unpleasant.

But if we let go of that idea that it's a problem to be sleepy while meditating – and as Leanne said, just let yourself fall asleep and see what happens – if you let go of that idea, you'll probably start to notice how pleasant sleepiness is.

So there's a belief or an agenda around meditation about what are good objects and what are bad objects for meditation. There are a lot of these kinds of beliefs in meditation. I had at one point a belief that I had to be in a certain state of mind in order to meditate.

At one point I was practicing in Burma, and I think some of this comes from familiarity with meditation. When we get more familiar with the practice, we get more familiar with certain states of mind, and we associate those with good practice. So then we think, "That's the state I need to be in in order to meditate."

I found myself as I was moving from walking practice to my room to sit, I found myself kind of putting my mind into a state that was a subtle form of repression of thought. Just a little bit of, "Yep, we don't think while we're meditating." But I noticed it doing that. I noticed it trying to create a meditative state. It's like, "Wait, I'm aware. What's wrong with this state? This is a state of mind. I'm knowing this one. Why do I have to change it in order to meditate? There's already meditation happening."

So there was a little belief—that belief that I had to put my mind into a certain state to meditate—that was revealed. And when that was seen, the mind recognized, "Well, there's nothing wrong with this state. I'm aware."

So if you're trying to change the state of your mind and you notice that, have some curiosity about what's going on there. What's the belief? That's an interesting question that can get at something, maybe a question that can help if the question "What's the attitude?" doesn't resonate. Sometimes when we drop in that question we don't get much of a response, and that's okay. You don't need a response; you can just carry on. You don't need to find an answer to the question.

Sometimes that happens because the attitude is more quiet or more subtle. Sometimes it can happen because the attitude is one of calm and we're not noticing those calmer attitudes. So there are various reasons why we might not understand what the attitude is. But if you find yourself struggling, another question that can be useful is: What is being believed? Because beliefs are a form of attitude—a subtler kind of attitude, perhaps. Greed and aversion are more obvious: like that, don't like that. There's a belief in there. But beliefs don't necessarily have a flavor of liking or not liking. They're just, "This is what's true."

Sometimes that question of what is being believed can open something up. "Oh yeah, this is not okay, what's happening." You know, the belief like "I'm a failure"—that was one of my beliefs connected with self-hatred. I'm a failure. And I began to see that that thought could happen and the belief not happen. It was just a thought. The thought and the belief were different.

So if you find yourself trying to change the state of your mind—like if there's sleepiness, dullness, restlessness, those are states of mind that often we try to change in order to put ourselves into a state that we can meditate in—try recognizing if you can be aware of the state. Often it can sometimes just be a belief, just the idea: "I can't be mindful while this is happening." If you're thinking that thought—"I can't be mindful while restlessness is happening" or "I can't be mindful while spaciness is happening"—you're already aware of that state. So try mindfulness before doing a shift, before making a change.

There are some other beliefs around practice that can get in the way and create suffering. Another belief I've definitely experienced—one I hung onto for quite a while—was that when I was mindful, experience would be clear. And if experience wasn't clear, it meant I wasn't being mindful right. To me, that was just true.

As I began practicing with Sayadaw U Tejaniya and beginning to explore the mind, there's so much in there. There's so much to see. It's like, oh my gosh, I was looking at this much. And when I started practicing with Sayadaw, it was like, whew. There is so much to see. Part of it is that we orient more to what's familiar, we orient towards what we recognize, and if we are aware and we're not clear about what's happening, we may think, "That's a problem."

But what we can know is simply this: I'm aware, and it's not clear. I'm aware, and I don't know. I don't know what the object is. Or I'm aware and it's really fuzzy—no clarity at all.

Some of these beliefs need to be pointed out to us. They're really hard to see, these beliefs around what we think of as meditation, what we think of as clear practice. This style of practice sometimes feels more busy. We're not settling in with one object, one experience. So sometimes it feels like there's a lot going on, and people say the mind is restless. But is it restless, or is it just knowing a lot? There are so many different experiences, so many different ways we can be aware.

I think often we stumble into a kind of clear awareness, or sometimes we stumble into our first taste of the mind really settling. It feels a certain way—clarity, quiet, no thoughts in the mind. That's one flavor. And whatever flavor we kind of stumble into first, we think that's what we're supposed to go for. That's it. That's what I'm supposed to be doing. And then we unwittingly limit ourselves by not recognizing there are different ways it can feel.

Awareness might feel focused and precise and clear. Sometimes it's broad and vague and fuzzy. Sometimes it's like we're looking at fog, and we're looking at fog. Sometimes there's clarity, sometimes there's not clarity. Sometimes we know what the objects are, sometimes we don't. Sometimes we know one object at a time, moment after moment. Sometimes we know lots of objects at the same time. There are many different ways awareness works. So how is it working for you?

These ideas can get in the way. We can be unwittingly looking for something through these beliefs and perspectives.

I'll just say one last piece. This kind of curiosity about the attitude—it feels like it's not good news when we see these hidden perspectives, but it's what will lead the mind to understanding. At a certain point, you may actually be really happy you're seeing anger. It's like, yay! It's way better to see it than not to see it. Celebrate.

So let's just sit for a moment, letting the words fall away. You don't actually have to remember anything that I said. Don't worry about it. In my experience, it's in there. You can think of it like dharma rain. The water falls down and works its way through, and at some point, perhaps some bit of that moisture will arise with the growth of a plant. We don't have to hold on to any of it.

The practice is simple. Really simple. Just this. And from time to time, some curiosity about how I am with this.

Thank you for your practice. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 189

Love and Wisdom

Andrea Fella · 47 min

In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella addresses a common question about the role of the brahmavihāras (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity) in Sayādaw U Tejaniya's wisdom-based meditation approach. Rather than being separate practices, Fella explains how these heart qualities naturally emerge through the very orientation of wise view—the allowing and receiving of experience as it is.

Fella illuminates how the brahmavihāras can serve as skillful means when mindfulness feels overwhelmed by reactive patterns, while also exploring a deeper understanding: our habitual struggles are actually tangles between natural wishes for well-being (mettā) and the truths of impermanence and uncontrollability. Through her personal example of experiencing fear after the September 11th attacks, she demonstrates how these tangles can untangle through mindful awareness, revealing that our defilements aren't wholly bad but contain misunderstandings wrapped around wholesome wishes.

The talk offers a beautiful reframing of practice—that when we meet experience with allowing awareness, it feels like being seen and held with love. Fella suggests that the brahmavihāras represent the emotional map of a heart free from clinging; when greed, aversion, and delusion fall away, love, compassion, joy, and equanimity are what remain. This reveals the profound integration of love and wisdom at the heart of liberation.

The other day, one of you left me a note with a question, and I responded with about three sentences. As I was reflecting on what to talk about tonight, I realized I could turn those three sentences into a Dharma talk. This is how it works sometimes.

The question was: what is the place of the brahmaviharas in this style of practice? This is a question I hear with some regularity. This is a wisdom-based practice, and we don't actively teach Brahmavihara practices on this retreat. On many Vipassana retreats, there's a metta period in the middle of the afternoon to talk about that practice, that style of practice—and it's a separate practice. I think most of you may be familiar with it.

I did speak a little to this question in the first reflection I gave on the first night of the retreat: that the very orientation of wise view, observing experience from a perspective of things as they are, allowing things to be as they are—it feels very much like a wisdom perspective, and sometimes it can be interpreted as a purely wisdom perspective. Just the way the teaching lands: just notice things as they are, receive things as they are.

But as I said that first evening, that opening to allowing things as they are, the feeling of this practice more and more becomes such that this perspective of wisdom is felt as care, as love, as connection, as intimacy. These qualities of love, of compassion, of joy, of equanimity—they come along for the ride. And so while the practice, in terms of hearing what we're doing, sounds dry, the experience in the practice becomes anything but dry.

I wanted to explore this question from a couple of different perspectives. First, just to elaborate a little on what the Brahmaviharas are, for those of you who may not be so familiar—there are a few of you who are newer to the practice here.

The Brahmaviharas are four qualities of mind that are naturally cultivated as we practice. They are wholesome qualities worth cultivating, and worth actively cultivating. There are different ways to actively cultivate wholesome qualities. These four are: metta, or love, loving-kindness; compassion; sympathetic joy or empathetic joy—joy in the joy of others, in the success or beauty of others; and equanimity, the quality of balance of mind. These are qualities of heart and mind. They naturally arise sometimes, and there are also ways to actively cultivate them.

The Brahmavihara practice is often what people are asking about when I hear this question: what's the place of the Brahmaviharas in this style of practice? People are often really asking: can I do Brahmavihara practice in this style of practice? Can I use that ever? Is it cheating if I bring that in sometimes?

The practice of the Brahmaviharas, again just to fill this out for those who may be less familiar, is a practice of using thought. We consciously bring—it's usually practiced in a relational perspective—so we bring people to mind, beings to mind, including ourselves, and explore wishes related to each of these brahmaviharas. We actively explore well-wishing for ourselves and others: May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be safe. May I live with ease. With compassion: May I be free from suffering. With sympathetic or empathetic joy: May your joy and delight continue. May your success and well-being continue. And with equanimity, a reflection on understanding that beings make their own choices and live their own lives, and we can't make their choices for them. We wish them well, but we can't make them happy.

The practice of the Brahmaviharas is explored through bringing those thoughts into mind. The thoughts themselves are expressions of the wishes, expressions of those qualities. A heart that would be feeling those qualities would naturally have those wishes. So it's using the tool of thought to incline the mind towards these qualities.

For me, I actually found that knowing and understanding the way thoughts work, how thoughts shape the mind—the way I would practice this is I would drop one of those thoughts into my mind: May I be happy. And then I would settle back and ask, what is that thought? How does that thought affect the system? Sometimes it would bring more contraction, sometimes more openness. But actually, this way of practicing the Brahmaviharas shows a kind of interface between this style of practice and Brahmavihara practice. Because we're bringing a reflection into the mind, and we use reflections in this practice—sometimes more encouraged as wisdom reflections.

This is nature. We're not trying to make ourselves see it as nature, but we're inviting the mind to open and see what the effect of that reflection is on our system. The Brahmavihara phrases work similarly—they're love reflections, compassion reflections. How do they land? How do they affect the being?

So this is the formal Brahmavihara practice with an added dimension: we recognize that what we're doing is conditioning the mind, and we observe the effect. We bring a thought into the mind—what's the effect? How does it affect us? We explore how wisdom reflections affect us in this style of practice, and bringing in love reflections, compassion reflections, is equally possible. The orientation would be to notice what's the effect of those thoughts. How do they land? Not particularly trying to find the metta, but simply: "May you be happy"—how does that make the being feel?

The Brahmavihara practice itself is more of a directing of the attention, a directing of the mind towards specific qualities. In this style of practice, we are more opening to what's here, what qualities of mind are present. And yet, as we've said a number of times, there are moments when the momentum of something challenging is stronger than the momentum of our mindfulness. Sometimes it feels to me like the momentum of a pattern is like a tsunami, and mindfulness is like a little trickle. When that's happening, mindfulness doesn't really have the capacity to meet the experience. We all learn our own ways of recognizing that. Alexis mentioned the other day that if we can see something with interest, that's a good sign there's enough capacity of mindfulness to meet the difficult pattern. One thing I often use is noticing whether the pattern seems to be getting stronger, or the reactivity to the pattern is intensifying—that would be a time to bring in a skillful means.

We've talked about various skillful means, both in the groups and in the hall, so I'm not going to make an exhaustive list here. But one of those skillful means is metta practice. If, for you, in those moments where the mind is overwhelmed by a reactive pattern, metta is grounding—if metta is a way to stay with your experience—please use it. Use it for as long as the mind needs to come to some stability and balance, and then explore the possibility of letting go of that as a skillful means and opening again to what's here. Maybe after you've done some metta practice, what's here is some metta. So that's what you can notice.

For me, Brahmavihara practice was something that came late. It really wasn't until I began exploring it from this perspective—what's the effect of these phrases on my system? How do they change my being when I drop that phrase in?—that the metta began to resonate. But this is not one of my go-to skillful means, so it's not one I think about offering so much. I know that for many people, metta is really powerful. So this is your discernment. It's your practice. It's for you to discern if a skillful means is needed when mindfulness can't just meet an experience, or is being pulled into the rabbit hole. If it's being pulled into the rabbit hole, use some skillful means so that you're not pulled in. And perhaps metta is one of those for you. All of the Brahmavihara practices are fine to use as skillful means.

So that's one way the Brahmaviharas can come into this practice—really individual, up to you whether it's an appropriate skillful means for you.

Most of the way that the Brahmaviharas connect to this practice is in understanding them as qualities of mind, recognizing that they are natural capacities of our heart and mind that may be a little weak at times.

So beginning to be curious about the experience of these qualities of mind—this is one of the main ways that they begin to be recognized.

As I said at the beginning, one of the key ways, and this is all very natural. Last night, Nisha gave a beautiful talk around both the nature of the natural unfolding of the way our habits of mind work and that we can watch that. The watching of that puts us on a path where there becomes a natural unfolding of the deepening of awareness and wisdom. This is a lawful process, the way the practice unfolds.

And so it's a lawful unfolding that these qualities of love, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity begin to, we could say, come along for the ride with this practice quite naturally. The first way that they begin to come along for the ride is that the ori-

entation of wise view carries metta in it. That perspective of—as I said at the beginning, but just to reiterate—that perspective of "this is allowed." What's happening now? Things as they are. Everything is allowed. Everything is valued.

Sometimes we think that "everything is equal" feels like it diminishes things, but it actually elevates things. Everything is valued. All experience is valued. And that perspective is one that brings metta to the practice.

We can remind ourselves of this much as we bring in wisdom reflections at times. "This is nature" is a reflection that for me is one of the most powerful wisdom reflections. When the mind is kind of wobbly about some experience, a little bit identified with it, just that reminder—this is nature. It's just causes and conditions unfolding. It's like, of course this is happening. It's been conditioned. Look at the history of this being. Of course this is arising.

When that reflection comes into my mind, I open to how does that reflection affect my capacity to meet the experience? What happens? What happens with the experience? And quite often it creates a little bit of space. It creates a sense of balance. Maybe some sense of equanimity is there. So in using those wisdom reflections, we get curious about how they affect our meeting of experience.

If you're not feeling metta in this practice, or a sense of—like I said, it doesn't feel dry, it feels quite intimate, quite connected, quite caring to be meeting myself—I think I said that the very first night: if somebody were to sit in front of you and say, "You be you. I'm here. I'm here with you. No matter how you are, I'm here with you." Most of us would feel that as a kind of love—to be seen, to be witnessed, to be held in that space of allowing us to be how we are. We would feel that as love, and that's how it can feel with our mindfulness and wisdom. It can be this container of loving attention, kind attention, caring attention—sometimes with the flavor of compassion, sometimes with the flavor of joy, sometimes more with the flavor of equanimity.

If you're not feeling that, there could be a little bit of a wisdom reflection or a little bit of a question, an investigation dropping in. When it feels like you're connecting with experience, when it feels like things are okay, you might have a curiosity: what other qualities are here with that okayness? How does that okayness actually feel? There are so many flavors that we can begin to really touch into. The different flavors of the Brahma Viharas can be present in how we're meeting experience.

If there's a struggle, sometimes that flavor of care has the quality of a feeling of compassion. If there's a feeling of things going smoothly or well, that flavor might have a flavor of joy and delight. And I've even seen—I don't know quite how it works, but...

Seeing anger, it's like, wow, look at that—and having so much joy. I think the reason the joy is there now, as I'm remembering that experience, is because I understand that I'm no longer caught by the anger when I'm seeing it. There's that sense of having some release, some kind of sense of yes. That's the heart resonating with something delightful. So sometimes the quality can even be joy, even in the midst of working with a challenging experience.

We can have some curiosity about the flavor, the experience of what it's like when the mind is meeting experience with some balance and ease. That's a place where we can begin to feel these Brahma Viharas, to feel them as qualities in the mind, in the heart. And as we've said again a number of times, when we touch into and see with wisdom wholesome qualities, it nourishes them. It creates the conditions for them to become stronger.

The recognition of those qualities kind of coming along for the ride—it's really valuable to actually check in and notice. Oh yeah, there's joy here. Oh, there's compassion here in this okayness with being with experience. That strengthens and cultivates those qualities.

Then we can open to the qualities when they naturally arise. And they may begin to naturally arise as you become more familiar with them. We begin to see them more. This is another way that they're strengthened—we can begin to notice when they naturally arise.

I mentioned the other day that during one of my sitting periods on a long retreat, I kept having thoughts about friends from the Peace Corps arise in my mind. And I was like, you know, come back, come back to what's here. Thoughts of friends from the Peace Corps. Yes, I know I'm thinking, but come back. I had that relationship with the thoughts. But the thoughts were so persistent that I finally kind of surrendered and was like, okay, what's here with these thoughts? And it was metta. When I finally began to attune to the thoughts and what was going on with them, metta was obvious. And attuning to that quality of metta, the thoughts didn't need to continue. There was just the feeling of metta.

Sometimes we can notice this in ordinary moments. We're in the lunch line and we see somebody we know getting something that they like. Or we see somebody doing something that touches us. This was one that I saw one time with a friend: I was doing walking meditation at a retreat center, upstairs in a room with a window that looked down into the courtyard at Spirit Rock. My friend was doing walking meditation down there. I saw her and it was so clear she was really mindful. The experience was joyous

—mudita for her, for that. May that continue. There it is. There's mudita arising as what's obvious. That can be known. And so that's another way these qualities are strengthened: when they arise, we notice them.

There's another place I want to spend a little more time with. As we meet a challenging experience, sometimes as those challenging experiences fall apart, we may see a connection to metta in the midst of a difficult experience. Let me unpack that a little bit.

Sometimes metta can be revealed not so much in the way I was talking about a moment before—where we're exploring something challenging and the way we're looking at it cultivates the qualities of compassion, metta, joy, and equanimity. This is different. Here, metta can be revealed as something that's kind of a mixture within the pattern itself.

Metta, the wishes for well-being, are often bound up in a tangle with our struggles and reactivity. This is, I think, partly why some of those patterns are so potent for us. Those habits, those patterns we've grown up with—the reason they're so strong and pervasive is because essentially they think, these patterns, that they're going to do something that will make us happy. They're trying really hard to make us happy. But fundamentally they're going about it in a really misunderstood way. They've fundamentally misunderstood what happiness is.

Greed's idea of happiness—within greed, the belief, the movement is: I'll be happy if I get that thing. That's the delusion embedded within the movement towards something. With aversion: I'll be happy if I get rid of that thing. So that "I'll be happy if" is right in the mix.

And so many of these strategies are self-strategies, habitual tendencies. It's as if they've tried to take care of us for our entire lives. They've done the best they can. They've tried really hard. And yet, they don't do such a good job.

In my own exploration of this, I began to see that right in the midst of anger is a wanting to be safe, a wanting to have a sense of "I'm okay." Even self-hatred—there's a wanting to be loved, actually, in the midst of that one. Feeling like I was not lovable. Hating myself for not being lovable. But within all of that is this wish to be happy, healthy, safe, at ease. The wish for safety is often tied up in fear. So within our habitual reactivity, quite often—maybe even always, though I haven't found a counter-example yet, so I won't say always—within our struggles there is this wish for well-being.

And often what happens is that wish for well-being, which is a natural wish, a human wish, a wholesome wish, a mettā wish—I think this is partly why these patterns have such a hold on us. When anger is saying, "I'll take care of you, I'll help you get rid

of these things that are problems," when greed is saying, "I'll take care of you, I'll get these things that'll make you feel better"—when those patterns are operating, they don't have the perspective that there's another way happiness can happen. They don't understand that there's another way well-being can arise.

So those patterns in the mind will really resist a view that they have to go away. That idea of "I'm going to look at this so that it will go away"—how many of us do that? It's so habitual. It's such a way we orient ourselves.

With my anger pattern, when I first started looking at it, first started seeing it, I felt like everything that was going on in there was wholly bad. It felt like a tumor. That pattern—it's bad, it's not good for the system. I need to get the scalpel and cut it out. Take that whole thing, get rid of it. But because, I think, part of the reason that movement runs up against resistance—when we try to do that, and I tried—when we try, some part of the system is saying, "No, I need to be taken care of." And it doesn't understand that there's another way. There's that sense of "Wait, what?"

So the wishes for well-being are kind of connected and tangled in these patterns. If we think of our entanglement as a big ball of tangled threads, one set of those threads are the wishes for well-being. And the other set of threads that comes into play is the nature of life itself. It's impermanent. It's unreliable. It's not amenable to our conscious control all the time—even much of the time.

And what happens when these wishes for well-being bump up against reality? "May I be safe"—but things are unreliable. Things are uncontrollable. That's where the tangle is. It's this tangle between mettā and truth. Our habitual minds don't understand that these can coexist.

So our habitual minds sometimes, as we begin to meditate, start to understand about impermanence, unreliability. We feel into vulnerability. Yes, that's truth. Vulnerability. We touch into some of those truths—yes, uncontrollable. But then, "No, I want to be safe." And we might bludgeon ourselves with the truth.

"I know things are uncontrollable, so I shouldn't want to be happy." That will not fly in our minds, because metta is a wholesome, natural wish. And so if we are at all telling ourselves that vulnerability means we shouldn't want to be safe—that's the confusion about how these two things can coexist.

It is possible to know vulnerability, to know the unreliability of experience, to know that experience is not controllable, and to simultaneously recognize the wish for happiness, safety, well-being. But what happens often is that we haven't learned this perspective that these can coexist, and the habitual patterns become the tangle.

The interesting thing about the tangles is that there's nothing extra there. It's a tangle of views—views around how it's not okay. Sometimes if we're holding the metta wishes, we feel somehow betrayed by reality, that things are impermanent and unreliable. So it's one side or the other; we feel like there's a problem. And that feeling like there's a problem is the tangle.

Think about a cloth with tangled threads in the middle. If you take scissors and cut out the knot, you end up with a hole in the cloth. But it is possible to untangle the tangle—to recognize how these wishes for well-being and these truths become knotted together. I think of mindfulness practice with these tangles as being like a lubricant, something that loosens the tightness of the knots. It's not getting rid of any of the fibers. It's loosening the tangle. And at some point, we may begin to see that these can coexist.

In my experience, through not holding tightly to the metta or bludgeoning myself with truth—just being with the pattern, recognizing self-hatred when it arises, asking what's here, what's showing up, meeting depression, meeting whatever comes, again and again—sometimes I've seen the metta quality, the threads of metta, revealed.

The wisdom side was more apparent in my mind's tangle. Understanding that I don't have control—that was apparent. But the metta quality was not so visible. Let me share an example of how this unfolded.

I was watching a pattern of fear. It was after the September 11th attacks, and I was on one of the first flights after air travel resumed. I flew through Houston, my flight was delayed, and I missed my connecting flight, so I had to stay at the airport hotel. In the middle of the night, there was a power outage. As you might imagine, right after those attacks, my mind went immediately to terrorist attack. There was a lot of fear. I looked out my window and all of Houston—or all that I could see—was dark.

As that was happening, I could feel the uncontrollability of the situation. I watched the mind producing all kinds of disaster scenarios, noticed the fear, just noticed it. And then spontaneously, I noticed the mind begin doing metta. *May all beings be happy.* It wasn't just about me. *May all beings be safe.* That one really resonated. Yes, that's what I wish. May all beings be safe. As that thought moved through my mind, there was a sense of yes. And then the fear would return.

And I saw the deep connection between the fear and the wish. The fear was a response to the wish—but it had a demand embedded within it, a demand about needing to be safe, an insistence that uncontrollability is not okay. The fear was that response: *This uncontrollability is not okay. This need for safety is paramount.*

But when the mind was connecting to that experience of "may all beings be safe," that feeling of the mettā wish, there was the understanding of: *Yes, this is the way it is, and may all beings be safe.* And then the fear would come back.

I got to see that happen over and over again—how the fear was connected to the wish. That was my first real experience of seeing that these defilements, as we sometimes call them, are not wholly bad. There's a misunderstanding in there that's not useful—that's where the defilement is. But there's also something true and beautiful woven within.

To bring this back to the brahmavihāras and cultivating them: so many, if not all, of our patterns and habits of reactivity have this nature of being a tangle between basically love and wisdom. Whenever there's a reactive pattern, looking at it with mindfulness, looking at it with allowing awareness, it's an opportunity to see that all of those reactive patterns have in them threads of love and truth.

If we're willing to meet that experience, the tangle can untangle. It untangles itself. And then we experience the love and we understand something about the truth.

So this too is a way that the brahmavihāras happen. These beautiful qualities of love and compassion and joy and equanimity—they happen as our hindrances fall apart. It's not that they disappear exactly; they untangle, they get reoriented. And there's a weave of cloth that emerges.

Essentially, I think of the brahmavihāras as being the emotional map of the heart that is not clinging. When greed, aversion, and delusion fall away, the brahmavihāras are what's there. There is a deep connection between love and wisdom.

Now let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 190

Retreat Opening: Establishing Mindfulness, Refuges, and Precepts

Andrea Fella · 1h07

> *In this opening talk for a month-long retreat at IMS Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella introduces the distinctive meditation approach of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, which she has practiced for twenty years. Rather than directing attention to a chosen object like the breath, this method emphasizes receptive awareness—relaxing and noticing what is already being received by consciousness. Fella explains that mindfulness in its essential nature is receptive, and we can cultivate it by settling back to observe whatever experience naturally presents itself.*
>
> *The talk grounds this practice in the Buddha's Four Noble Truths (cattāri ariyasaccāni), explaining that suffering (dukkha) arises not from unpleasant experience itself but from our relationship to experience—the craving, aversion, and delusion that color our responses. Fella describes how mindfulness meeting difficult mind states creates conditions for their weakening, while awareness of wholesome qualities strengthens them. A key instruction involves "checking the attitude"—noticing how the mind relates to whatever is arising, which reveals subtle views and beliefs about meditation that perpetuate reactivity.*
>
> *Fella offers practical guidance on the four aspects of this practice: relaxing body and mind, recognizing that awareness is present, knowing what awareness receives, and periodically checking the relationship to experience. She addresses common challenges like sleepiness, noting that the belief "I can't be mindful while sleepy" itself creates aversion. The session concludes with taking the refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha) and the five precepts (pañca-sīla), establishing the ethical foundation and community container for the retreat ahead.*

So welcome everybody. Most of you are arriving today. There's a couple of you who are staying on, so thank you for welcoming us into your space. I think to track what the weekly schedule will be, I'll say something about that tomorrow morning. I do know that for some of you, the introduction said there would be a two o'clock optional sitting and a Wednesday Q&A in the hall. That was the last retreat, so that's not happening. The posted schedule is our schedule.

I thought I'd start by saying a few words about the kind of practice we're doing. But first, I should say something about the absence of my fellow teacher, Diana Clark. Diana agreed to step in when Nisha Patel had to pull out of teaching this retreat. Only Diana is

teaching another retreat this weekend, so she'll be arriving on a red eye from Sunday night, getting here Monday morning. I'm going to do the heavy lifting of the teaching for the first few days.

It actually ended up working out for me. I have a family situation—my brother passed away a couple of weeks ago, and I'm going to go down to New Jersey to participate in a memorial service for him. So I'll be leaving on Friday and returning on Sunday. Diana will be holding the load at that point, and I just feel so grateful to have a colleague that I can navigate this with.

So I thought I'd start by saying a few words about the style of practice that we'll be offering this month, the form of the practice. Not a lot tonight. I got here pretty late last night, and it was a lot to get here. For all of you too, it's a lot to get here. So I don't expect you have too many brain cells functioning. There's not going to be a lot of information tonight. Tomorrow morning at the 8:30 sitting, please come to that sitting. That will be where I offer the basic overview of the instructions. The instructions for this style of practice are so simple, it may seem like we don't need to elaborate, but elaborate we will.

Just tonight I thought I'd offer a little bit of an overview about this form of practice. How many of you are familiar with the style of teaching that Sayadaw U Tejaniya offers? Many of you, a few of you not.

I met Sayadaw U Tejaniya about twenty years ago now. I met him when I was helping out at a retreat in Burma, and I was hearing a lot of people talk about this teacher. I was really intrigued by what they said about him—in particular, the orientation towards observing the mind and the emphasis on relaxation.

So I went and met him. One of the things that had happened to me was in a prior retreat when I had been practicing in Burma. I had been sitting for long periods, and it injured my body a little bit to do that, so I had to shift to lying meditation at that retreat with those Sayadaws. When I asked them, "When should I come for my next interview?" they said, "Oh, you can come back to interview when you can sit again." And I felt kind of abandoned.

I felt like I could continue practicing in lying meditation, but they felt the practice required the upright posture. And so I left thinking I wouldn't be able to practice in Burma for a long time, not until my body healed.

Then I heard about Sayadaw Utejaniya and went to meet him. One of the first things I said was, "Sayadaw, I can't sit for very long. I do most of my meditation lying down. Would that be okay? Can I come to your monastery to meditate and practice with you if I'm in the lying posture?"

He looked up at me and said, "If you know how to meditate, it doesn't matter what posture you're in."

Yes! Thank you, Sayadaw.

So the next year I came back for six weeks and learned his method, which is different in many ways. I'll describe a little about how it differs from the forms of meditation practice that may be familiar to many of us. But first I want to say a few words about the motivation—why we practice.

I think we all understand that there's a lot of suffering in the world. In our own hearts and minds there's a lot of struggle and stress. Many of us come to meditation practice hoping to understand something about our minds, hoping to understand how we might have more ease and peace in our lives.

This is really what the Buddha pointed to in the Four Noble Truths: that suffering is a part of experience. The first noble truth, the truth of suffering, the truth of dukkha, the truth of stress—this is part of being human. And much of the stress we experience, what we call suffering, is actually not what we might think suffering is. It's not simply unpleasant experience—it's our relationship to experience that creates the stress and suffering in our minds, that creates the tension, that creates the difficulty in navigating our lives.

The second noble truth is that this suffering arises with craving, with greed, with aversion, with delusion. And there is a possibility for an ending—the ending of suffering, the ending of greed, the ending of aversion, the ending of delusion. This is the ending of suffering. That was the way the Buddha spoke about it.

Now, this doesn't mean there aren't difficult things, unskillful things that people do in our lives. It doesn't mean everything is suddenly all wonderful. But it means our hearts are not fighting with what is happening. In that not fighting with what's happening, we come into alignment, recognizing: okay, this is what's happening.

This is my understanding of equanimity—an orientation of mind that is in alignment with what is actually happening, what has already arisen. We understand that it has arisen, and we're not fighting with the fact that it has arisen. The heart that is not fighting with the nature of what's happening can respond skillfully to what's happening.

Equanimity doesn't mean we just say, "Oh yeah, that's what's happening, okay." Equanimity also includes the capacity to respond—but to respond skillfully, to respond with kindness, with ethics, with wisdom, instead of responding from greed, from anger, from hatred. The movement of our hearts around suffering shifts radically.

The practice of meditation, the practice of mindfulness, begins to help us understand the forces at work in our own hearts and minds—how greed, aversion, and delusion are operating within us. I think this also helps us understand how they're working in the world. As we see how to navigate them in our own minds, we learn how to navigate them differently in the world. This, to me, is really the purpose of our practice: to cultivate a new relationship with our own hearts and minds that will support us in a new relationship with the world.

The key teaching the Buddha offered for understanding our hearts and minds—understanding how greed, aversion, and delusion create stress and suffering, and how their release creates conditions for ease and peace, for skillful action, for compassion and wisdom to lead our choices instead of greed, aversion, and delusion—this teaching is mindfulness.

Awareness. Awareness is the word Sayadaw Utejaniya uses for mindfulness, and I like this word. For me, the word mindfulness feels kind of up here somewhere, feels a bit heady. But the word awareness is more evocative of what the experience actually is when I am aware, when I'm mindful. So I like using awareness for mindfulness. Other teachers use awareness in different ways, but I wanted to clarify at the beginning: the way I'm using awareness in this retreat means mindfulness.

One of the functions of mindfulness, one of the ways awareness works, is this: when we are meeting, when we are receiving qualities of mind based in greed, aversion, and delusion—when we meet those with mindfulness rather than reactivity, with just a simple, basic recognition of "this is what it's like, this is the human experience of someone experiencing anger or frustration or greed, this is the human experience of that"—

When mindfulness meets those kinds of qualities in the mind, it creates the conditions for them to weaken. My understanding of how this works is that when mindfulness feels—and really, I feel like mindfulness, awareness, has a feeling quality to it. There's a feeling that comes when we are aware of experience.

So the experience of recognizing anger, for instance: when we are mindful, when we are aware with anger, we will feel the experience. And the feeling of these states of mind that are based in greed, aversion, and delusion—generally they don't feel very

good. This is actually not a mistake. When we're recognizing them with mindfulness, when we're knowing, "Oh, this is what it's like to be a human being that's frustrated," we feel the suffering of that, we feel the dukkha of that. And we understand in feeling that, that it's not helpful.

So it's not a mistake when we experience the tension, the contraction around these difficult states of mind. But as some teacher said—it's an apocryphal statement—it's the kind of suffering that leads to the end of suffering. That kind of observation of experience allows the mind to begin recognizing, "This is not helpful," and it begins to find its way to letting go of those states. Now, it doesn't happen in a split second, usually. It takes time.

And yet that experience of recognizing, "Oh, this is the experience—when there's greed in the mind, this is what it feels like; when there's aversion in the mind, this is what it feels like"—the feeling of that tension, that contraction—the very experience of being aware of it can create some space around it, so that there's a sense of, "Oh, it's okay that it's happening." And there's the sense of the awareness and the wisdom that are being cultivated while witnessing that difficult state of mind. At times we can touch into those. There have been times when I was witnessing really strong anger and feeling genuinely happy—because it was being seen, and because there was an understanding of how the wisdom works, that the wisdom will begin to release, will begin to help the mind let those states go.

Simultaneously, when we bring mindful attention to compassion, to wisdom, to patience, to love, it creates the conditions for those to get stronger. So this very simple capacity of awareness, when it is brought to bear with a curiosity about "What is this experience?"—that's crucial. The perspective we bring to observing experience matters tremendously. If we are observing experience in order to make it go away, or in order to hold on to it, to get more of it, that's cultivating greed or aversion in the back of the mind, in the perspective through which mindfulness is meeting experience. It's meeting experience with that kind of lens on it.

But if instead it's more of a curiosity—"Oh, what is this experience? What is it like to be feeling this right now?"—that perspective, it sounds like such a small shift, like nothing almost, just to understand this is an experience happening in the present moment as it's happening and to be curious about it. That makes all the difference in the world. It makes the difference between continuing to be caught by our reactive habits and patterns and beginning to free ourselves from them.

And so mindfulness, awareness—very powerful, very powerful function of mind. This is the main thing we will be cultivating here: mindfulness, awareness. We'll be cultivating it from a slightly different perspective than some of you perhaps are familiar with.

Many times mindfulness practices begin by orienting toward a directing of the attention to some particular experience, like the breath. That's a choosing, a selecting something out of experience, and then we let our attention rest there. When the attention wanders from that, we come back. We notice the attention has wandered, and we return. In this way, we're cultivating mindfulness around a particular experience. This is a fine way to cultivate mindfulness. It develops, it grows, it begins to strengthen. Then over time we begin to expand to include more and more different kinds of experiences.

The style that I'm going to be offering, the style that Sayadaw U Tejaniya offers—instead of exploring the directing of attention to cultivate awareness, to cultivate mindfulness, it's a receptivity. Instead of choosing what to pay attention to, we are simply settling back and noticing that awareness is already receiving something. Fundamentally, awareness is receptive. The function of directing the attention—that's something connected with the factor of attention. Attention and mindfulness are different things.

I'll talk more about that probably in a day or so. But the aiming or directing of attention is a way that we can know we are connecting to an experience. We can also know that we're connecting to an experience because attention is always connecting to something. Whether or not we are choosing to direct the attention, attention is connecting with something. And that attention is directed essentially based on our conditioning—what we have cultivated our attention to go to, or where it's gone habitually in the past.

So attention will always be with something, and we don't have to choose to direct the attention in order to be mindful. This was a big shift in my understanding about mindfulness. When I first started practicing, I thought if I wasn't choosing where the attention was, it meant I wasn't being mindful. But that's not true. Mindfulness is essentially receptive. We can choose to direct the attention to the breath, but then what mindfulness does is receive that breath. Mindfulness just receives whatever attention is connecting to. Mindfulness in its nature is receptive. This awareness—its nature is receptive. And so what we're exploring here is attuning to that quality or functioning of mind: that mindfulness receives experience.

To begin connecting with this receptive quality of mindfulness, one of the things Sayadaw suggests at the beginning of practice is to relax. Relaxation is a huge support for this connection with receiving experience. We can start by consciously relaxing the body. When we explore this in a guided meditation, I'll probably do a bit of a body scan to support relaxation—just allowing there to be a relaxation of body.

And then allowing there to be a relaxation of mind. The mind often has quite a bit of tension in it around needing to do, needing to fix, needing to change. Thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future. There can be a sense of also relaxing the mind. Maybe the worries, the concerns can soften a little bit.

As the body and mind begin to relax, there's an invitation to just notice what's already happening. What do you already know? Like right now—what are you aware of right now? It might be something like just sitting here in this room and listening to me. It can be very broad. This is another piece of how this style of practice helped me understand that I was often thinking attention was very precise, landing on very specific things. But attention can land on very broad things, and so it's also possible to just be aware of sitting here in this room in a very open way. Or it might be something more specific, like the sensations of your hands, or a breath. So if you relax, what's obvious? You don't have to look for anything. One teacher, Gil Fronsdal, sometimes says, "What's coming to you? What experience is coming to you?"

If you have not practiced in this style before, likely what might happen as you relax—and this is what happened for me when I began this style of practice with Sayadaw U Tejaniya—he encouraged the relaxation, so I relaxed, and then it's like, okay, what's obvious? Well, what was obvious was bodily vibration. That had been my primary object for a long time. And so when I relaxed, that's where the attention went. Of course it went there. That had been conditioned.

So if you haven't done this style much, when you relax and check in to what's happening, you may find that whatever familiar meditation experience you're used to paying attention to, that's what's happening. That's okay. You don't have to say, "Oh, I shouldn't be paying attention to that because it's supposed to be receptive." Well, that's what's being received. What I would like to encourage is to notice the difference between when it feels like it's just happening—like you relax and then, wow, there's the breath, it's just being received, it's so simple.

It's so easy. It's so obvious. And there's a difference between that and when it feels like you are aiming, when you are doing it. If it feels like you're starting to do that, then it can be useful to, well, first of all, notice that—notice that directing of the attention.

And then perhaps, again, encourage a relaxation. Because that directing of the attention probably has some tension in it. So relaxing and again, then receiving. And maybe what's received again is what you're familiar with, and that's okay.

When I finally went and reported this to Sayadaw, I said, "When I relax, what I'm noticing is the body. I'm noticing body sensations. I'm not noticing what's happening in the mind." And he said, "Well, you need to do that too." But he didn't tell me much about how to do that. He'd given this other instruction, though, which I'll cover a little more in a bit, but I'll mention it now. And that is to check the attitude—to notice how the mind is in relationship to what's happening.

So I began the practice by just letting the relaxation and the attention rest with the body sensations, as I was familiar with. And then I kind of checked in. It's like, okay, so how's the mind with this? What's the relationship to the fact that this is what's happening? And I noticed that the mind was really calm and very happy. I had not noticed that before. And that was the beginning of really understanding how to watch the mind.

So this practice—we begin with a relaxation and then we just check in and see: Where is awareness? What is awareness naturally receiving? The entirety of our human experience is possible in terms of what's received. It can be any of our six sense-based experiences, and it might be something happening in the mind.

Over time, this style of practice—partly because of this checking of the attitude, because of the encouragement to be curious about "this is what's happening, how am I in relationship to it?"—we begin to recognize more and more how the mind is working. Is there wanting something to continue? Is there wanting something to go away? Is the mind balanced around it? Is there ease? Is there calm?

And the mind is where that greed, aversion, and delusion are working and creating stress and suffering—and where the release from greed, aversion, and delusion happens. So this practice begins to help us understand really clearly how to watch the mind. And from the beginning too. It's not just like some long stretch of time after you've done this practice. It happens pretty quickly that we begin to see, "Oh, I see." In my case, it was like, "Oh, there's happiness and ease in the mind. That's... wow." And I'm seeing it. I was seeing it—seeing what it was like to have that experience. What's it like to watch the mind?

So this practice, we begin with relaxation. And actually the instructions for this practice are pretty simple. There's four basic aspects. Relax. Recognize that you're aware and then know what awareness is receiving—that's two and three. Recognizing that

you're aware—for some of you, that may be clear. At times, that can take a little bit longer to really understand what it means to know that I'm aware. And we'll talk about that. As I said, we'll unpack this.

Multiple layers will unpack this. So there's a relaxation, then we recognize that we're aware and what awareness is receiving. Notice what's being received. And then from time to time, checking in: what's the relationship with what is being received? What's the relationship to the experience that's happening?

Now this piece—the relationship—there's so much that gets revealed here. So many different ways that we assume certain things about meditation. One of the things I found in this style of practice is that it really showed me how many ideas I had about meditation: views about what was good meditation, what was bad meditation, what kind of objects were appropriate for meditation, what needed to be happening. All of these ideas and beliefs. And they can get pretty subtle. They can get pretty quiet. This practice begins to help us see this.

A simple example is around sleepiness—that experience of falling asleep in meditation. How many of you have experienced that? I think all of you, for sure. And how many of you have had the thought, "I can't be mindful while I'm sleepy"? But sleepiness is just another experience. Mindfulness can receive any experience, even that thought, "I can't be mindful while I'm sleepy." You're already aware that you're sleepy. There's already some awareness of it. But the idea—that's a belief. There's a view there. "Sleepiness is not a good thing to be while meditating." And so what happens? We fight it. We think we need to get rid of it. That sets up an aversive relationship to it. The belief "I can't be mindful while I'm sleepy" creates the conditions for aversion to arise. Then we're relating to the experience through aversion, fighting the sleepiness.

There's so much to see in looking at the relationship to experience. It begins to make a beeline for how we might be relating to experience in terms of greed, aversion, and delusion. And then we observe that. The checking of the attitude isn't meant to say, "Oh, there's aversion in connection with sleepiness—how do I get rid of the aversion?" That's more aversion. Rather: what is the experience of aversion? "Oh, there's sleepiness and there's aversion to it. What's it like to have sleepiness with aversion? This is that—this human experience. What's that like?"

The checking of the attitude isn't meant to try to get rid of the attitude, but to understand it—to understand something about how it's affecting the mind, how it's affecting the body.

So that's a little bit about this style of practice. Tomorrow I'll give a more structured teaching around it. For now, just let this be an offering. You don't have to figure it out.

There's so much about the way the Dharma works—if we allow the Dharma to come in, I think of it like rain. Rain hits the landscape and filters down through the soil, absorbed into the earth, and then plants' roots begin to take it up. Think of the teachings as being like that. Just let them hit your system. You don't have to do anything with them. You don't even have to remember them. I will repeat myself a lot.

So, coming into a retreat, we honor in a way the container that we're creating.

We step into this container at the beginning of a retreat with the refuges and the precepts as an expression of the way we want to be together in community. You're all experienced students, so I'm not going to say too much about these. We've heard many talks about the refuges and the precepts. I'll just say a couple of things.

The refuges are really the orientation, the perspective of how we want to orient our lives towards the Dharma. We take refuge in the Buddha as the being who discovered, who found—he didn't create, but as he said through analogy, he found this ancient city and he found a path to this ancient city. He was not claiming to have created this. But he discovered, he found his way to the Dharma. And in finding his way to the Dharma, he woke up. He realized the freedom, he realized the possibility for the ending of suffering. That was his whole purpose on his journey: Is there a way to end suffering in this life? Through discovering the Dharma and then creating the teachings for us, we take refuge in the Buddha as an expression of the being who both found the Dharma, created a teaching around it, and then woke up.

And that the Buddha is a human being—to me, this is the beauty. When I take refuge in the Buddha, I think of this. It's the refuge in the possibility for a human being to awaken. It's possible for me to awaken. And the way to awaken is to connect with the Dharma, to take refuge in the Dharma—the teachings, the instructions, the understanding, the wisdom the Buddha offers. This is our path. This is how we wake up. We get lost, we wander off the path, but whenever we wake up, whenever mindfulness returns, in that moment we can essentially take refuge in the Dharma again. This awareness—this can free the mind.

And the Sangha, the refuge in the Sangha. To me, there are a couple of pieces around this. First of all, the lineage—the way that we know what the Buddha did and how he taught is because of this lineage of the Sangha, beings who practiced and carried the teachings 2,600 years to us. It's amazing. So much gratitude for that. My colleague Gil

Fronsdal says that Dharma is passed from warm hand to warm hand. We can think of this as a lineage of beings that have supported, passed from warm hand to warm hand, for 2,600 years.

And the Sangha also is a support for our practice—here, this is our Sangha. It's lovely to practice in community. There were times when I was sitting retreat, my first long retreats of two months or three months, I would just be sitting with my eyes closed feeling all the dukkha of what I was experiencing. Then I would open my eyes and see somebody sitting calmly. Or at one point I remember watching somebody move their hands very mindfully to a new position. It brought me right back into mindfulness. If they can do it, I can do it. So we support each other here.

One of the ways we support each other and support the world is through a commitment to ethics, a commitment to non-harming. This is what the precepts are really speaking to—that commitment to not harming. Not harming through physical action, refraining from killing living beings. Not harming through taking things that are not freely offered. Not harming through containing our sexual energy. Not harming through speaking falsely—and here, more noble silence. And then not harming ourselves and the possibility of losing clarity of mind through refraining from intoxicants.

These precepts are an ethical ground for our connection in community. And these are not small things. If every human being on the planet decided to refrain from killing living beings, it would be a different world. Completely different world. If everybody decided they would not tell lies, it would be a different world. So these commitments, they're not small things. Honor yourself for committing to them.

It can happen that we do break the precepts. If you find that you have broken a precept—what happened for me at one point on retreat was that I told, I can't remember exactly what it was, but it was a skew to a report that I gave to my teacher. I went to him and said, this is what happened.

I did not speak truthfully in the meeting. And I was in quite a state, actually. I was really in a lot of dukkha over having done this. This was my teacher in Burma—not Sayadaw U Tejaniya, another teacher—and he said, "You need to take the precepts again. You need to take the refuges and precepts again." I said, "Sayadaw, I've done that." And he said, "You need to take them in front of me." So I did. In front of him, I took the refuges and precepts, and he said, "Now your sīla is purified."

That was what I needed to hear—that the act of committing again to the precepts, even if I had broken a precept, the act of committing again purifies the heart. You understand that it was not skillful to have done that. But you take, you commit again. You recommit.

We make it easier here to follow the precepts, since you're not speaking much. It's just easier on retreat. But I definitely found at times, even in the interviews, it would be, "Oh, I did it again. I skewed that report." It was very painful. Very painful. But I learned a lot. I learned a lot about how breaking the precepts harms me, creates the pain here, and how to move forward, how to continue, how to carry on.

So we will take the refuges and precepts now together. Tonight we'll take the five precepts together, and then each night before the dharma talk, we'll take the refuges and precepts together. The dharma talks will be on Tuesday night and on Friday night. Those of you who are taking the eight precepts, we can take the eight precepts on Tuesday night.

The refuges we'll do together in Pali. The precepts we'll do call and response.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

And call and response for the precepts:

Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

Idaṃ me sīlaṃ...

That last part means: through my connecting with the precepts, may I find the deepest freedom.

So we'll just do a short sitting, just a few minutes. Finding your way to a posture that feels comfortable, alert, and yet relaxed. We're not going to do a whole scanning of the body for relaxing, but maybe just an invitation for relaxation. Maybe there can be a softening of the body. And maybe a softening of the mind.

Exploring the possibility of receiving with awareness. Whatever is easy, whatever is easy to connect to or receive, what is most simple. It might be something in the body. It might be hearing. Maybe it's the breath. What's being received? Now what's being received?

When we're not directing or aiming the attention, it's quite common for what's being received to change. So maybe for a few moments with the breath, and then with hearing, and then another body sensation, and then maybe a thought. The shifting of the attention is not a problem. We can settle back and allow, as Gil said, let experience come to us. Relax and receive.

The mind will wander into thought or drift off. If we lose mindfulness, not much we can do about that. And yet the moment that we recognize that we have lost mindfulness, in that moment mindfulness is already back. We're aware again already. So what's being received? There's nothing particularly to come back to.

We're already back. So what is awareness receiving?

Relax and receive. Again, allow what's happening, bringing that sense of curiosity to the receiving. What's this experience like? This human experience.

So many of you probably need some rest. You're welcome to take your rest or continue to practice as you wish.

CHAPTER 191

Supports for Continuity

Andrea Fella · 47 min

> *In this guided meditation and instruction from a retreat at IMS Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella introduces a practice centered on the simple yet profound recognition of awareness itself. Rather than directing attention to a particular object, practitioners are invited to notice what awareness is already receiving—whatever is obvious and easy to know in the present moment.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes relaxation as a foundational support for this receptive awareness. Fella guides a systematic relaxation through the body, noting how tension in the face and visceral areas directly reflects tension in the mind. She explores how relaxation and receptivity work reciprocally: conscious relaxation supports the capacity to recognize awareness, while resting in receptive awareness naturally brings about further ease and softening.*
>
> *A key teaching addresses the moment when mindfulness returns after the mind has wandered. Rather than judging ourselves for losing awareness, Fella encourages curiosity about this return—seeing it as a precious opportunity to recognize what it feels like to be aware. She uses the metaphor of waking up on a new planet, inviting practitioners to explore the mental landscape that was constructed during wandering. This includes checking our attitude: How are we relating to what's happening? Is there wanting, aversion, or perhaps an unexpected calm? By releasing judgment and cultivating curiosity, the recognition of awareness itself becomes a support for its continuity, creating a natural, effortless quality to practice.*

I will start this morning settling in with the sitting, and I will offer some reminders about this method of practice that we're offering.

Our basic exploration is recognizing that we're aware. This capacity to recognize that we're aware and to be curious about our experience as experience is supported by relaxation. Especially at the beginning of a retreat, it can be helpful to consciously connect with a relaxation of body, a relaxation of mind. It takes some time to allow for relaxation, and so we'll do this in a kind of systematic way again today.

Opening to the sensations of your head and face, see if there can be a softening. The face in particular has a very direct connection to the mind. If there's tension in the mind, it can be expressed in tension in the face. Relaxing tension in the muscles of the

face can allow for a natural softening in the mind. Soften the muscles around the eyes, the mouth, the jaw. Allow for a relaxation of the neck and shoulders. A softening of the arms and hands. Maybe there can be a relaxation of the chest and upper back, all of those muscles around the rib cage. Perhaps there can be a relaxation, a letting go of tension across the stomach and abdomen, in the middle and lower back. Relaxing in the hips, maybe inside the hip socket. Maybe there can be a softening of the legs and the feet.

I also find it helpful to explore the possibility of relaxing inside the body. Perhaps there can be a softening inside the throat. A softening, a relaxation of the heart, the area around the heart. Maybe the stomach and the intestines can relax, all those organs inside the body. This area too is very connected to the mind, and so a relaxation of this inner landscape, this visceral area of the body, can support a softening in the mind, a relaxation of tension in the mind. Maybe too there can be an invitation for the mind to relax. As my colleague Gil Fronsdal suggests, as if the brain were a muscle, maybe the brain can relax.

Having explored a relaxation of body, of what might be possible to consciously release, I sometimes find it useful to just drop in again an invitation for there to be relaxation. May the body relax. And then just see how the mind and body respond to that invitation. Not trying to do anything, just seeing what happens as you drop in that invitation. May the body relax. I sometimes find with that kind of invitation some tension releases that I didn't even know was held until it has released. May the body relax. May the mind relax.

We've been connecting with awareness through this process of relaxation, being aware of various areas of tension and release. And now, allowing for a connection with the recognition: Are you aware? This is simple. Don't look too hard for it. In fact, looking for it will probably make it harder to recognize.

Just aware. Just knowing.

And yet often, especially at the beginning, it's easier to recognize awareness when we notice that we are aware of something. This can also be a doorway. So what is awareness aware of? What is being received?

There's no need to choose something to pay attention to. There will be something awareness is already receiving. What is obvious? What is easy to know? It may be the breath or body sensations, hearing—whatever is being received.

Exploring the possibility of allowing. It's just physical or mental phenomena happening in this human body. We are exploring this human experience, getting to know it like a naturalist in nature. What's showing up? It may be anything in our body, mental and physical processes. It could be thoughts or emotions.

Settling back, maybe with the feeling of experience coming to you. Sometimes it can feel that way. Sometimes it can feel like awareness is following the attention, kind of moving where the attention is. It's just a different experience that can happen. There's not a right way. It's noticing how awareness is receiving.

And recognizing that with this shifting of the attention, it's not a problem that the attention shifts. It may at times settle with one experience for a while, and at times it may move more quickly. We don't have to know all the details of what the awareness is landing with. Whatever is obvious is enough.

Sometimes I have the feeling of just resting and receiving. I remind myself: let awareness do its job. I don't have to do that. Awareness will be aware. That's its function.

Are you aware? What is obvious? What is awareness already receiving?

If you notice that the attention gravitates to a familiar meditation experience like the breath, that's fine. Just noticing the difference between when that happens naturally—it can feel very effortless—and when it feels like we start to do that attending. Notice the difference there between receiving the experience and directing the attention to it. If you notice a directing of the attention, there is likely some tension with that. So perhaps remembering relaxation. Relaxing, receiving.

And awareness will get caught, will lose mindfulness, will lose awareness, be lost in thinking or lost in a state. At some point, mindfulness will return. In that return, some curiosity about the experience of becoming aware again. It's a great moment to begin to get really familiar with what it's like to be aware.

That awareness will be aware of something, likely something connected with where the wandering went. We don't need to judge that. It's conditions. It's the conditioned nature of the mind.

And so opening to what's here now, in this moment. It's kind of like the wandering creates a landscape in the mind, a new world that we haven't been clearly aware of because the mindfulness was lost. But in the return of mindfulness, we're often waking up into that landscape.

So what's the landscape like? We're a naturalist on a new planet. What planet are we on?

This is recognizing the effect. This is seeing the conditioning, how the mind has been conditioned. It's not a mistake. It's not a problem. It can be received. It is being received in awareness. Are you aware? What is obvious? What's easy? What is awareness already aware of?

And from time to time, we check the relationship. How are we with what is happening? What's the attitude, as Sayadaw would say? Do you want something to happen? Want something to stop happening? Is there confusion? Or maybe there's an ease, an okayness, a balance of mind.

Checking the attitude can be done with a simple question: How am I with what's happening? Again, it's an invitation. It's not that we're looking for something specific. It's an invitation for an attitude to show up, to be more clearly recognized. Sometimes we don't necessarily recognize an attitude, and that's okay. Just continue noticing what's obvious.

Often I find that in asking a question like that, sometimes an answer appears as a word in the mind or a sentence. But more often it actually appears through a shift in the experience, a recognition of, "Oh, this is arising also. This is also here, and it hadn't been clearly seen." Maybe there's a recognition of some tension around a pushing away. "Oh, there's aversion." It may not be expressed in words in the mind. So in checking the attitude, simply notice the experience. We drop in that invitation and keep noticing what's here, what's obvious.

Fundamentally, this practice is extremely simple. Very little to do. Just a light touch of effort to connect—aware of what? Aware of what?

Relaxation, as I've said several times, is so helpful. It's a helpful condition that supports our capacity to recognize that we're aware, to have this receptive aspect, this receptive awareness. At the beginning, it is helpful to consciously relax. And as we continue in this exploration of recognizing awareness and allowing, receiving what's here, what I find is that connecting with that receptivity quite naturally brings relaxation into the experience.

So it goes both ways. The relaxation supports the receptivity, and the receptivity supports a relaxation. You may find that starting with just what's here and noticing, "Oh, there's some tension," quite naturally that tension releases.

I mentioned in the meditation about when the mind wanders—we wake up at some point, and noticing the return of mindfulness, that moment when we become aware again, how important that moment is to begin to see, to recognize the experience of awareness, what it feels like to be aware.

If we're not judging ourselves for having gotten lost, it's much easier to notice that return of mindfulness. At one point, I began to get really curious about that experience of the return. And just that curiosity really helped to release the judgment around the fact that the mind wandered, because if in a 45-minute sitting the mind wandered a hundred times, that was a hundred opportunities to see awareness returning and to get familiar with that experience—what it's like to be aware.

The recognition, getting familiar with what it's like to be aware, will be a support for the continuing of the awareness.

And in the waking up after the mind has wandered, as I mentioned, it's like when the mind wanders it can wander off into some thought or fantasy or memory of something we were doing yesterday or an experience last week when we were not here. It can be wandering off into something, and the constructing power of the mind is so powerful. So when we wake up, we often get to see what has been constructed while the mind was wandering. We're waking up into something that has been shaped by the conditioned nature of our minds. The mind wandered—perhaps it heard a sound, and that sound reminded us of something, and that reminding allowed a memory to arise, but we got lost somewhere in that process instead of being aware of it.

And so when mindfulness returns, we can see what had been shaped. I often use this analogy of the mind creating a planet, just a whole world while it's wandering. And our exploration when mindfulness returns is to be curious: What planet am I on now? Is it planet confusion? Planet fun? Planet frustration? And then just feeling that. What's that like? Can that be received? Can that be allowed?

Noticing the attitude is a really useful practice after returning from wandering. We often have not only a relationship to the fact of the wandering itself, but we may have relationships to what it wandered into. A feeling like "that was a waste of time." Okay, that's what's arising now—that attitude.

Sometimes when the mind wanders—and I've seen this happen more often than I would have expected when I first started getting curious about what had been shaped by the mind wandering and began to lose the judgment about it—sometimes when the mind wanders, it wanders into calm. It wanders into ease. For me it was kind of like the mind saying, "Hey, you're working too hard. Let me show you how to relax." And it

would get lost in that relaxing, and then there would be a coming back into awareness and being curious: Oh, what planet was I on? I was on planet calm. Okay, that's what's here now.

If we're judging ourselves for the wandering itself, that judgment will probably obliterate the calm. So just really be curious about what's here. What's here in each moment.

CHAPTER 192

Continuity

Andrea Fella · 53 min

> *In this guided meditation and teaching from the Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella offers profound yet practical instructions on maintaining continuity of awareness. She emphasizes the simplicity at the heart of practice: asking "Are you aware?" and "What's obvious?" rather than trying to create special states or particular experiences.*
>
> *A significant portion of this talk explores the relationship between awareness and thinking—a territory where many meditators struggle. Fella clarifies why thoughts often seem to disappear when we try to observe them: the directing or aiming quality of attention (vitakka in Pāli) uses the same mental energy as thinking itself. She distinguishes this directed attention from the receptive quality of awareness that can know thinking while it's happening, observing how thought content shapes emotions, body sensations, and subsequent mental formations (saṅkhārā).*
>
> *Fella describes various ways thoughts manifest—as inner speech, images, or even through other sense modalities—and addresses the hypnagogic, daydreamy quality of mind that often arises as practice settles. Throughout, she repeatedly emphasizes that nothing she describes is something to "do"; rather, these are descriptions of what can naturally be noticed. This teaching illuminates how understanding the conditioned nature of experience leads to a natural weakening of unwholesome qualities and strengthening of wholesome ones, all through simple, receptive awareness.*

Are you aware? What's obvious? What's easy? What is already being received?

It doesn't matter what the experience is. We can be aware with any experience. We can be aware when the attention rests with one experience for a while, or when it's shifting from experience to experience. Every experience offers an opportunity to learn curiosity about experience as experience.

If it feels like there's a struggle, any tension about connecting with experience, notice the relationship. Check the attitude. Be curious about what perspective is here. If checking the attitude, noticing the relationship, allows something new to be seen—something that had been hidden—then that too is just another experience, another happening.

Notice the return of awareness. If the mind has wandered and woken up again, recognize that re-arising of awareness. Aware again.

Quite often the mind wanders, gets hooked, and part of that being hooked and losing mindfulness is often connected to the process of thinking. And thinking itself is not inherently an experience that we can't be mindful of, like any other experience. It's just an arising phenomenon that awareness can know, can connect with. You can be curious about the experience of thoughts, of thinking. A simple recognition: thinking is happening.

Sometimes the recognition might be a little more specific—the kind of thinking that's happening. But we don't have to try to do this or label this. Mind can just open to the recognition that thinking is happening. Often Sayadaw will say, "Can you know a thought is a thought? Can you know a thought is just a thought?"

Sometimes thoughts are pretty potent. They have a pull. There's strong content that's attaching or interesting the mind—the content of the thought. And if the content is compelling, it can be really useful to recognize that this content, the contour of the nature of the thought, is shaping our experience. Thoughts about a conversation with a friend—that content will have an effect, likely an effect on us, conditioning emotions, conditioning body sensations. And so, some curiosity: How is this thought affecting the body and mind?

Sometimes the content is less strong, not particularly compelling. We can have some curiosity about how we know we are thinking. How is the thought appearing? Is it as if we're speaking to ourselves? As if someone else is speaking to us? Images? Sometimes even a felt sense in the body, a kinesthetic experience. We can recognize how thoughts are happening, how they are experienced.

We can also be curious—and this is very interesting with thoughts that are more random or drifty or daydreamy—to be curious about the quality of the mind that is having those thoughts. It can be spacious, easeful, calm. And often we kind of just lose awareness, drifting off into those states, the quality of the mind. Yet we can be clearly aware of the calm, the ease, the spaciousness.

Not looking for any particular experience, not trying to create a special state. Whatever is present can be received, is being received. The practice is so simple. Are you aware? What is awareness receiving?

Sometimes in exploring being aware with thinking, people describe that when they notice a thought, the thought goes away, and so they've been confused about how they can actually know thinking while it's happening. What I would say is that that kind of observation—it's more about how the mind is looking at the experience. If we're directing or aiming to look at a thought, and the practice of noting is doing that, like naming

"thinking" or "planning" or "remembering," it's a directing, it's an aiming, often. And that very activity of aiming uses the same energy in the mind that thinking uses. And so it takes the energy out of the thought. That way of observing will naturally cause the thought to tend to disappear. The very word in Pali for that aiming or directing of the attention is *vitakka*.

It's also translated as thought or thinking. So that energy of aiming will tend to create the conditions for a thought to go away. This can be very useful. This is partly how the mind can settle with a more concentration practice.

And yet we are also interested, especially in this style of practice, in learning how to be aware with all experience. The kind of awareness that can know thinking while it's happening is receptive. A receiving quality can simply know what's arising in that awareness, including thought, and be aware in the recognition of that arising—how it's affecting other experience.

So there's this curiosity about being aware with thinking and how thinking, especially the content, has a very potent conditioning power in the mind. We become curious not so much about what the content is, although that can be apparent as we become aware with thinking, but about how that content is affecting emotions, affecting the body. This is seeing the conditioning power, the shaping power of thoughts—the shaping power of mental formations.

Mental formations are a functioning of mind that shapes all of experience. They shape how our body is, the quality of the feeling tone, what we're perceiving. They shape other mental formations, so the content of a thought can shape an emotion. And they can also shape what we tend to notice, where the attention goes, what consciousness meets. So it's a very powerful shaping quality, and this is useful to notice.

Noticing the conditioned nature of experience, we begin to recognize and understand what qualities of heart and mind shape unhelpful suffering, unskillful experience, unwholesome qualities of mind—and what shapes the wholesome. Quite naturally there will be a weakening of the unwholesome and a strengthening of the wholesome in the seeing of these processes, in the seeing of this conditioned nature.

When content is less strong, we can be curious about the process of how thinking is happening. A certain level or layer of thoughts often feels as if we're speaking to ourselves, talking to ourselves. Sometimes we can notice it's like somebody else's voice, or like a radio playing—we're hearing somebody else speaking to us. It might be images. Thoughts can be experienced through any sense modality. Often, I think, it is

through sound and sight, as if we are seeing or hearing our thoughts. Now, it's not really that seeing and hearing are happening, but they're expressing themselves in that way.

We can notice this—the process of how thinking is happening. It can also be as if we're smelling something. This for me is much rarer, but I have experienced it: there's a smell, and it's like I'm actually smelling something, and then I realize, no, that's a thought. Physically too—sometimes a thought can be experienced as if we're doing something. This was how I practiced my dances when I was a dancer: thinking the feeling. Any sense modality, we can be curious about how thoughts are arising. And sometimes that's what's obvious.

Again, this isn't something to try to do. This is more of a naming of things that can be noticed. I'll probably say this multiple times. Certainly Sayadaw said it to me several times, because I would hear what he talked about and then go try to do it. I'd come back and report either my struggle or my success, and he would say, "Are you trying to do that?" And I would say, "Yeah, I thought that's what you suggested." And he'd say, "Nothing I say is anything for you to do. It's simply a description of things that can be noticed."

It's useful to describe or to hear different things that can be seen, because sometimes the descriptions will help us recognize: oh, that's actually what is already being noticed, but it hadn't been clearly recognized until it was named. So this description around noticing the way thinking is happening—you don't have to try to do this. Just continue simple, simple practice. What's arising? What are you noticing? What's naturally being noticed? This information, this sharing, is a condition that may allow you to recognize something different in your experience.

Another piece around thinking: often, especially as the practice begins to settle, as the mind begins to settle, it's not discursive thinking that's happening but rather daydreamy images, hypnagogic states—that quality of just random, seemingly random thoughts coming through about people we don't know, things happening we don't particularly care about. Just imagery, or words even, kind of funny random words appearing in the mind. When that kind of thinking is happening—

there's usually a quality to the mind that's pretty relaxed, pretty spacious. And so that can be recognized. Sometimes we get lost in the relaxed, spacious quality of mind. It's like those hypnagogic images are almost a sign of the mindfulness weakening a little bit, because the mind is getting caught in the state itself.

So the recognition of the quality of the mind can brighten the mindfulness. If you kind of wake up noticing those hypnagogic images, if you're waking up into those, notice the quality of the mind that's already happening. It's just available. It's available to be recognized. And again, not something to do—it's something that can be seen, something that can be recognized.

A couple of you have asked about reading. There are some books by Sayadaw U Tejaniya in the library. There are a limited number of those books, and so I'd like to encourage you not to keep them in your room for the retreat, but to share them with each other. We are going to order a couple more copies so that they're available.

I would also encourage, if you do reading, to do it sparingly. Maybe just a paragraph. And while you're doing that, see if you can notice—these are thoughts, this is content that you are taking in. This is a way of exploring a relationship to content. Read a sentence. How does that content affect your experience? Does it brighten the mind? Does it allow you to recognize the awareness? Reading a few sentences and noticing how it affects you.

I recently published a book that we're going to have about four or five copies available in the library as well. And I will give you a copy when you go. I don't want you just reading the books during the retreat. They'll be available in the library—you can, again, sparingly read. And you don't even have to read. I feel like we are offering you plenty. But some people tend to learn with that modality, so it's available if you wish. But do keep in mind that there are a limited number of those books, so please share.

CHAPTER 193

Recognizing Delusion

Andrea Fella · 1h05

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella examines delusion (moha) as the most foundational of the unwholesome roots, explaining that greed and aversion cannot arise without delusion underlying them. She identifies three distinct levels: the familiar disconnection or 'checked out' quality when mindfulness lapses; personal delusions shaped by our conditioning, culture, and family that function as unexamined views; and the deepest level —the universal human tendencies to perceive what is impermanent as permanent, what is unreliable as reliable, and what is not-self as self.*
>
> *Fella offers practical guidance for recognizing each level, drawing on the Buddha's teaching of 'gratification, danger, and escape' to investigate how long sense pleasures actually last, and exploring the three flavors of self-identification: 'this is mine' (ownership), 'this I am' (the agent or doer), and 'this is myself' (the passive recipient of experience). She emphasizes that delusion doesn't obscure the object of experience but rather obscures its true nature—its impermanent, unreliable, and not-self characteristics.*
>
> *The talk concludes with an encouraging perspective on the path: while insights into the delusory nature of experience may feel obvious in moments of clarity, delusion will return—yet each time it does, we can recognize it more clearly. Through patient practice, these veils gradually thin, and we learn to meet even the mind's persistent searching for solidity with tenderness rather than resistance.*

We've been talking about checking the attitude, and there are four basic flavors of attitude: those associated with or in the bucket of greed, of desire, of wanting, leaning toward; those in the field or terrain of aversion, wanting to get rid of, to push away; those in the field of delusion, which is the topic of tonight's talk; and those in the terrain of basically balance of mind, wise thinking, wise attitude—that perspective that allows us to be at ease with whatever is happening.

They are all worth recognizing. I'd say that greed and aversion are usually the most familiar. We know what those feel like. We are pretty clear when those are present. Greed is that kind of leaning toward. There's often a visceral sense of reaching out, wanting, a grasping toward. Aversion is that pushing away or wanting to get rid of.

Delusion can be harder to recognize. But in a way, it's more foundational than the other two. Greed and aversion would not arise if it were not for delusion. So there's delusion embedded in the movement to want to hold on or grasp onto something, and in the movement to want to push away something. Delusion is all over the place, but often it's harder to recognize.

Sometimes people have the idea or the belief that we can't really see delusion, that it's one of those things we can't see—that in its very nature, if there's delusion in the mind, it means we're not mindful. That is not the case. We can begin to recognize delusion functioning. And then it's no longer driving the mind in the way it was. When we see greed as greed, it's no longer driving the mind in the direction of that wanting. When we see delusion as delusion, it's no longer obscuring the mind. It's no longer functioning as a filter or a confused perspective on experience.

So partly this talk is information about how delusion works, and ways that we can begin to be curious about recognizing it so that we can start to see it.

There are different levels to delusion. The most obvious, or the one that most people are more familiar with, is a kind of checked-out quality, a disconnection—just not being aware. That space where we're not aware, there is delusion happening there. That one is harder to see directly, but we can see it when the mindfulness returns. And we can begin to see flavors of that quality of being checked out: spaciness, dullness, and so forth.

The next level down is more what I'll call personal delusion. It's delusions that have been shaped by our personal lives, by our cultures, by our families—ways that we think the world works that are basically views or perspectives we're not seeing as views or perspectives. This is one of the key ways that delusion functions: there's something happening in the mind, a belief or a view or a perspective, that's not seen as a belief. So we're just taking it to be truth. We're taking it to be how things are, how things are supposed to be.

These can be shaped in simple ways. Our culture, for instance—whatever culture we grow up in, whether it's familial or the broader culture—there are some basic, familiar ways that we learn about how close to stand to somebody that we don't know, or how much eye contact we make with them, or whether we touch somebody we don't know. These things are just embedded in how we interact, and nobody sits us down and tells us this is what we do. We just absorb it. Many views come in this way. It's not like somebody has taught us these views; they've been more absorbed through seeing how people interact with each other.

These kinds of views we can begin to recognize as perspectives, sometimes when they're challenged. When I was younger, I really enjoyed traveling around the world, and I found those edges fascinating—seeing where things were different, where this is not the way I'm used to interacting with a stranger, for instance.

So those are kind of neutral views in some way, and wars have been fought over less. These personal views, perspectives around how we interact with each other, what we believe about each other—this is the realm of this middle level of delusion, and it creates a lot of suffering.

But the most insidious level is the set of delusions that we share as human beings. At that middle level, we share the processes by which delusion works: this picking up of a view and believing it, thinking that this is the way the world should work or the way the world works, and not recognizing it as a perspective or as a view. That's a similar way that delusion functions across cultures, but they're different flavors of beliefs or perspectives that are picked up. At the more insidious level, the deepest level of delusion, are delusions that we share as human beings.

These misperceptions seem to be woven into the very fabric of our being, and to some extent into our biology, into how our senses function. These are the three basic misperceptions: we tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent; we tend to take what is unreliable to be reliable, or what is suffering to be pleasurable; and we tend to take what is not self to be self. I'll spend the most time on this third one, but let me say a little about those first two as well.

The first one involves a lack of awareness, a disconnection from experience. This happens to us all the time. When we get lost in thought, when the mind is pulled into thinking, we are not aware of what's happening. We become absorbed into a world. That absorption into that world, and to some extent believing that world—that's delusion. When mindfulness returns, we often can recognize, "Oh, wow, I've been lost in thought." Although sometimes we stay believing those thoughts.

I had one partner where I would find myself lost in thoughts, thinking about things he might do and getting angry at him for things he might do. And then I'd wake up and recognize, "He didn't do this." But then I'd think, "But he could. He could do those things." And so the anger was still bubbling, even though I saw that I was now aware those were just thoughts. Sometimes even that imagined world creates a perspective we hold on to.

So this form of delusion we can really begin to get curious about in that moment when mindfulness returns. When mindfulness returns, as I've said, we have that sense of what it was like in the moments before—to not be aware, to be lost. In that return of mindfulness, we get the flavor of that mind that feels disconnected. We may even begin, through that recognition, through mindfulness returning and seeing that quality of the disconnected mind that was present moments before, to recognize the feeling of the mind starting to disconnect, the movement in that direction. We can begin to be attuned to that quality of checking out or moving into disconnection.

Doubt is also a flavor of this quality—doubt in the practice, doubt in our capacity. When these states are not seen, we're caught by that view of doubt. We believe, "I can't do this," or "Everybody else can do this and I can't," or "I'm failing." In that case, doubt isn't really obscuring our experience. We're still aware; we're just doubting our capacity, doubting whether we're doing it right. The doubt is functioning more as a perspective, as a view. When that view is not seen, we're caught in that wavering feeling: "Should I do this? Should I do that? How can I do this? I'm not doing this right." We're caught in that.

But if we can see, "Oh, what is happening is that doubt is arising," then it's no longer functioning as doubt. It's no longer in the way of the practice. It is just another experience. Any experience will do. It's an impermanent, constructed phenomenon that reveals the nature of experience. None of what I'm talking about here is a problem when it's seen. It's not in the way. But it does need to be seen, and delusion is particularly hard to see—hence this talk.

The second level of delusion concerns our views that are created or shaped by our lives, by our conditioning—our personal conditioning, our familial conditioning, our social conditioning in our schools or workplaces. We get immersed into a particular culture or setting, and people in that setting interact in certain ways. As I said a few minutes ago, we absorb that culture.

We have a culture here that, I think, the first time I landed in a culture like this, I thought was pretty strange. You don't make much eye contact, you don't talk. It felt very strange, and I felt very uncomfortable. But over time, I learned to really appreciate the value of some aspects of this culture and absorbed its flavor.

So we absorb these—what's the right word?—these ways of interacting with each other. That's not a problem in itself. We have shared agreements here. But where it does become a problem is when we don't understand that this is a shared agreement and we begin applying it elsewhere, in other situations. We pick it up as being the way things are supposed to be, rather than seeing it as appropriate for a particular context.

We're seeing it as simply the way things are supposed to be.

We pick up these views through a kind of absorption. When we're in a family culture, when we're in a particular culture from a very young age, we pick up some of these views without any articulation for them. They're just what we know, how we live our lives. This becomes a perspective that we bring to our experience, and that particular perspective begins to filter how we receive experience.

We have a belief or a view about something. And because that belief or view has been so embedded in us, the way our minds tend to work is that we see things that confirm that view, and we actively don't see things that disconfirm it. This is a well-documented psychological phenomenon called confirmation bias. The Buddha's languaging of this, from way before that term existed, is: whatever one frequently ponders becomes the inclination of the mind. Frequently pondering doesn't necessarily mean consciously thinking about something, but being in the field of something over and over again. It becomes how we orient to the world.

Again, views are not inherently problematic, but they become problematic—they create suffering—when we run into people holding different views. In this country, all over the world really, people holding different views about religion, about immigration, about political things—this is generating war. It's generating a lot of suffering in the world. This is not a small kind of suffering. It's not a small thing to begin to recognize: oh, this is a view that's being held. It's not necessarily absolute truth. It's one way of looking at the situation.

When we can recognize a view as a view, there's a little bit of space to understand it's not necessarily absolute truth—it's a perspective. That can create conditions for a little more room to have conversation, to navigate different perspectives. Views will happen. We need to recognize that they are views. This is part of the power of the question, to check from time to time: what is being believed?

Some of our own suffering, as I mentioned earlier, my tendency towards self-hatred was ultimately seen as a thought that was being believed. "I'm a failure. I'm no good. I'm not worthy of being loved." That perspective. Now, the thought or belief itself was not where the potency was—it was in the strength of the belief that it was so potent.

So much of our suffering around greed and aversion contains beliefs. There are views embedded in greed and aversion. Greed itself is that leaning towards, that reaching out, that tendency to want to latch on. Aversion is that pushing away, wanting to separate from. Each of those has its own view, and without the view, the greed or aversion would not be happening.

Within greed is the perspective: getting that thing will make me happy. That belief is not itself felt as a belief—it's just true. If I get that thing, I'll be happy. And in aversion, the perspective is: if I get rid of that thing, I'll be happy. Seeing or recognizing that thought doesn't necessarily feel like aversion. It just feels true. That unpleasant thing is in the way of being happy. I need to get rid of it in order to be happy.

There are beliefs embedded in greed and aversion. Most, if not all—I think all—of our suffering, when we are suffering, there is some kind of delusion at work. There's some kind of belief or view at work that's not clearly being seen. When we can really feel the quality of the emotional suffering, however that suffering is being felt—this is what I've seen for myself in the practice.

When I can really feel into that without resistance, when I can know it, it's like, "Yep, there it is. It feels like this." And it feels like it's okay to be with it. It's not pleasant necessarily, but it feels fine to hold it and meet it.

When I can hang out with some kind of dukkha, even for not very long—a minute or so—that can be a useful time to bring in that kind of question. Because it feels to me like being able to be with the dukkha, being able to be with the aversion, being able to be with the greed—when we can hang with the experience, feel into it, it's a place or a way of being with experience that allows for potentially something to be seen that hadn't been seen before.

So: what's being believed? Or a broader question: anything else want to show up? Just opening to something else. In that space where we can meet experience, we're inviting something that had perhaps been a little repressed. We're willing to see whatever wants to be here.

When those beliefs are not seen, that's the delusion. When they're seen, we can recognize, "Oh, that believing is happening."

I also find it useful, in that space of recognizing there's a belief happening here, to look more closely. Because sometimes when we see a particular belief, it can be like, "Yeah, I can see why the three-year-old me believed that, but I don't even consciously believe this anymore." And if we see that, we may think of just dismissing it: "Yeah, yeah, I know this isn't true. This belief is silly." But some part of the system is believing it. So not to dismiss the belief, but to really acknowledge: okay, this is being believed. This is the experience of believing this.

I find it interesting at times to see just how strong the belief is. Am I really on board with that one? Or is it that kind of place where I can see I don't consciously believe this, but at a deeper level, there's something saying, "Yeah, this is true. I am no good. I am a failure." I could see objectively I wasn't a failure, but it didn't mean that I didn't feel that way.

Now, the deepest level of delusion—the third level—these are delusions we share as human beings, quite fundamentally. We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. We tend to take what is unreliable to be reliable as a place for lasting happiness. And we tend to take what is not self to be self.

You probably recognize these as the flip side of what is often talked about as the characteristics of experience: that the nature of experience is impermanent, unreliable or dukkha, and not self. But what our minds do is attribute permanence, attribute reliability, attribute self to experience.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya says delusion doesn't obscure the object—it obscures the nature of the object. When delusion functions in this way, when we're taking something impermanent to be permanent, we're still knowing the object, but we're seeing it in a distorted way. We're attributing something to it that is not in its nature. And we will suffer because its nature is impermanent. Attributing the nature of permanence to it and thinking we can find happiness by holding on to it, we will suffer because it is going to fall apart.

In terms of taking what is impermanent to be permanent, there are so many pieces of our human system that create this tendency to believe in the solidity or stability of things—just the way our perceptual system works. When I'm looking around the room here, what I perceive is stability of the floor and all of you seated on the floor. But if I had a camera moving the way my head was moving, it would look kind of jumpy. There's a perceptual process that creates the sense of stability.

Our perceptual processes also take in rapidly changing information. We know this through how the eye works—the eyes receiving little bits of light and putting together an image. It's just like pixels. It's not anything whole. Our minds have this capacity to stabilize, and it's actually helpful. It's kind of helpful not to feel like we're walking on a moving ship all the time.

There was this exhibit at a science center in San Francisco that I went to with my nephew when he was ten. We walked in, and in the back of the building, kind of across the way, there were all these bars hanging up on the ceiling.

And they were probably six feet high and maybe three inches around, and they had flashing lights on them. There were about fifteen or twenty of these bars, spaced about two feet apart. So there were a whole bunch of these bars, and that's what I noticed—these flashing lights on these bars. I thought, "I wonder what that is. I'll have to check that out later."

At a certain point, we were sitting down having a drink, resting our feet, and my nephew kind of looked up. He said, "Oh, it's a school bus." And I looked up and saw flashing lights. I said, "What? What are you talking about?" He said, "Oh, now it's butterflies." What are you talking about?

So I had to stand there and let my eyes relax. At a certain point, I could see it—it turned into the perceptual processes. It's entirely perceptual, the way this thing works. I could see the entire place where the bars were hanging, like it turned into a screen. And across that screen, I could see a school bus driving. It's kind of like what you might see if you had slits in a fence and something drove past it. Your mind carries the image from one to the next, to the next, to the next. I think it's called persistence of vision. That's how the perception worked, and it created this illusion of a thing up there.

I mean, I knew there was no school bus up there. It was only flashing lights. But it was so detailed—I could see the name of the school district on the side of the school bus from those little pixels of information flashing past.

So this is the power of our human system to create stability. Of course we confuse. Of course this happens. Of course we think there's stability. Of course we believe we should be able to find it.

Another way that impermanence is masked—so our perceptual systems will mask impermanence, kind of hide it from us—is that we tend to relate to experience through concept. For instance, our hand. We relate to our body often through concepts of our body. If we just look at our hand and think about it as a hand—what it does, how it touches things and reaches things—that's creating an idea that we are meeting experience through.

Now if we, just right now, let our attention rest in the hand and feel what that experience is like, it's probably quite a dynamic sense. Maybe pulsing, tingling, prickling, moisture—there's a lot of different sensations going on. And then think about it again as a hand that does things. When I do that, it's like I lose touch with those sensations. I have to work when I'm thinking about it as a hand to stay in touch with the sensations.

This sense of relating to experience through concept is a very powerful delusory function in our minds. We tend to meet experience not through direct contact with it, or even direct recognition of how it's being reflected in our minds, but through an idea, through a concept. We meet people through concepts. We meet meals through concept. We meet pretty much everything through concept.

So there can be a curiosity around: What is it that you're taking to be solid? What is it that feels like it might be permanent or solid or stable? When we start to look for solidity, there are times in the practice where there's a tendency to be searching for someplace we can land on. As we start to really feel into the impermanent nature of experience, our minds are just so wanting there to be some kind of solidity that we'll be looking, looking, looking for some place that's solid.

The encouragement in practice is: if it feels like there's something solid, have some curiosity. That pain in your knee—is it really solid? This was for me a kind of a place of curiosity for a while. When it felt like there was something solid, I would say, "Okay, let's feel that. What is that solidity?"

How does it feel? Is it really solid?

We sometimes take what is unreliable to be reliable, what is suffering to be happiness. And this is really a corollary in many ways to the impermanent nature of experience. When we take things to be permanent or stable, we believe that there's a lasting happiness that can be found by holding on to those things. The unreliability inherent in the nature of experience—its impermanence—makes it unreliable as a place where we can find lasting happiness. There's no experience in our bodies and minds that lasts more than a split second. And yet our minds are constantly trying to put things together and hold on to them.

It kind of feels like our minds think sense pleasure is as good as it gets. And that's, again, basically what we've learned through our lives—that's where we find happiness. If I get what I want, I will feel ease. I will feel better. I'll feel happiness.

The Buddha had a great teaching to help us recognize that trying to find happiness in unstable places is not ultimately reliable. This teaching is called gratification, danger, and escape. He suggested—he said—yes, we do experience pleasure when we get what we want. We experience pleasure with respect to sense experience. But rather than saying "don't do that," he said notice how far that gratification extends. Essentially, how long does it last when we feel gratified by having a sense pleasure? How long does it actually last?

Sometimes it can last surprisingly long. I played with this around chocolate and discovered that chocolate really works with my system. I get a real hit of the pleasure of the taste, and then there's something else that happens—a deep relaxation or something. The endorphins, I don't know what it is, but it feels pretty good. A piece of chocolate, if I'm not just shoving it in my mouth but actually tasting it and really meeting that chocolate—the pleasure of that chocolate can last about 45 seconds. I thought that was pretty long, actually. But it doesn't last longer than that.

So this is an interesting thing to play with. Not to make something bad around experiencing sense pleasure, but to notice. I began to see in my early explorations of this how in those first few moments of getting that hit of chocolate, there was the belief: yes, this is going to do it for me. Now, I knew intellectually it wasn't true, but some part of the system was like, yes, this is so good.

That exploration—how long does it last—helps us to see, again not to make a problem about it, but to see what happens when that pleasure ends. Do you reach for the next piece of chocolate? Is it looking for pleasure again where it's just going to be the next thing, the next thing?

I think this is how we tend to live our lives. It's like we're stringing together pearls on a necklace. If I can just keep stringing together pleasant experience after pleasant experience, that would be a life worth living. But it takes so much work. There's so much suffering in the orienting around getting, getting, getting, getting rid of, getting rid of.

So, some curiosity: what are you relying on for happiness? How reliable is it? The Dharma is a way of relying on something different—a different way of relying. It's not demanding any particular experience or any particular thing. It's landing with, or just streaming with, the changing nature of experience and not resisting that this is the nature of experience—this changing, impermanent, unreliable flow of experiences.

And then there's the third tendency: we tend to take what is not-self to be self. I'm not going to try to do a whole not-self teaching here. But this is basically, again, a misattribution. We tend to attribute to our processes of body and mind—this tumbling on of causes and conditions—we attribute a self to what is simply causes and conditions unfolding. Again, it's a kind of reification.

We're attributing something that's stable, that's permanent, that's reliable to this stream and saying, "That's me. That's who I am."

The basic exploration around this is to be curious when it feels like there is a sense of self arising—again, not to try to find not-self. There's that famous quote of Dogen: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be awakened by all things."

So we are curious about what—like with the other two—we are curious about what are we taking to be solid? What are we taking to be reliable? What are we taking to be self? When it feels like a sense of self is arising, what is that experience? How long does that last?

That's kind of fun to watch too. We think of the sense of self as being this stable thing that's always here, but when we start looking at it, we discover there are so many different senses of self, and they have no relationship to each other.

I was at IMS, practicing with a sense of self—at the time I was about forty years old, and I was right. I knew the right way that people should be doing things and how they should be asking questions in the hall, and this other person in the hall was asking questions in a way they should not be asking questions, and I was suffering. I was feeling the suffering of this analytical, argumentative self, and it was so familiar. It felt so heavy and so like me. But I was just watching it.

And then conditions shifted. A big truck drove up in front of IMS, and it had loud brakes and it crashed to a stop, and the doors banged, and I was standing right next to it, and I turned into a two-year-old. "Wow, it's a truck!" Split second—one identity to another. There was no relationship between these two.

Another time I was having a meal and feeling depressed, just feeling that depression, and then suddenly something else happened. It was like, "Oh, that's gone. Where did that go?"

So notice when there's identification. Notice when there's a sense of self. And again, see how long is it actually lasting?

There's so much evidence for not-self. This is one of those confirmation bias things—because we have this view that we're a self, we find evidence all over the place for a sense of self. But when we start being curious about not-self, there is also a lot of evidence for not-self.

The simple fact of the wandering mind. You sit down and meditate, tell yourself you're going to be present, and the mind wanders. You didn't decide for that to happen. It happened. That's evidence for non-self. The mindfulness returns—who did that? You

didn't make that happen either. That was conditions coming together. But we give ourselves credit for it. "I did that." The sense of self sometimes is like this after-the-fact attribution. An intention arose, and then, "Oh, I did that."

But we can start seeing how the system is doing its taking-care-of-itself work. We sit for a while, we get a full bladder, there's an intention to stand and relieve the pressure. That can all happen without a me doing it. So again, just being curious about that sense of me, of I.

There's a teaching the Buddha often brings in—and this will be close to the last piece. We should recognize that experience arising, usually framed around the aggregates, is not mine, is not who I am, is not myself. This is a useful three-part reflection on exploring the sense of self. We can turn them around to where we do create a sense of self: "This is mine. This is who I am. This is me." Those three have slightly different flavors of senses of self. The "mine" is the owner—that's the more obvious kind, in a way.

The owner of the body, the owner of things—that sense of "that thing is mine" or "that is mine." So that's one flavor we can feel into: that quality, that sense of ownership.

Now the next two—"this I am" and "this is myself"—this is my understanding of these. But it has been very helpful, so I share it with you.

"This I am," to me, is like the sense of self as the subject of the sentence. "I am this. I do this." It's the agent, the one who's active, the sense of the one who's doing. That's a very potent place of identification—the one who feels like they're in control. And the Buddha pointed to that piece around control as being a very powerful point of identification. So that, to me, is that kind of exploration around "this I am." It's like: when does it feel like I'm the one acting, I'm the one doing? Many of our emotions have this quality. "I am the one who's angry, and I want to get even"—our emotions have this kind of active quality.

And then there's another flavor, a subtler flavor, I think, of sense of self that we can start to see: that we're not doing things. At one point I was realizing, "Wow, perception is happening." Perception arises, things are recognized, there's knowing and there's feeling. It's all happening. I could see that I was not the one doing it, but it felt like it was happening to me.

This is, I think, that third flavor. This is the reflection: "This is not myself. This is not me." Or flipping it around: "This is me." It's the self as the object of the sentence, the one who's just being impinged on. So there can be the recognition that we're not in control, but boy, does it feel like it's happening to me.

I actually went and reported that to my teacher at one point. I told him that I was seeing that I wasn't doing the consciousness, the feeling, the perception—it was just happening, but it's happening to me. And I said, "I can't see through that one." And he, of course, simply said, "Well, just notice that that's what's happening. That is the feeling, the experience is that it's happening to me. Know that."

This is seeing through these—the sense of witnessing or seeing the way we take things to be permanent, reliable, or self. We don't do the understandings of impermanent, unreliable, not-self. It is insight. It is a result of practice to see through these delusions. So my teacher telling me, "Yeah, don't try to see through the sense of me, just notice that it's happening"—that creates the conditions for the potential for witnessing it falling away.

And this can happen with any of these. We can witness the mind shifting and letting go of how it's been holding on to these. There was one retreat where I was seeing suffering so clearly and seeing that it made no sense to cling to anything. I felt like there was somebody whispering in my ear: "Doesn't make any sense to cling."

And it's just like everything was just being released, released, released. It seemed so obvious. It was so clear. So that was a moment—or a set of moments, you know, it was minutes at least, maybe even hours of being in that space. And it was so clear. It was like, how can I not see this? I'm never going to cling again. This is just so obvious that clinging makes no sense.

But guess what? It's not so obvious. When you're in that space, it's obvious. But delusion returns. And when delusion returns, then you can really begin to see it much more clearly and know: thinking there's something to cling to—yep, I know that's delusion. Because there's been the shift, there's been the experience of seeing so clearly that it doesn't make any sense. But then the conditions change and the delusion of "I want that thing, I need that thing"—it comes back. But then we can clearly know that's delusion at work.

Through the practice, we at times get to see these veils, these perspectives of delusion fall away, and see so clearly. And it feels very obvious. It's like, how can I not see this? But delusion is very powerful, so it will come back. Yes, even insight is impermanent. But it does unwind. The delusion begins to unwind and it gets thinner. Sometimes we get those moments where there's such clarity—we're not clinging. And then it comes back. And we see again, it's almost like another layer, another layer of how we're clinging.

There was one point where the mind was doing this kind of seeing things just falling apart, falling apart—very slippery, seeing the impermanent nature of experience. And there was this yearning to want to find somewhere to land. Like, I'm so tired of just falling, falling, falling. I want some place—please let me land somewhere. And the mind was searching. There would be ease in just recognizing, yep, nowhere to land, it's okay. And then the mind would go into this searching thing.

And at some point I just got very tender with that part of the mind. It was almost sweet or something. "Yeah, you go ahead, you try. You try to find some place to land. I'm here with you. I'll hang out with you while you look." I knew at one level—I mean, I knew because I had seen that letting go is much more easeful. I knew that there wasn't a landing place. But some part of the system, again kind of like that thing I described earlier, just could not buy into that.

And so we get to be with that, hang out with that—not try to somehow stop it, saying "stop that." We can't. It's not self. It's doing its thing.

CHAPTER 194

Awareness of Awareness

Andrea Fella · 47 min

In this guided meditation and teaching from the IMS Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella offers intimate instruction on one of the subtler aspects of vipassanā practice: recognizing awareness itself rather than focusing solely on the objects of awareness. She guides practitioners to notice that awareness is always already functioning, receiving whatever arises in body and mind, and invites exploration of what it actually feels like to be aware.

Fella describes how awareness can manifest in many different qualities—sometimes following attention as it moves between objects, sometimes feeling utterly still while experiences arise within it, sometimes receiving with crystalline clarity, other times with a broad, diffuse openness. Drawing from her practice with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma, she shares how she initially tried to force this recognition and gave herself a headache, learning instead that awareness of awareness naturally unfolds without effort. The key teaching: we don't try to create this recognition; we simply notice when it happens.

This exploration has profound practical implications for meditation. Our usual training emphasizes paying attention to objects—no one taught us in school to notice that we're aware. Yet this capacity is natural to the mind and, when allowed to arise without grasping, can reveal different flavors of knowing: sometimes objects feel distant while awareness is prominent, sometimes both awareness and objects shine with equal clarity. Fella encourages practitioners to release expectations about how this should feel, remaining open to however awareness reveals itself moment to moment.

Are you aware?

Relaxation supports our capacity to be aware, to recognize that we're aware. What is awareness receiving? Experience is already awareness, already aware. Awareness receiving whatever is arising in our bodies, in our minds. Awareness can meet any arising experience.

Often we are more interested in, or just the habit of our minds is more interested in, what is being received than it is in recognizing that we are aware. We can know awareness, recognize its functioning. Awareness receives. Awareness shines a light on what's happening. We know awareness is working through how it is experiencing, through how it is receiving experience.

It doesn't feel like a turning around to look at awareness. It feels more like an opening, a broadening, a stepping back. The objects, the experience, don't disappear when we recognize that we're aware.

Are you aware?

The simplest way of recognizing this is just knowing that you're aware. The question "aware?" supports a curiosity about what it is to be aware. We can begin to have a sense, a felt sense, of what it means to be aware. And yet even without that felt sense, we can sometimes simply know that we're aware, and that's enough. That's a place to begin this recognition.

Are you aware?

The feeling of awareness is not always the same. The feeling shifts sometimes depending on how awareness is receiving experience. This is a key thing that awareness does: to receive.

Sometimes it feels like awareness is receiving very clear, specific experience, one moment after another. We recognize the shifting of attention and that awareness is receiving the objects that attention is shifting between. Sometimes it can feel like the attention is moving and the awareness is kind of following the attention. And sometimes it can feel like the awareness is very still, and objects are appearing in awareness.

Sometimes the quality of the receiving can feel like a flowing, smooth shifting. Sometimes it can feel jumpy, almost like popcorn—one object appears, another object appears. Sometimes awareness will be receiving a very broad, diffuse, non-specific experience. At other times, very focused, precise, a lot of what we would usually call clarity. Sometimes it can feel like awareness is receiving many, many things at the same time.

Let go of any concepts or ideas you have about awareness and experience what is happening. What is the feeling of being aware? There's not a right way or a best way to know the awareness. And it can shift and change from moment to moment, how awareness is receiving.

Are you aware?

Sometimes it can feel like awareness and the experience are separate, as if the awareness is observing the experience from a distance. And sometimes it can feel like the awareness is right inside the experience. Just notice how it is.

Aware? How is awareness receiving?

At times the attention will be more curious about the experience of the object too. We don't have to try to do awareness of awareness. And yet it is something that is possible, the recognition of awareness itself.

Are you aware?

When I was practicing with Sayadaw at his retreat center in Burma, he talked about recognizing awareness a lot. I think that's part of the condition that helped us to begin to recognize it. The pointing that it's possible—the mind begins to open to that possibility to recognize it.

With that conversation in the field, what can happen is that we kind of stumble into recognizing, "Oh, this is what it means. This is what it means to be aware of awareness."

Initially, I don't know—I would say it was very cool. "Wow, I can actually know that. I can see that. Wow." And so there's a tendency to try to do that, to create it, to put the mind into that space. And yeah, I gave myself a headache trying to do that.

So I went and reported this to Sayadaw, what was going on. And he said, "You know, don't try to be aware of awareness. Just notice. Sometimes there's the clarity of recognizing being aware, and sometimes the clarity of recognizing the objects. It will kind of naturally shift between those. So you don't have to make it happen—it will happen."

It's a subtler recognition than the recognition of objects. We are trained through our school, our parents all telling us, "Pay attention, pay attention to things, pay attention to objects." We're really trained to notice what's happening in experience. I don't think I ever heard my parents or my teachers in grade school ask me to notice that I was aware. That's not where our training has been. Objects tend to be more obvious than recognizing awareness. It's a subtler kind of experience, a subtler kind of recognition.

And yet it's quite natural—our minds have this capacity to know that we're aware. They have this capacity. And it will happen. This is what I mean by stumbling into it. We stumble into that recognition.

Another interesting piece around that stumbling is that whatever that first way we really kind of stumble into recognizing, "Oh, this is what it means to be aware of awareness"—where there's a felt sense or a feeling of that—then we think that's what it means to be aware of awareness. But there are many ways that it feels. If you're looking for one particular flavor, you may miss that other flavors could be happening.

It can feel very different: this sense of awareness following the attention, almost feeling like awareness is moving, versus the sense of awareness being still when objects either just appear in awareness or come into awareness—these things can feel different.

Often I'd say that initial or first taste of being aware of awareness does kind of feel like the objects might be a little distant. There's less clarity about the objects. And that's okay. If the interest is more in knowing the awareness, sometimes the detail of the experiences is less precise or less clear to us.

And yet there's also another flavor of being aware of awareness that I stumbled into at one point—again, it was just a stumbling into it—which was a clarity of awareness and a clarity of objects where they were both equally clear. Sometimes it can feel like we're knowing the object, the attention more picking up the texture of the experience itself. Sometimes we're more aware of the awareness, where the interest is more in what it feels like to be aware. And then there was this thing where it was just equal clarity about awareness and the objects.

Boy, did I cling to that one. "That's what I'm supposed to be doing." But it's just another way it can feel.

So just notice the relationship to when you're noticing this or not noticing it.

CHAPTER 195

Allowing What Has Come to Be

Andrea Fella · 45 min

> *In this gentle yet profound talk from the IMS Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella illuminates the heart of awareness practice: simply opening to what is already here. She clarifies that acceptance—allowing things as they have come to be—is not about agreeing or disagreeing with experience, but fully acknowledging "this is the experience." Drawing on the insight of Zen teacher Daishin Morgan, she distinguishes this allowing from passivity, showing how clear recognition of present conditions actually creates the foundation for skillful response.*
>
> *Fella explores how mettā is not separate from insight practice but is lived within it. The quality of allowing what arises—without trying to fix, change, or reject any aspect of experience—naturally feels like love. Just as a friend who truly listens without agenda offers us the gift of being seen, this practice extends that same caring attention to ourselves, welcoming all of our experience: the confusion, the beauty, the wanting.*
>
> *The talk deepens into an exploration of equanimity and how, contrary to our assumptions, the falling away of greed, aversion, and delusion does not lead to inaction. Rather, wholesome qualities—wisdom, compassion, curiosity, joy—gain strength and have their own natural agency. Wisdom begins to guide practice and life; compassion moves to alleviate suffering. What Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls "Dhamma effort" emerges: a shift from personal striving to being carried by these wholesome qualities, as the need for a controlling sense of self gradually weakens through alignment with wise view and ethical conduct.*

Are you aware? Our practice is so simple. Aware with what is already arising, what is already here. Being with this human experience. Opening to what is here.

We're opening to the unfolding of the conditions of our lives. The nature of things as they have come to be. Opening to what is already happening. Awareness receiving what is already happening.

This opening to is an allowing. Allowing what is here. Accepting what is offered. The offering of our conditions revealing themselves.

One teacher, Zen teacher Daishin Morgan, points out that this acceptance, the acceptance of things as they are, is not about agreeing or disagreeing with the experience. It's about fully acknowledging this is the experience. Clearly meeting, knowing this is the experience. That is the quality of acceptance. Accepting, allowing what is already happening.

And yet this perspective of accepting and allowing what has come to be, clearly recognizing this is what has come to be—it's not a perspective of passivity. In fact, it really creates conditions for us to in the next moment respond skillfully. In our practice, a skillful response is often continuing to witness, continuing to be with. And yet even in our formal practice, there are times that we may recognize a skillful means is useful, or a question and investigation.

This practice is a wisdom practice, wisdom based. The teachings are wisdom teachings. We talk a lot about noticing things as they are. Recognizing the impermanent, unreliable, not-self nature of experience with any experience. Exploring a perspective of allowing, curious about the attitude and even allowing. If a perspective of wanting something to happen has arisen, we allow that and we are curious about that. How has that been shaped?

The teachings are very much in the wisdom vein, and sometimes people ask, what is the place for metta in this practice? In my experience, the metta is lived in this practice. The allowing perspective, opening to allowing what is already here to be here—in the feeling of the practice, that feels like love.

If we were sitting in front of a friend and we were having trouble, when the friend was just willing to listen and be with us, not trying to fix us, not trying to make suggestions or figure things out for us, but just willing to be with us fully, most of us would feel that as love. Feeling very cared for, very seen, that feeling of being seen.

And this is what this practice does for us. We see ourselves fully, completely. All the messiness, all the confusion and delusion, all the wanting, all the beauty. It's all welcome with awareness and wisdom. No part rejected. And this simple practice allows this, opens to this feeling of care for ourselves. Wisdom and love grow together.

Just simple. What's this? Opening fully to our experience as it has come to be. Noticing relationships to what has come to be: wanting, not wanting, and beliefs, ideas about what is happening. Those attitudes based in greed, aversion, and delusion. This practice begins to weaken those tendencies of greed, aversion, and delusion. There's more capacity for allowing, more capacity for acceptance of what has come to be.

And that place of opening to this is what is here, opening to things as they have come to be without reactivity to what has come to be—that is equanimity.

If I was completely okay with what is happening, why would I do anything? But that's not the way it seems to work. Because as greed, aversion, and delusion fall away, the wholesome qualities gain strength—qualities of wisdom, love, compassion, patience, interest, joy. And these qualities also have a kind of agency. They act in the system.

We're familiar with the way aversion acts based on wanting to get rid of things. Greed acts based on wanting to have things. Delusion acts based on what it believes. And so we begin to see that it's not necessarily a "me" doing that. We see that this is the conditioned and conditioning nature of those qualities of mind. Anger tends to construct anger, tends to create more tension in the heart and mind.

The wholesome qualities also have an activity to them. Again, not "me" doing it. The nature of love seems to be to connect us. The nature of compassion, to alleviate suffering. The nature of curiosity, of interest, to explore in a wholesome way. The nature of wisdom is to recognize suffering and to release suffering—this is the wisdom that we're cultivating here.

So these qualities of mind do things. And when there is equanimity, these functions of mind, these capacities of mind get stronger. Wisdom begins to act, wisdom begins to guide the practice, wisdom begins to choose and navigate our lives. Compassion acts—this movement to alleviate suffering.

And so the place of equanimity is not a place of passivity. It's not necessarily a place of self-doing. But we can be present with the way our wholesome qualities carry us.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya points to this as a kind of shift in the practice—from when we're making a personal kind of effort, and we have to start there, where it does feel like we're involved in the choices of practice—to certain times when practice becomes more effortless. These are times when wholesome qualities are guiding the practice. Sayadaw calls this "Dhamma effort"—wisdom taking the lead instead of an idea coming from beliefs and views that we have.

We have to start by aligning with wise view and making choices based on wise view. The teachings unfold through exploring how to skillfully have a sense of agency and sense of self that aligns with wise view, that aligns with ethics. And as we do that more and more, the need for that sense of self weakens.

I'm so happy to be here with you. I really appreciate your sincerity, your care, your commitment. It's a rare thing in this world, what you're doing. Thank you.

CHAPTER 196

Rhythms of Practice

Andrea Fella · 49 min

> *In this Forest Refuge talk, Andrea Fella addresses a common concern among meditators: the seemingly problematic return of reactivity after periods of ease and spaciousness. Drawing on Michelle McDonald's evocative teaching of 'purity and purification,' Fella reframes these shifts not as mistakes or signs of poor practice, but as the natural rhythm through which wisdom unfolds. Both states—the spacious ease and the arising of old habits—reveal the fundamental characteristics of experience: impermanence (anicca), unreliability (dukkha), and conditioned arising (paṭicca samuppāda).*
>
> *Fella describes how this process unfolds as a deepening spiral rather than mere cycling. As grosser forms of greed, aversion, and delusion (lobha, dosa, moha) release, subtler layers become visible—previously masked by stronger reactivity. The very calm that develops allows repressed material to surface and reveals increasingly subtle ripples of grasping. She notes that these subtler forms can actually feel like strong dukkha precisely because we've tasted freedom from grosser reactivity.*
>
> *The practical instruction remains beautifully simple: meet whatever arises with curiosity and awareness. Notice shifts between states. Observe the quality of mind—whether there's resistance to purification or grasping at purity. This teaching offers reassurance that the path naturally includes both the clearing and the revealing, and that sustained, receptive awareness is the appropriate response to whatever presents itself in each moment.*

Aware with whatever is arising in this moment. Sometimes what's arising are habits, old patterns of confusion or reactivity. This can be seen, received. Sometimes what's arising is spaciousness, ease. This can be seen, met, received.

In terms of the cultivation of awareness and wisdom, both reveal the nature of experience: impermanent, unreliable as a place to land, and not self—conditioned arising in dependence on conditions and causes.

It's quite natural for there to be a shifting between the arising of reactivity, of struggle, patterns and old habits, and for there to be times of spaciousness, of ease, of the mind more settled. One teacher called this the rhythms of purity and purification. Michelle McDonald called this purity and purification.

This is part of how the practice unfolds. It's not a mistake. It's not a problem. Just noticing the relationship, especially when there's a shift—a shift from spaciousness and ease to old reactive habits and patterns. What's the relationship? Wanting to hold on to the ease, resistance to the arising of the habits and patterns? Or simply, "Oh, this now. Just this."

We tend to like the purity side and resist the purification. We can sometimes think we're doing something wrong. Surely if I was practicing properly this reactivity would not be arising. But it's a natural cycling. It's not actually even cycling—it's more of a spiral deepening. Often we're seeing something at a deeper level, a more subtle form of grasping arising. And so just noticing how it is, aware with this, just this.

These rhythms, these shifts between ease and seeing our habits and patterns, seeing how greed, aversion, and delusion are arising—these shifts between purity and purification, as Michelle McDonald puts it, are simply part of how the practice seems to work. It's not a mistake, nothing that we've done wrong.

We tend to like the shift from purification to purity. We think we've figured it out. And it is often a meeting of some kind of reactivity or holding or clinging. That meeting allows for a release, allows for a shift into letting go, openness, more spaciousness and ease.

These shifts can sometimes happen simply because the mind picks up on something else instead of attuning to the reactivity. It meets some other experience, and that becomes what the attention rests with, and it shifts to more ease. There are different ways that shift can happen from purification to the quality of mind that's spacious and at ease, balanced, calm.

We get a taste of that spaciousness and ease, and then reactivity returns for different reasons. Sometimes in that space of more calm and ease, it's almost like the habitual ways that we've been keeping things held down begin to release—ways that we've repressed things or not seen things. Those kinds of repression structures get released, and so it's quite natural that some of those things that have not been seen start to be able to be seen.

Or sometimes in that space of ease and calm, we get a little complacent. We're not really clearly noticing the quality of the mind that is easeful and receptive and interested. We're not really recognizing what it's like to have a mind that's at ease. And in that complacency, the mindfulness weakens. And the habits of greed, aversion, and delusion arise. It's natural that this happens. Again, it's not a problem. It's just something to notice.

Wherever we are, whatever's arising, this is what is asking to be seen in this moment. It's not random; it's arising in dependence on conditions and causes.

Another way the shifts between purity and purification can be recognized or experienced is that in that space of ease, the mind gets more attuned to that spaciousness, that ease, that balance of mind. It feels to me sometimes like a whole layer of reactivity can fall away. Patterns and habits, bigger patterns and habits of reactivity, can fall away, and then we have a period of time where we're in a space of more ease.

That reactivity, that old pattern, is simply not arising—or not arising as much. And then, in that space of ease, we start to see subtler kinds, subtler forms, subtler flavors of greed, aversion, and delusion that were masked by the larger reactivity and are now being revealed by the quieting of the mind.

It's like the ease is revealing that there are still subtler ripples—subtler ripples of greed, aversion, and delusion still working. They're being revealed. It's not a problem.

And then we start to feel those subtler ripples, and sometimes, because we've had that feeling or that sense of spaciousness and ease, they can actually feel like pretty strong dukkha. We've experienced a sense of not having reactivity. But then we begin to see those flavors of greed, aversion, and delusion, and they begin to weaken and release. And we have another period where it feels more spacious, more easeful.

We can maybe go through these cycles—it's almost like going down into deeper and deeper layers. Ease, ripples, release. Ease, ripples, release.

For myself, whenever I would notice any kind of shift, that would spark a curiosity. What's happening? There's something new arising, or something new being seen, perhaps. So, what's this?

The instructions are so simple: What's this? And noticing the relationship. Noticing the quality of mind meeting the experiences.

CHAPTER 197

Not Knowing

Andrea Fella · 43 min

> *In this contemplative talk from the IMS Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella addresses a subtle but significant aspect of deepening practice: the experience of being aware without knowing what awareness is connecting with. As mindfulness becomes more continuous, practitioners often encounter moments where they clearly recognize they are aware, yet cannot identify or name what is being known. Fella encourages us to simply rest in this recognition rather than grasping for clarity.*
>
> *The talk explores our deep conditioning around needing to know and understand. Most of us have strong habits of searching, naming, and trying to land on something familiar when faced with uncertainty. Fella points out that this very grasping—the doubt, the discomfort with not knowing, the anxiety that can arise—becomes itself an object of practice. By recognizing these reactions as conditioned patterns of mind, we can begin to release our tight grip on the need for certainty.*
>
> *Fella offers a profound reframing: as practice deepens, wisdom itself begins to orient toward the unfamiliar, toward what we cannot seek because we don't yet know it exists. This is not something we can do through effort, since we cannot look for what we don't know. Instead, we learn to trust awareness and wisdom, becoming comfortable with the unknown. This trust supports the conditions for genuine insight and release, which by their very nature cannot be predicted or grasped in advance.*

Simply continue. Aware. Aware with the experience that is already happening.

Sometimes as the mindfulness gets a little more continuous, there are times when we know that we're aware, and yet we don't know what awareness is aware of. It can feel like there is the awareness and there is the recognition that there is hearing and body sensations, but that doesn't seem to be what the awareness is really connecting with.

In that experience of aware and not sure what awareness is really connecting with or receiving, we can simply know that. Aware. Don't know what the object is. Just resting and receiving that.

This helps us also to really clearly recognize that we're aware. We begin to trust that. We know we're aware. And yet the experience, whatever it is, may be unfamiliar. It may be a subtle kind of state that we don't have a name for. We don't recognize it. But we can know that we're aware. Simple. Trusting that. Trusting awareness and wisdom.

Some curiosity arises: what's it like? What's the experience like to not know? We often have some relationship to that. Most of us have a long history of being encouraged to be clear, to know. And it feels uncomfortable to not know. It might feel confusing or vulnerable. It might create some anxiety.

So we need to notice the relationship. We might start grasping for something clear, searching to make things more familiar. And the practice is simple. We notice that we're aware. Awareness will naturally be receiving something. We don't always know what it is, and we can know that.

Sometimes it's clear. Sometimes we do know what it is. We can know that. Sometimes it's something pleasant. Sometimes unpleasant. We can know that. Just experience arising in this human body and mind. Being seen, recognized.

We're curious about its nature. We're curious about where we tend to grasp, to hold, and feel the suffering of that. In feeling that with awareness and wisdom, it begins to release. We notice that.

What's actually happening in this moment? Body sensation arising and being known. Mind states arising and being known. Awareness recognized. Simple.

And sometimes our minds complicate things, trying to search, look, figure out. That too is just an arising and can be known. Simple. Complication is happening.

Just another experience, another object. What's this?

We can be drawn to what's familiar. The way our minds work, our habits, our conditioning shapes what we tend to receive, what we tend to notice. And often that orients to what is familiar—what we already know, what we're already used to noticing and recognizing.

Sometimes in our practice, that recognition of what we're familiar with begins to help us see more clearly what we are familiar with, to see more texture. The direct experience of what we're familiar with makes it seem more lively, more here. Some of you have used the words "raw experience" in your descriptions. Even as we orient to what's familiar, we begin to see more fineness, more subtlety.

And yet sometimes that way of meeting experience becomes like a habit in itself—that sense of the clarity of experience, the clarity of knowing, the clarity of seeing more closely, more detail. This is one way the practice helps us to see more clearly what's happening. We can see into how those experiences come into being and how they fall apart. That's one way that mindfulness and wisdom are curious about experience.

Yet also, as mindfulness gets stronger, as mindfulness and wisdom gain momentum and have more continuity, it feels like wisdom starts to get interested in things that we have no clue about—things we are not at all familiar with. Wisdom begins to orient towards noticing the unfamiliar. This kind of exploration that wisdom begins to do on its own is not something we can really do, because we can't look for what we don't know.

When wisdom begins to be curious about what's unfamiliar, it can feel uncomfortable because we're so used to knowing. We want to know. We have that strong conditioning. When we don't know what's happening, we have a strong conditioning to try to figure out what's happening—a searching, a trying to land, a trying to name, identify, to recognize. All of that is conditioned. And the practice actually deepens through noticing that relationship: noticing the wanting to land, noticing the searching, noticing the idea that it's not okay to not know, noticing the doubt.

So we recognize those as processes of mind, and begin, over time, to get more comfortable, more okay with the fact that there are times we just don't know what's happening. We can be aware, we can know that we're aware, and not know what awareness is receiving.

I helped myself get more comfortable with this place of not knowing by reminding myself that, largely by its nature, insight—understanding into the nature of experience, a deepening of insight—we can't know what that will be. The Buddha speaks of freedom, the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion. Do I have some flavor or taste of what that might be like? I don't know. That ultimate release, the place the Buddha is said to be living in—we can't really know.

When the mind releases, that's another place of the unknown. When the mind lets go, sometimes that experience of letting go can bring a little bit of uncertainty or fear. Where is it going? We can't know. And so the curiosity turns toward what's in the way: all those ideas about needing to know, searching for something, needing to have clarity about what's happening.

As we see those as complications, as we see those as habits, as patterns of mind, their weakening supports the conditions for the mind to simply open to this. The very act of looking, trying to find—all of those movements of mind, the doubt, the trying to land, the searching for something, the trying to find clarity—will tend to obscure what's unfamiliar.

So we have to trust. Trust wisdom. Trust awareness. It's okay to not know.

CHAPTER 198

Aware... Just This...

Andrea Fella · 43 min

> *In this guided meditation from a retreat at IMS Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella invites practitioners into a quality of awareness that is simple, receptive, and unelaborated. She guides meditators to meet experience exactly as it is—sensations, thoughts, and mental processes—without searching for something better or resisting what's present.*
>
> *Fella draws on the Buddha's teaching to Bāhiya, pointing to the direct recognition that "in the cognized is only the cognized." This teaching emphasizes meeting experience without adding layers of self-reference or conceptual elaboration. Whatever arises—whether pleasant or unpleasant, wanted or unwanted—can be received by mindfulness. As she reminds practitioners, receiving experience is mindfulness's job; we don't need to add effort or tension to make it happen.*
>
> *The talk addresses a subtle tendency that can arise in mature practice: the impulse to be "involved" with mindfulness, to try harder to see clearly or connect more fully. Fella suggests recognizing this tension itself as something arising, and then relaxing back into trust—letting mindfulness and wisdom do what they naturally do. For practitioners with established momentum, she encourages simplicity: the simpler the awareness, the more clearly experience reveals its impermanent, not-self nature. Just this. Just continue.*

Aware, with experience as it is.

Sensation arising, aware with sensation. Thoughts arising, aware with thoughts. Whatever is obvious.

Sometimes there is more curiosity about awareness itself, also recognizing awareness as simply what's here, what's available. Processes of mind, processes of body, arising, being recognized as experience. When thoughts, opinions, ideas arise about experience, that too can be seen as just an arising.

In the cognized is only the cognized. In reference to the cognized, there will be only the cognized. Just thoughts arising with awareness.

Whatever is arising, whatever is obvious—there is not a better object with which to understand the Dharma. This experience, just this, as the nature of being impermanent. Not worth clinging to. Just a phenomenon in the mind and body arising. Not me, not who I am, not mine. Just a phenomenon.

Experience arising in dependence on causes and conditions. Simple, just aware. This is what's happening.

If there's a sense of searching, looking for something, trying to find a better experience, or a resistance—that too is something arising that can be known. Searching, looking, resisting. There is no experience that can't be received with mindfulness. That's the job of mindfulness: to receive. It can receive any experience. So let mindfulness do its job.

Sometimes I find I'm involved with mindfulness, trying to see more clearly or connect more fully. When I feel that kind of tension around the mindfulness, a reminder often arises: mindfulness can do this. I don't need to be involved. Letting mindfulness and wisdom do what they do. Receiving just this. Aware.

There's quite a bit of momentum in practice at this point for all of you. Continuing and just keeping it simple. The simpler the awareness, the simpler the mind, the more will be seen and understood. We can get out of the way.

Just continue.

CHAPTER 199

The Mind of Freedom

Andrea Fella · 54 min

In this contemplative talk, Andrea Fella offers a deep reflection on a profound sutta from the Aṅguttara Nikāya that describes the Buddha's own experience of liberation. Drawing on the scholarship of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's "The Magic of the Mind," she presents this teaching as an elaboration of the Bāhiya Sutta's famous instruction: "In the seen, there will be only the seen." The Buddha describes a mind that does not conceive or imagine a visible thing apart from sight, does not conceive of an unseen, does not conceive of a thing worth seeing, and does not conceive of one who sees—and similarly for hearing, sensing, and cognizing.

Fella carefully unpacks each of these four aspects, exploring how ordinary minds habitually create things and selves through the process of conceiving (mañ̃ati in Pāli). She connects this to papañca (mental proliferation) and the construction of self-view, illustrating with personal examples how we grasp at ideas, create objects of craving around things not yet experienced, and solidify experience into something we believe exists independently of the knowing process. The teaching reveals that what we experience is always a construct of mind meeting conditions—we never actually experience "what's out there" but rather the process of contact itself.

The talk culminates in a reflection on the Buddha's remarkable stability—not through grasping or landing on anything, but precisely through not clinging. This "suchness" (tādī) represents a radically different kind of steadfastness: alignment with the truth of impermanence rather than resistance to it. Andrea encourages listeners to hold these teachings as reflections rather than concepts to grasp, remaining curious about how the words land and what resonates in direct experience.

Tonight I'd like to reflect a little bit on a sutta in which the Buddha basically describes what the mind of freedom is—in a way describing his experience. I've been reflecting on this sutta for the past few years and speaking about it in this form, and I find this reflection is really best held as a reflection. Not necessarily trying to track every word or understand all the concepts. In fact, the description sometimes seems almost paradoxical or hard to understand. So rather than trying to grasp it, simply open to the words, the reflection, and see what lands, what resonates. I encourage receptivity during this talk—receiving what I'm offering and being curious about what your experience is as you're hearing the words, as you're taking it in.

This sutta is from the Anguttara Nikaya. I first learned about it from a book by the scholar monk Nyanananda called *The Magic of the Mind*. In that book, Nyanananda says that the description the Buddha offers of his own mind—I don't know if we can call it experience exactly, but the quality of the mind of a Buddha—could be understood as an elaboration of the Bahiya Sutta, which we talked about last week.

In the Bahiya Sutta, we explored those phrases: "In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, there will be only the heard. In reference to the sensed, there will be only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, there will be only the cognized." In that sutta, there wasn't much description about what that meant. In this sutta, we find a little bit of a description of what perhaps it means for the mind to have that space or that opening to "in reference to the seen, there will be only the seen."

I'm going to read a section of the sutta. This translation is from an early version by Nyanananda. He chooses particular words for this translation, and in a later translation he chose different words, but I'm going to start with his first choices and then shift to his later choices.

"Whatsoever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, and pondered over by the mind, that I have fully understood. All that is fully known to the Tathagata"—the Tathagata is basically his name for himself, meaning something like "one thus gone"—"but the Tathagata has not taken a stand on it. A Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight, does not conceive of an unseen, does not conceive of a thing worth seeing, does not conceive of one who sees. Does not conceive of an audible thing apart from hearing, does not conceive of an unheard, does not conceive of a thing worth hearing, does not conceive of one who hears. Does not conceive of a thing to be sensed apart from sensation, does not conceive of an unsensed, does not conceive of a thing worth sensing, does not conceive of one who senses. Does not conceive of a cognizable thing apart from cognition, does not conceive of an uncognized, does not conceive of a thing worth cognizing, does not conceive of one who cognizes."

That description uses the word "conceives" repeatedly. The Pali word translated as "conceiving" here is *manyati*. There are a couple of different flavors of that word. The Pali Text Society dictionary says it can mean to imagine, to think, or to be convinced, to be sure. Later, Nyanananda chooses to translate *manyati* as "imagine," and it creates a different flavor to that passage, which I'll read using that word later. I found it quite interesting to listen to the different way it lands with different words.

Conceiving is also often talked about in terms of the sense of self—how we conceive ourselves to be the same as, less than, or equal to others. So it often is used in relationship to the sense of self and measuring ourselves against others or measuring ourselves against ourselves.

In another passage, there's another flavor of how an ordinary person relates to the seen, heard, sensed, and cognized. Last time, during the talk on the Bahiya Sutta, I went through a passage that described how our minds usually relate to sense experience—not in the flavor of "in the seen is only the seen," but how the mind picks things up and runs with them. This is another flavor of how an ordinary person relates to experience:

"One perceives the seen as the seen. Having perceived the seen as the seen, one conceives oneself as the seen, one conceives oneself in the seen, one conceives oneself apart from the seen, one conceives the seen to be mine, one delights in the seen. Why is that? Because it has not been fully understood."

This is really pointing to different flavors of identification. "I am this"—conceives oneself as the seen. "I'm in this"—conceives oneself in the seen. "I'm separate from this"—conceives oneself apart from the seen. "This is mine"—conceives the seen to be mine.

These are simply different flavors of our relationship to experience through the sense of self. The conceiving probably has a relationship to this process of selfing, this process of identification, this process of constructing an "I," a "me," one who possesses.

Conceiving is also understood in the suttas as being closely related to *papañca*, that word I talked about last week—the reification, the mind running amok with thoughts. But I also spoke about how *papañca* could be understood as a solidification of an object: how what one perceives, one thinks about; what one thinks about, one objectifies; what one objectifies, one makes into a thing. And in that process of thing-making, there's also a process of I-making, of separation.

I sometimes think of these processes of conceiving and *papañca* as flip sides of a coin. At times we may notice the mind making a thing, and at times we may notice more clearly the mind engaged in the process of selfing. Or we may not notice at all—we get caught in this all the time. But we can be curious about these processes. They are simply processes at work in the mind to create the sense of self, to create the sense of separation, to create a thing. And in someone who is not craving, who is not clinging, whose mind is free, these processes are not happening.

This is one interesting thing about this passage, really. The Buddha uses words to describe the mind that is free, and he's using language largely that talks about what is *not* happening. He's not talking about what's been gained or appropriated, but about processes that have stopped occurring: not conceiving of a visible thing as apart from sight, not conceiving of an unseen, not conceiving of a thing worth seeing, not conceiving of one who sees.

I want to go through each of these four things—four processes that aren't happening in the mind of the Buddha—and reflect a little on each one. When I first went through this, I used Ñāṇananda's teachings in his book to help me begin to unpack and understand what some of these might mean. But what was most fruitful was really a curiosity: when I explore these reflections, what does it do in the mind? How does it land?

I'll go through each of these largely through the realm of seeing. Occasionally I'll bring in one of the other flavors—seen, heard, sensed, cognized—to point to some of the other ways we might encounter resistance.

A Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight. What this points to is that an ordinary person *does* tend to conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight—believes their experience of seeing to be the reality of what is experienced. That's the flavor of it to me.

In my own exploration, I turned each one of these around. So: the Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight. When am I conceiving of a visible thing as apart from sight? What does that mean? What is the mind doing there? Again, I think it has to do with that sense of creating a thing. The mind creates a thing and then believes that thing to have a reality. The Tathāgata's mind does not construct—does not internally construct any idea of a thing that exists apart from the experience of seeing.

The Tathāgata does not conceive. Let's throw "imagine" in there: the Tathāgata does not imagine a visible thing as apart from sight. This points to the process nature of our experience. What we are experiencing through our sense bases is the phenomenon of eye and forms meeting. There's the process of that contact—eye consciousness and contact. The experience is a process being constructed, and what we are experiencing *is* that process. We're not actually experiencing what's "out there." We're experiencing a construct of our minds.

We don't usually understand it that way. We believe that what we are experiencing is what's out there, and so much delusion can arise because of this. Everything we experience is constructed by our minds, and all kinds of ideas, opinions, and views influence that construction. That a Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from

sight means simply understanding that seeing is happening, but the thing that is seen is a result of the process of seeing. It's not separate from that process. The sight that is seen cannot be separate from seeing. The process of seeing creates the sight and then knows that sight.

Thinking a little about the flavor of this with respect to the cognized: one does not conceive or imagine a cognizable thing apart from cognition.

We can make a thing, an idea, out of mental processes as well. There was one time I experienced a lot of suffering because I had taken ownership of a word. I had expressed that word to one person, and then later I heard other people using that word and attributing it to this other person. And I'm like, "Wait, no—I defined that word. I made that word." So much suffering. Creating, taking ownership, making a thing out of a word. Creating a cognizable thing apart from cognition.

The Tathagata does not imagine a visible thing separate from the process of seeing. One understands the process of seeing as the process that both creates the sight and knows it. All experience constructed by the mind and known by the mind.

And then this next one: a Tathagata does not conceive of an unseen. Now this one's maybe a little different. This one, for me, I've been exploring for a while, and Ñāṇananda even says that the commentary's definition of this seems really shallow. The commentaries say that what this means is the Tathagata does not conceive, "I am seeing things that ordinary people don't see." And this could be a piece of it, in a way. It's a kind of superiority conceit—"Look at me, I'm seeing all of these processes at work as processes. I'm seeing what ordinary people don't see." But Ñāṇananda and Bhikkhu Bodhi both say this just seems like not really what this is pointing to.

This is pointing to almost the opposite: the Tathagata not conceiving of the unseen. So again, flip this around. How might an ordinary person conceive of something unseen? Well, there are some obvious ways this might happen. If somebody says, "Gee, I saw this thing," but somebody else hasn't seen it, then they could be conceiving, "Well, maybe you saw that, but I'm not going to believe it until I see it myself." And so there's a conceiving around things not seen—that unless I've seen it, it doesn't exist. That's one flavor, perhaps, of this.

Or here's one that I experienced on one three-month course. There may be a relationship to something not experienced, conceiving around something not experienced, and then desire arising around that, having not experienced it. So again, conceiving of something unseen and then deciding, measuring oneself against it.

In my case, on my first three-month course, I was listening to the dharma talks and hearing the teachers talk about all these experiences. Arising and passing was one that they talked about. And it sounded very cool, and I really wanted to see it. I had never seen it, but it was described, and it was like, "Ooh, I want that." And so I began creating ideas around it and wanting it. At one point, there was so much suffering around this—feeling like I was failing because I hadn't seen this thing, trying to imagine what it would be like to see this thing.

And then at one point, this arose in my mind: going up to my teacher in the interview and telling him I had experienced this. And we were laughing and celebrating that I had seen this insight and understanding. As I watched this story play out in my mind, I realized I had no idea what I wanted, but what I did want was being seen as someone who had seen that. That began to help me let go of that whole craving around something I had not seen.

Now, if we think about this, what's really happening there is there's a craving happening around an idea. So that's a cognized. There's a craving around something that is cognized, a thing-making around something that's cognized. And so that kind of puts it into that side of things—the conceiving of a cognizable thing apart from cognition.

That's what the mind was doing. But it was around something that I didn't know, didn't understand. It had created this idea. And this is so much of what we do—we create ideas around things and then want them.

Another way to understand this conceiving of an unseen, how we tend to do that: again, we're probably not going to just land in the Buddhist mind, this mind of freedom, but we can begin to see how we participate in these processes, how the mind participates in these processes, how it participates in this process of conceiving of something not seen, something not heard.

Sayadaw tells a story of a time he was here. He was being escorted around and shown the area. One of the staff members, or somebody the staff had asked to help take Sayadaw around, was driving him through the area. The person mentioned that there were all these deer, and happened to mention there was a deer alarm on the car—a very high-pitched tone so that the deer hear it and don't come close to the road when the car is driving by. He said Sayadaw might be able to hear it.

Sayadaw couldn't hear it, so it was unheard. It was described as being something, but he couldn't hear it, so it was something unheard. And he tried to listen for it. He said he tried hard to hear it, and he couldn't hear it. And then he said, "I just relaxed myself. And I heard it."

So it was the conceiving of the idea that it could be heard, and that he could try to hear it—the conceiving around it kept it from being experienced. Maybe this is another way to reflect on this: how do we conceive of an unseen and unheard and unsensed and uncognized?

But an alternative reflection on this that feels in some ways more profound is perhaps along the lines of when we begin to understand these processes, when we begin to recognize, maybe see directly, that our mind is creating what is experienced—that what we are experiencing is a creation of our mind. Then perhaps conceiving of the unseen could be the view, the possible view, that if everything is constructed by my mind, then there isn't anything out there actually. A kind of mind-only perspective.

Nyanananda has a parable or analogy that elaborates on both of these first two: conceiving of a visible thing as apart from sight, and conceiving of an unseen. He's exploring an image of a dog that's crossing a stream on a plank. There's a kind of bridge across the stream, and the dog is trotting across. It's an area where there's a pool in the stream, and the dog trotting across catches sight of itself in the pool and gets intrigued. It starts looking into the pool, starts wagging its tail, maybe barking, trying to communicate with this dog that's a reflection of himself.

Nyanananda says, "When a dog crossing a stream stops halfway on the plank and starts wagging its tail and peeping curiously down, the reason is the sight of his own image in the water. It imagines another dog there. The dog thinks there's something there to see apart from the process of seeing. It is unaware of the fact that it is seeing what it sees because it is looking. It thinks it is looking because there is something out there to be seen."

It is unaware of the fact that it is seeing what it is seeing because it is looking. It thinks that it is looking because there is something out there to be seen. The moment it realizes that it's seeing because it's looking, it will stop looking at its own image in the water.

Nyanananda says it's because of personality view—this sense of separation, this sense of identification, the view of self—that the world is carried away by this illusion. One goes on looking, saying one is doing so because there's something to be seen. But the seen is there because of the looking. This is again the sense of the idea of something separate from the process. There is just this process of seeing happening. And then, not imagining a visible thing apart from sight, we might come up with the idea that there isn't anything out there to be seen—that notion that if it's all processes in the mind, it's all just mind-made.

This reminds me of a sutta, one of the phrases in the Samyutta Nikaya: "For the most part, the world depends upon a duality, upon the notion of existence and non-existence." So if it doesn't exist in the way we thought, then it must not exist at all. And so if we see, as we see, that what we are experiencing in sight doesn't exist in the way that we're used to thinking about existence, then it must not exist—conceiving of an unseen.

Nyanananda says again, "Apart from the fact of having seen, there's nothing substantial to see. One does not imagine a visible thing apart from seeing. On the other hand, it is not possible to deny the fact of seeing happening. One does not imagine an unseen."

Let this land. Again, we can almost think of these as koans, or as invitations to be curious—not to try to figure it out, but to explore. To be open to: how might I be conceiving, or imagining, an unseen? Or imagining something apart from sight?

One does not conceive of a thing worth seeing. To me, this pretty directly speaks to craving—the sense of wanting, of something to have, something to hold on to. One does not conceive of a thing worth cognizing. That may be a little harder to feel into. I mean, isn't the Dharma worth cognizing? That might be. Again, what might it mean to allow for that cognizing, the reflection of the Dharma, to arise without grasping it? Without holding to it?

Another translation of this phrase comes from Ñāṇananda: "does not conceive of a thing worth seeing, does not conceive of a thing worth hearing." Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it more along the lines of how I was speaking to it in terms of papañca. He translates this as "does not construe an object to be seen"—the thing seen, the creation of the object itself. That to me is very resonant with the way we were exploring that first phrase: does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight. Does not construe a thing to see. Just seeing, hearing, sensing happening.

And "does not conceive of one who sees"—this is that sense of self. We've been exploring this. What is this experience of the sense of self? And with all of these, we notice where we are. We notice what's arising. We don't try to pick up these phrases and impose them on ourselves. But we can use them as explorations. What's arising is a feeling of one who's seeing. That can be seen, not clung to. That can be recognized as an arising. It can be recognized as an arising cognition. The sense of self that's seeing is a cognition. It's a function of the mind, just a process in the mind, believing itself.

I'm going to reread the section using "imagines." Just don't try to think through this. Having kind of explored these sentences, just let this land. What is it like to hear these words?

The Tathāgata does not imagine a visible thing apart from sight, does not imagine an unseen, does not imagine a thing worth seeing, does not imagine one who sees. Does not imagine an audible thing apart from hearing, does not imagine an unheard, does not imagine a thing worth hearing, does not imagine one who hears. Does not imagine a thing to be sensed apart from sensation, does not imagine an unsensed, does not imagine a thing worth sensing, does not imagine one who senses. Does not imagine a cognizable thing apart from cognition, does not imagine an uncognized, does not imagine a thing worth cognizing, does not imagine one who cognizes.

To me, the word "imagines" really makes it land that these processes are our minds making things up and believing them. And even that believing is an imagining.

I want to go back to the first part of the section I read: "Whatsoever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, and pondered over by the mind—that I have fully understood. All that is fully known to the Tathāgata, but the Tathāgata has not taken a stand on it."

This phrase "not taking a stand"—I want to reflect on this a little bit. At the basic level, taking a stand would mean there is this, that thing-making and the craving, the holding to, the attachment to, the solidifying with. And so not taking a stand is non-craving, non-clinging, non-conceiving, not attaching to views about. Not creating a thing to stand on. This is what we do. Our minds create a thing and then think we can stand on it. We think it's stable, think it's reliable.

Following that section, the next sentence in the sutta is: "The Tathāgata being such-like in regard to all phenomena seen, heard, sensed, and cognized—is such."

And so "such-like" is basically this description of not conceiving, not imagining a visible thing apart from sight, imagining an unseen, imagining a thing worth seeing, imagining one who sees. Such-like.

This word "such," *tādī*—it's a simple word, actually. It means something like "this" or "that" or "such." The Tathagata being such-like in regard to all phenomena. The Tathagata being just this—just this process of seeing, the process of hearing, the process of sensing, the process of cognizing, nothing other than that. Just this. Such.

As I feel that word, it lands. The Tathagata is such—nothing other than this, than just this, just experience tumbling on. Not conceiving in any way with respect to seeing, hearing, sensing, cognizing. Not imagining in any way with respect to seeing, hearing, sensing, cognizing. No cognizer, no thing cognized. Just the processes of cognizing happening, the process of seeing happening, the process of hearing happening—nothing

other than that, and understanding that. Processes create and experience what is experienced. That is all. Nothing other than that. That's a phrase that has landed for me with respect to this "such." Nothing other than the processes.

Now, an interesting thing about this word *tādī* is that sometimes it's translated as "stable." And so to me, the fact that in this first part of the sutta the Buddha says the Tathagata does not take a stand on this, and yet the Tathagata is stable, creates a little bit of a dissonance for us, perhaps.

Ñāṇananda says this quality of being *tādī* or "such" is often rendered or translated as firmness, steadfastness, and immovability. Generally one associates firmness, immovability, or stability with landing on something, with holding on or leaning on. But here we have just the opposite. Not to hold on to anything is to be such. Not to hold on to anything is to be stable. This suchness has a flexibility of a higher order and an adaptability.

So: not taking a stand, and yet stable. We normally try to find stability by landing on something, by our minds creating something and trying to land on it. We think this is where stability would be. But what might a different stability look like?

Ñāṇananda says this quality of being unshaken, this immovability, this stability, is the result of not grasping. It comes when there is no clinging. It is for the one who rests on or leans on something that there is instability.

Why is that? Why is landing on something unstable? Because what we land on is inherently falling apart. It's already falling apart. Ñāṇananda says if you're leaning on a wall and the wall is damaged—I think earthquake, because I live in California—you're leaning on a wall and the wall is shaking. It's like the earth is shaking. The earth is not stable. We think of it as being stable. So when we are leaning on, holding to, feeling like that stability in something we think of as stable, landing on something, we find it's not. Because everything is arising in dependence on conditions and falling apart when those conditions change.

And so the Buddha points to this—the such, the not-clinging, not-landing mind that's aligned with experience as impermanent and is not trying to find stability in that. It's like this slipperiness, this alignment with the truth of instability. That's a different kind of stability. Nowhere to land, changing experience, understood as changing experience.

CHAPTER 200

Release - and Not Picking Up

Andrea Fella · 46 min

In this contemplative talk from a retreat setting, Andrea Fella explores the nuanced territory of release and freedom in meditation practice. She begins by describing how awareness and wisdom naturally receive and understand the conditioned, impermanent, and dukkha nature of experience—including the subtle ways we cling and search for a place free from suffering.

Fella distinguishes between two aspects of freedom from craving. The first is the familiar experience of letting go—the release and ease that arises when wisdom understands how clinging participates in suffering. She notes how pleasant this release can feel, partly due to contrast with the previous state of tension, and cautions that even this sense of release can become a subtle object of clinging if we begin seeking it as an aim.

The second, subtler aspect of freedom is the mind simply not picking up craving in the first place—non-reliance on greed, aversion, and delusion rather than active release from them. This may initially manifest as disinterest or even boredom as we become disenchanted with experience. Eventually, she suggests, even interest and disinterest become irrelevant—there is simply experience arising and ceasing, not being picked up. When old habits of clinging return, we can notice the dukkha more clearly, continuing to observe experience as it is. This teaching offers practical guidance for practitioners navigating the deepening stages of insight and equanimity.

Aware and receiving. Maybe you're already aware, already known, as there's a momentum to awareness and wisdom. Awareness and wisdom simply receive and understand—experience, understand the conditioned nature of experience, the unreliable nature of experience, the impermanent nature of experience.

And sometimes the understanding is the dukkha nature of experience. Sometimes that's experienced as unreliability, nothing worth holding on to. Sometimes it's experienced as understanding, feeling the dukkha, feeling the dukkha of the clinging. This is not a mistake. We notice our relationship—the subtle ways we try to avoid or want to get away from, or search for some place to land where there is no suffering. And that very process is also dukkha. But we can see that. Such deep habits, not personal habits, but human habits of clinging.

And sometimes we experience the letting go, the release, the ease. When the mind understands the way clinging is participating in the suffering, when wisdom understands that, it lets go. Sometimes we experience that letting go, the release. That ease, that peace, that release can be very pleasant, in part because of the contrast. And we can appreciate that release, understand that it is a letting go.

And sometimes there can be a very subtle clinging to that too—that sense of the release being the aim, that experience of release being the aim. So in a subtle way we may start looking for that release.

There's a letting go aspect of freedom, a letting go of craving. One definition of the third noble truth: freedom is the ending of craving—giving it up, relinquishing it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it. Another way to understand freedom is the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion, the absence of craving, the non-arising of craving.

Sometimes initially our experience of that freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion is the sense of letting them go, of the release from them. There's also the possibility of understanding that the mind is not picking up the craving, not relying on it, not picking up, not latching on.

At first this can perhaps be experienced as a sense of not being interested in. Awareness and wisdom, not interested in picking things up, not interested in clinging. Sometimes that feeling of disinterest, maybe even boredom—this is in the flavor, some of the flavors as we become disenchanted with experience. It's not so interesting anymore. So we might have that sense of disinterest. That can be known.

And at a certain point, interest and disinterest just don't seem relevant. Neither interest nor disinterest. Just experience arising, ceasing, not worth clinging to. Just experience not being picked up.

And then after a time we see the habits of tending to pick up come back. We feel the dukkha of that. Again, sometimes even more clearly we feel the dukkha. Not a mistake. And so we just notice experience as it is, aware of this, aware of the relationship—just experience tumbling on.

So notice what happens there. Is there discomfort? Is there a sense of running up against habits of mind, habits of culture? Again, just noticing that, and trying to remember the guidelines we've created around a pretty broad container of silence around the center.

You all have a lot of momentum in the practice. In that momentum, the practice can get even simpler.

So carry on.

CHAPTER 201

What is True in This Moment?

Andrea Fella · 47 min

> *In this contemplative guided meditation from the IMS Forest Refuge, Andrea Fella invites practitioners into a profound simplicity of awareness—receiving experience exactly as it arises and passes in each moment. The practice unfolds as an exploration of what is actually true right now: sensations, sounds, emotions, and mind states simply arising and being known.*
>
> *Fella guides attention toward the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa) as they reveal themselves naturally in direct experience. She points to the changing nature (anicca) of all phenomena—sensations, thoughts, and feelings arising, persisting, and passing away. She illuminates the dukkha nature of experience, noting how nothing is reliable as a place for lasting happiness, how there is nowhere solid to land. And she touches the not-self (anattā) quality—experience as uncontrollable, not mine, not who I am, just phenomena tumbling on according to conditions.*
>
> *What emerges is an invitation to profound relaxation through alignment with these truths. Even resistance, when it arises, becomes simply another phenomenon to be known—changing, conditioned, not self. Fella quotes Bhikkhu Bodhi's distillation of practice into two essential instructions: to start and to continue. This talk embodies the elegant simplicity at the heart of vipassanā—a mind that receives just this moment without adding, concocting, or imagining. Just this is the path.*

What is the experience of this moment, the truth of this moment as it is arising and passing? Sensation arising, being known. Sound arising, being known. Emotions, mind states arising, being known. Experience as experience.

We might be attuned less to the experience and more to the nature of experience. The changing nature perhaps—sensations, thoughts, feelings arising, persisting, and passing away. Sometimes the interest is more attuned to the change itself and may not even be so interested in what is changing.

Perhaps interest in the dukkha nature of experience is what's clear, what's recognized in the moment. Sometimes the experience of the contraction around clinging, or sometimes the understanding that experience is just not reliable. There isn't any place to land. A changing nature, tottering, all experience shifting, changing, nothing reliable. Nothing reliable is a place for lasting happiness.

Aligning with these truths, the mind can deeply relax. Just rest in the non-resting.

At times we may be noticing the uncontrollable, the vulnerable nature of experience. Conditions changing, not under our ultimate control. Not mine, not who I am. Just experience tumbling on.

Receiving experience as it is, arriving, showing itself, however that is. Open to receiving this, just this.

And sometimes there's resistance arising to this—frustration, wanting something else to be present, not aligned with the truth of this moment. And yet the truth of this moment then also includes that resistance. That can be seen just as a phenomenon. Resistance too is changing, conditioned, not self. Phenomena arising and being known.

Noticing when imaginings arise, knowing them as imaginings.

It really is so simple. A mind receiving just this. It's a very simple mind. Not adding, not concocting, not imagining. And if those arise, those are simply known.

Simple practice. Aligning with the truth of this, just this. Just this is the path. There is no other.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has said that there are really only two instructions: to start and to continue.

Simply continue.

CHAPTER 202

The Present Moment

Andrea Fella · 51 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella addresses a question that arises for many practitioners: why do we keep returning to the breath and the present moment? She explores multiple dimensions of this foundational practice, from the simple pleasure of concentration to the profound discovery that the present moment is the only place where choice actually exists.*
>
> *Fella examines how reactivity begins at its most subtle level—in the movement toward pleasant experience and away from unpleasant experience—and how mindfulness practice reveals these patterns. She introduces the distinction between passive and active awareness, explaining how truly being present differs from the vague awareness that operates when we're lost in thought. The talk includes practical exercises from Jack Kornfield's teachings, such as sitting until the urge to get up has arisen and passed three times, and pausing before speaking to witness the moment of intention.*
>
> *Particularly powerful is Fella's personal story of working with overwhelming anger, discovering through patient practice that she could witness the very birth of reactive patterns and choose not to follow them. This account demonstrates how meditation reveals the microcosm of our habitual tendencies, showing us where suffering begins and where we have the power to respond differently. The teaching emphasizes that while we can choose our actions, we cannot control their results—pointing to the importance of releasing attachment to outcomes while remaining fully present to each moment of choice.*

Tonight I'd like to talk about the present moment.

As meditators, we emphasize the present moment. We come back to our breath over and over again to train ourselves to wake up to the present moment. But after we've practiced for a while, sometimes it gets kind of rote to us, this coming back over and over again. And we begin to think, what does this have to do with anything? Why am I doing this? Why am I spending my time coming back to the in-breath and the out-breath over and over again?

So that's what I'd like to address tonight. Why do we do this? What are the benefits of it?

As I was contemplating this, the first thing that came into my mind is that a lot of us do it because it feels good. When we come back to the breath over and over again, it begins to steady the mind and stabilize the attention, and some concentration starts to develop. Concentration in and of itself feels good. It gets quiet, and there can be all kinds of pleasant sensations in the body and in the mind that arise through the concentration.

But another thing that we start to see as we do this practice and get a little bit concentrated is that the mind has stopped its normal mode. It gets out of its habitual tendencies as it becomes a little bit concentrated. And we start to see, even if only for a few moments, that a lot of our difficulties, a lot of our struggles are released in this letting go of what our habitual tendencies are—letting go of the tendency of the mind to go off, and simply coming back. So even for a few moments, we start to see the benefits of the lessening of reactivity.

This reactivity of mind that has us moving out from the present moment is a lot of the reason why we suffer, why we struggle. At its core, what is reactivity actually? When we think about it, we usually think of states of mind like anger or resentment or hostility or avarice—something like that where there's a very strong sense of reactivity in the mind. But at its core, at its very beginnings, the reactivity is born out of contact with something being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. And out of that experience of pleasant or unpleasant, there's a movement either towards it, if it's pleasant, or away from it, if it's unpleasant. If something is pleasant, we like it, we want it, we want to get more of it. If something is unpleasant, we usually want to try to get rid of it. So that's the birth of reactivity—that place where the pleasant moves into liking, to wanting, to grasping.

A lot of what we see as we come back to the present moment, as we practice this training, is the fact that it's really hard to stay here. And we actually think that's a problem, that we can't stay here. But that's part of what the training is—to see what makes us unable to be here.

As we come back again and again, we start to see the mind will go off into some rant with a friend. "Boy, why did that person do that?" And we're off into some kind of reactivity. Or perhaps we're paying attention to our breath and there's a little bit of pleasant feeling coming, and suddenly we find ourselves off on a beach in Tahiti. The practice is to come back, but also to notice what has taken us away. What are the habits of mind that take us away? That's part of the training—to witness that. It's not a problem when the mind has wandered. It's part of what we see, part of the training to actually understand what our habitual tendencies of mind are, what we react to, how we respond to pleasant and unpleasant.

Becoming free of the reactive mind happens in several ways through the course of our meditation. Part of it happens in the way that I mentioned earlier, just because concentration develops slowly over time. Because that concentration has developed, some of the reactivity becomes quiescent. That's one of the ways we begin to let go of our reactivity. And as the reactivity becomes quiescent, we begin to get a sense of, "Wow, it's kind of nice to be without the mind going all over the place. It feels pretty good."

Another way we start to let go of reactivity is when we begin to see that it's unskillful for us, that it makes us suffer. Part of the practice is actually witnessing how we suffer in our anger, in our frustration, in our impatience—that reactivity causes us suffering. Often we are so outwardly focused on what we are angry at or frustrated with or impatient with that we don't really see that we're suffering in the process. The practice of becoming present, waking up in the midst of the reactivity, lets us see that it's actually not so skillful. That's another way we begin to learn how to let go of the reactivity. As the mind sees the suffering that's generated, it begins to let go of the things that cause it.

And likewise, another thing we begin to see as we cultivate this coming back is the benefits of the peace, the tranquility, the equanimity that's cultivated as we do this practice.

We begin to see that those kinds of states of mind make us happier, make us more peaceful, make us more balanced. So through these three ways, as we do this coming back over and over again in our meditation, all three are becoming cultivated.

Mindfulness has a really wonderful property to it. And what I mean by mindfulness is a non-reactive, non-judgmental awareness of what is happening while it's happening. In my experience, with that kind of awareness, it has what feel initially like some kind of magic properties.

It has the property that when you bring your attention to some of these wholesome states of mind—tranquility, equanimity, peace, generosity—when you bring your awareness to states of mind like that, it creates the conditions for those states to arise more frequently in the future. And when you bring your attention to unwholesome or unskillful states of mind like anger, frustration, hostility, avarice, it creates the conditions for those states to arise less frequently in the future.

Now that first one makes sense to a lot of people, and it certainly made sense to me. What I pay attention to tends to increase. That second one—what I pay attention to tends to decrease—I didn't quite understand for a while. But my understanding of what happens is this: when you pay attention with a non-judgmental awareness to a state of mind like anger, and you've got your attention on the anger itself, what you see is the

suffering. You see how detrimental it is to your own being. So the mindfulness, the turning of our attention back on some of these unskillful states of mind, shows us that they are unskillful. We get a direct hit of the fact: this is not so good for me.

So it's really wonderful—this one simple quality of mind, this mindfulness, has this power. It's like this incredible wedge that creates a path for us through our experience, showing us what is skillful and what is unskillful, if we're willing to pay attention to it.

The other reason the present moment is such a valuable place to pay attention to is because it's the only place anything ever happens. A lot of us spend a lot of our time thinking about the past, thinking about the future. And as we begin to do this practice and witness our own minds, it can be really humbling to see just how much we do this. It's astonishing how little we're actually here. It's amazing we can get anything done because our minds are continually off. We get these little moments of being here, a little moment of "oh, there's something," and then the mind is off thinking about how it compares to this or that, or why I like it, or why I don't like it, or why I want more of it. And in the midst of that, there may be a little awareness of some thought, and then there's a reaction to that, and the mind is off on that.

So there are these little moments during our day—many of them, actually—where we do have some presence of mind. But the vast majority of our day, we are in our thoughts, thinking about this or that, the past and the future.

Let's explore a little bit about the past and the future. The past doesn't actually exist anywhere. We can't point to it. We can't say, "There it is." What the past actually is, is a thought in the present moment. That's all the past is. That's all the reality it has—what exists in our thoughts. We have a cultural group agreement that the past exists, and we create it over and over again in the present moment by thinking it. As a collective community, sometimes we think about the past together. Likewise for the future. The future doesn't exist. It simply exists as a thought in the present moment. So if we're not actually awake in the present moment, we're missing our lives.

There's another aspect of awareness, as distinct from mindfulness, that I'd like to explore. And this again relates to the quality of bringing awareness into the present moment. Awareness is happening all the time. Every second of our day, there's some kind of awareness going on. And probably even in our sleep, there's some kind of awareness happening. But it's not always an awareness that is connected with the present moment.

I'll give you an example of this. It was the first time in my practice that this became really clear to me. I was on a retreat, sitting in the dining hall, and I was kind of spaced out. I wasn't really paying much attention, just in my thoughts. I don't even know what I was thinking about. But I noticed somebody come into the room and put some food on their plate and then leave. And then I noticed another person come into the room and put some food on their plate and then leave. While this was going on, I was thinking about the people who came into the room. And then after they both had left, there was a recognition: oh, I'm awake now. I'm actually here now, and I wasn't before. I'm present. But I was curious about the fact that I could remember what had just happened, even though I hadn't been awake in the present moment.

I'm sure you've all had this kind of experience. If you're sitting in a room reading a book and somebody walks in and leaves, you're concentrated on the book.

But if somebody came in and said, "Did somebody come in?" you can probably remember, "Yeah, somebody came in." So there was an awareness going on. But that moment where I saw, "Oh, I'm actually awake now in the present moment"—what was the difference?

One of my teachers, Gil, gave me a term for this. He called it passive awareness versus active awareness. And in later discussions with some of my Burmese teachers, what they have said is that the awareness is not concurrent with the present moment in that kind of passive awareness. There's an awareness happening, but it's not concurrent with what's happening. It's not aware of what's happening while it's happening.

And so that active form of awareness brings you into the present moment, and you are aware of what's happening right now in this very moment. You're aware of the pressure on your seat. You're aware of your hands at your knees, whatever. There's just an awareness of what's happening, whatever moods or mind states are going on right now.

Another benefit—one of the most powerful reasons to come into the present moment—and what we can learn in the present moment has to do with choice. The present moment is the only place we have a choice. We have the possibility in this moment to have some input into the direction of our lives, how we want our lives to go. It's the only place that we have this option. If we're not present to make our choices, if we're not present in the present moment to be aware of that possibility that a choice can be made right now, our habitual tendencies will make our choice for us. So if we see this moment of choice, we have the opportunity to influence the course of our lives.

What I mean by our habitual tendencies making our choice for us is that as we go through our day, there are so many different things that operate in our minds—patterns, just ways that we move through the world. Even a simple, small example: every day when I get to a certain point in my day, I have to choose to go out for my aerobic walk. And I would say most days the thought crosses my mind, "I don't want to do that." And if I weren't conscious of it, I would probably half the time just blow off the walk that day. But because I'm conscious of the fact that I'm making a choice, I can choose, "I'm going to do this." And every day, even though I feel like I'm not going to do this today, I choose to do this.

So being aware of that moment when those thoughts cross our mind—"I don't want to do this," "I've got better things to do," "I've got these eight other things that are calling me," "I don't have time to take my walk this morning"—those habitual tendencies would choose for us. That's a very simple example of what I mean by our habitual tendencies making our choices for us. If we're not aware of the fact that we have this choice, our habits will make the choice for us.

There are some ways that we can start to practice with this in our meditation practice. I'd like to talk about some of those and share a little bit about my experiences with them.

One of them was an exercise that I learned from Jack Kornfield's book, *A Path with Heart*. In it, he suggests that in order to pay attention to this movement of mind, of making a choice, you pick a time for meditation when you don't have to have a specific length of time for the practice. So don't set your alarm to go off after thirty or forty-five minutes. Just have it be an unspecified period of time for your meditation.

Then the instructions are that you sit until a very strong urge to get up has crossed your mind three times. So that first time the urge crosses your mind, you simply observe it. You watch the fact that you want to get up. And this is easiest to do if you actually turn toward the experience: What does it feel like to want to get up? As opposed to kind of gritting and bearing, "Okay, I've got to sit through this." Just observe. What does it feel like? What is the pull? What's happening in the mind?

So observe that whole process of what that wanting feels like. And after some period of time—and it actually doesn't take that long, a minute, maybe two at most—that desire will pass, and the desire to get up will no longer be there. So you can now just settle into your meditation again. You may want to notice if there's any kind of deepening that's happened through that firm attention that's been cultivated by paying attention to the wanting.

And sometime sooner, perhaps, or later, another urge will come, and you pay attention to that. Again, the third time it comes, you can get up.

When I tried this the first time, I had been sitting about twenty minutes a day. And I just assumed my body kind of told me I needed to get up after twenty minutes. I thought, "Well, that's just the way my body is, I guess." I wasn't particularly judgmental about it.

But I tried this exercise, and at the end of the time, after I'd had these three urges pass, I looked at the clock and it had been forty minutes. I thought, "Wow, I guess I can sit for forty minutes." And from then on, I sat for forty minutes. So it had a very strong impact on my practice just to witness that. My assumption—basically I had an assumption that was untrue—and this exercise revealed that to me. Now your experience may reveal something different to you, but it's a really great exercise and I'd encourage you to try it.

You can extend this exercise too, if you can't particularly find a time when you can have an unspecified period of time for your practice. You can extend this to a vow of stillness in the sitting—for instance, not moving to scratch an itch or not moving for a pain in the knee until the urge has come and gone three times. So you can play with this and see how it deepens your practice and how it shows you about this power of choice.

That moment where the mind says, "It's time to get up"—that's a moment of choice. And that movement of the mind saying it's time to get up is our habitual tendency telling us it's time to get up, as opposed to it being an actual decision based on evaluating the circumstances. Observing that choice point can help us start to see these choice points in our lives.

Another great place to practice with this, seeing the choice points, is in walking meditation. If you do formal walking meditation, typically in this practice we do a back and forth walking where you stop, you walk, you come to the end of a path, you stop, you turn, and then you start walking again. All of those points—the starting to walk, the deciding to end walking, the turning, the moving—they all involve choice. So it's a great place to see it, because there's something happening at each end of the path where it's a very clear choice that can be made. When do I turn? Which direction do I turn? It's a wonderful place to observe that.

Another wonderful place to look at this is in speech. I'd suggest doing this with a friend who knows what you're doing—maybe as a pair, a dharma buddy. You get together and decide, "Okay, we're going to pay attention to deciding to speak." The way I suggest doing this initially is to simply pause before you speak. Know that you're going to

speak before you speak. You don't have to stop yourself from speaking, but know that you're going to speak before you speak. Know that choice is being made: "I'm going to speak right now." Simply pause, and try to carry on a conversation with a friend in which that pause is part of the practice.

Through starting small, we can begin to cultivate the ability to be present for this moment of choice. And it can help us in our day to begin to see where we're starting to make our bigger choices—or where we're missing the fact that we've made a bigger choice, where we're suddenly driving down the road in search of the latest electronic device because we had this wanting and we are suddenly off and going without ever having seen that we were going to get there.

The other thing I'd like to mention about choice is that when we see that moment of choice, as we practice, as we start playing with looking at a choice being made—with this pause before speaking, with waiting to move in our meditation—what we'll likely see at that moment, kind of all by itself, is not only that a choice is being made, but we will also very likely get to see why we're making that choice. What's the motivation? What reason is pushing us in that direction?

So in the sitting example, you may discover a thought: "Time to clean the refrigerator. Oh, this is a great time to clean the refrigerator! I have forty-five minutes." We get to see what the motivation is, what is triggering it. There may be motivations of boredom, of wanting to get away from the sitting. There may be a motivation of feeling like there's a lot of things pressing on us that we have to do, other things that are more important to us. So we begin to discover the reason why we want to get up.

I really saw this clearly at one time practicing in Burma. I had witnessed the intention in walking meditation quite a lot before this, but at one point I was really witnessing these pairs—the motivation in conjunction with the intention to do something. On one particular walking period, every time I came to the end of the path and I was standing there, I would note "standing, standing, standing," and then I would notice an intention to turn. And there was always something accompanying it. It was usually boredom, frustration, wanting to get on with things. It was never a wholesome mind state—it was always some kind of aversion, a feeling of "just don't want to be standing here anymore, time to turn around." There was just a little hint of some kind of aversion accompanying that desire to turn.

At that point I was in fairly deep retreat, not really wanting to act on unwholesome intentions. So I was kind of stuck. It was like, "Well, can't turn now." I'd see the intention, I'd see the aversion, I'd see the boredom. "Oh, won't turn on that one."

What do I do? I mean, I'm not seeing a wholesome reason to turn around. And I went and reported this to my teacher. I was like, what do I do? I don't want to act on an unwholesome intention, but all of the intentions that accompany the intention to turn are unwholesome. I was in quite a state.

His instructions to me were quite simple and really brilliant. He said, "Note standing five times, and then turn." Basically, it cut through any internal reason to turn and made it a very structured reason, a kind of neutral reason. Note standing five times, and then turn. So we can really start to see these small movements of mind.

Now, this may sound like something so subtle in some ways—to see that kind of aversion happening before we turn. But what I'd like to suggest is that what we see in our meditation is really a microcosm of what's happening in our minds anyway. Our minds don't really change because we are meditating. We just get to clearly see what they're doing. So that kind of pattern of the mind to be averse to things, to have that tendency to not want to be in a particular state, to have that kind of pushing something away—this is a habitual tendency of my mind. We really get to witness in this microcosm of paying attention in our meditation how our minds function at large. And it's very helpful to begin to see these habitual tendencies.

So see if you can start to witness the moment of intention to action accompanied by a moment of motivation behind that action. And again, we have the opportunity at that point—when we see that choice point and we see whether there's a skillful motivation or an unskillful motivation—we can hopefully begin to choose towards taking the action or making the movement when the motivation is skillful, and to not go that direction when the motivation is unskillful. It begins to instruct us. This path, this mindfulness, really points out how we can move through our lives skillfully.

We're not always going to be able to choose skillfully, even if we see it. We're not always going to be able to choose skillfully. But at least we've seen it, and that's a wonderful step. And if we do notice that a motivation is skillful—if we notice a motivation of generosity or kindness or equanimity or peace behind an action, or compassion—we can take joy in the noticing of that mind state itself. We may be motivated by more wholesome intentions more often than we realize. And as I mentioned earlier, the recognition or the awareness of that wholesome, skillful mind state—of joy, of generosity, of kindness—the recognition of that while it's happening creates the conditions for it to arise more frequently. So notice when you have a skillful intention arising, and take delight in it. It's a wonderful thing to happen.

These moments of motivation, intention, and action happen all the time, every moment of our life. Even while I'm sitting here moving my hand this way, every moment through that path of my hand moving, there's a moment of choice. It keeps moving or it stops. It keeps moving or it stops. So there's a moment of choice. It's astounding, actually, when we begin to see how widespread, how much choice we have in our lives. It's overwhelming, actually, to some extent—we cannot really see all of those intentions. But we can begin to see, through this practice of cultivating the awareness of this choice point, the larger, more obvious choice points: the choice to get up from sitting to standing, the choice to start walking, the choice to go get in our car and go shopping. We can begin to see the more major choice points in our life when we start to pay attention to them in our meditation.

This is one of the biggest powers of mindfulness: the ability to witness that moment of choice and to actually decide how to act, instead of having our habitual tendencies choose for us.

I had a very wonderful experience of this pretty early in my practice, and this event is actually what really got me going into the practice. It really showed me the power of the practice, and I'd like to tell this story.

I really got into the meditation practice because of overwhelming anger. I was really, really angry at a particular person. And the anger was so extreme that when it really came up, I was pretty much non-functional. I couldn't function in my work. I would just be enraged and consumed with this anger. And this is what actually got me into the meditation practice—there's got to be a way to deal with this.

I wasn't functional. There had to be a way to deal with this.

A friend had sent me a book on mindfulness, and I thought, okay, I'm going to try this. I haven't got any other things to try. I'm going to see if I can be mindful of my anger. I used it almost like a mindfulness bell—whenever I got angry, I vowed that I would wake up for that experience and recognize what it felt like.

What I noticed initially was that I would be in a full-blown rage by the time I remembered I was supposed to be paying attention. And then it was pretty unpleasant to be in this state of anger. I really noticed the suffering. I really noticed how difficult it was to be present for myself. I couldn't actually do much other than just say, "Yep, I'm angry." Just really gross noticing of anger at that point. I was pretty new in the practice also. I hadn't had a lot of instructions. I didn't know about how to pay attention to my body. This was just a very gross recognition: yep, I'm angry. What am I supposed to do with this? And at some point, I would be able to put it aside and go back to my work.

Over the course of months of this happening, what I began to realize was that I was waking up a little bit earlier in the process. I wouldn't be in such a rage—it would be more like normal anger when I woke up and remembered, oh, I'm supposed to be paying attention to this. And then over even more months, I began to see that I was waking up when it was more like irritation.

I was beginning to recognize it before the mind fed it and allowed it to escalate. That's what I was witnessing: if I broke into the cycle of anger earlier, it didn't get a chance to escalate into rage. And then earlier and earlier—if I broke into it at irritation, it didn't get a chance to escalate into that full-blown anger.

Then one day I was in my kitchen, no anger present. I was just pretty much paying attention to what I was doing—cutting an apple. In that moment of cutting the apple, I saw a thought appear in my mind. I saw a memory of being at a fruit stand with this person I was so angry with. And I saw at that moment that I wasn't angry. I also saw the inclination of the mind to jump on that thought as if it were a train and ride it right into anger—to construct the anger by thinking, "He did this and he did that and he shouldn't have done this."

Having spent several months looking at the anger and seeing how much suffering it caused me—this is my understanding in retrospect; I didn't know this at the time—but having seen so much suffering in that state of anger, the mind simply said, "I don't have to go there. I don't have to get on that thought and ride it into anger. I have a choice."

And I didn't.

The next moment I stood there kind of waiting to get angry, because I'd not had the experience in the previous few months of this person arising in my mind without anger arising in my mind. I thought they had to go together. But I didn't get angry.

In that moment it was like, wow, this is really powerful stuff—that this practice can show me where my anger begins and show me that I have a choice. I was blown away by the power of simple mindfulness to reveal that to me.

Looking back at it now, I think what often happens when we have this kind of reactivity to somebody over and over again is that we'll have a moment like that where we see the choice. And then a few moments later, that thought comes back to bait us again. Another thought about that person will return, and if we don't notice it, we'll jump on that one and get angry.

But in my experience in this particular case, I was so overwhelmed by the power of the practice that it completely drove thoughts of him out of my mind. I was left with so much gratitude and appreciation. That was the operative experience in that moment—the gratitude for the practice. Wow, what can this do for me? It really made me want to keep going.

So with all of this attention on the present moment and cultivating skillful actions, and knowing that as we cultivate skillful actions it tends to make those states appear more often, we do have to be careful in this process. We must be careful not to choose skillful actions in order that a certain result will happen.

We cannot actually control the results of our actions. While we have some choice about the present moment and what we do when we see this choice point, we don't really have a choice about how that action will manifest once it's out in the world—how people will respond, how other events will unfold on the basis of that action. So we need to let go of the results of our actions. This is really the wide web of karma. We can't control how other people will respond to us, and we can't control how our actions will influence the environment. A simple neutral choice, such as turning left or turning right, might mean life or death. We don't know. And that's another great reason to be in the present moment. We never know when that moment will come, that moment of death. We never know whether we've chosen something that will have that be the result of our actions. So wake up for your life, wake up. You're missing your life unless you are present in the present moment with mindfulness.

Someone asked about the interplay between concentration and mindfulness. In concentration practices, what we do is try to keep coming back to a particular object and let go of everything else. In mindfulness practice per se, at some point the practice is simply to be present, simply to be awake for whatever is happening. So that moment of noticing, "Oh, I'm lost," is a moment of mindfulness. You can wake up right in that moment, aware of whatever is happening. You are already awake right in that moment, aware of whatever is happening. And you have a choice. You can then skillfully choose, "Okay, come back," or you can choose to stay present with whatever is happening.

This connects to something I had wanted to mention in that discussion of passive versus active awareness. One of the best ways to really see the distinction between mindfulness and concentration is to cultivate a recognition of what it feels like to be present, what it feels like to be awake. Then it doesn't matter what we're paying attention to in mindfulness practice. If we want to develop concentration, we can actually develop it through simple presence to changing experience. But if we want to develop

deep states of concentration, we typically have to focus on a particular object. So that awareness or recognition of presence—what does it feel like to be awake?—is a great thing to cultivate.

Initially I didn't really understand what this meant. People would give instructions in guided meditations and say, "Feel the presence in your body." And I would think, "What does that mean?" I had no clue what it meant for years. Over time, I began to understand it. And one of the places that I learned most to see this is in that very moment you talked about—the moment when we wake up after we've been lost, or the moment where we recognize, "I'm off, I'm off the breath." There's something that I was focused here, and then something pulled me away, and I'm awake now. That moment of recognition—"I'm awake now"—is the best place to recognize and see the difference between passive and active awareness.

Because in that moment, there's a little hint, there's tendrils, there's a remembrance in the mind of what it felt like to not be present—a little bit of a sense of the vagueness of mind or the lack of clarity—and the sense of what does it feel like now. It's quite clear once we begin to look for it, once we begin to see, "Oh, that's what it feels like to be awake."

In order to do this exercise, you really have to be awake and present for the moment you notice, "Oh, I've been lost." And this exercise, at least for me, really helped to cut that little bit of judgment around the fact that I'd been lost, because I was starting to take an interest in that interface. I was starting to take an interest in what it felt like to be lost. So in order to do that, I had to be present and not judging myself for having gotten lost. I started to try to ask: What is the soonest I can possibly see the fact that I've woken up?

It stopped being a problem that the mind wandered because I was so interested in what it meant to come back. So that's a really great place to explore that interface and also to help loosen the tie of the judging mind around that coming back.

Question: Could you comment on the difference between active awareness and mindfulness?

No, I'm not so much drawing a distinction between active awareness and mindfulness. I was wanting to draw a distinction between active and passive awareness. But essentially, they're the same thing.

Comment from participant: I learned tonight that you're supposed to clean the refrigerator, so now I know what's wrong in life.

Another participant: I have a little over four months left in a year-to-live practice. That really puts the commodity of time right on your plate. Early on, I started looking for what this present moment looks like—this razor's edge between the past and the future. How do I dive into that and find more of it? The more I've been sitting with it, I find it's just very, very open. The present moment is a very huge place. A lot gets done, and it keeps changing within now rather than now moving through some fixed time. When you talk about thoughts of past and future, it's much more like—I understand it as construct, and I've been able to gain a lot of insight into a knot up in this, you know, the construct of "this is my past, these are the things I've been through, these are the things that constantly reinforce that I'm an individual, separate self." And I ask, do I really cling to that? It's behind this kind of practice that I've been able to see that, and really see the illusion of the self that we cling to as if it were the truth.

That's beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. This idea you mentioned about the present moment getting really big—that's true. It's kind of amazing that it's just this infinitely changing now. And it gets really big. It contains everything, essentially. So it's quite amazing. Thank you for sharing that.

So it's about ten of right now, and I'm told we should stop. Thank you very much for your attention.

CHAPTER 203

The Ordinary That Transforms

Andrea Fella · 52 min

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella invites us to appreciate the extraordinary potential hidden within the most ordinary aspects of our experience. Drawing from her extensive practice including long retreats in Burma and ordination as a nun, she reveals how mindfulness—a quality so common it's like the air we breathe—possesses remarkable power to guide us away from suffering and toward liberation.

Fella presents the Buddha's teachings on the six sense doors (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mind) and the five aggregates (khandhas): body, consciousness, perception, feeling, and mental formations. She explains how consciousness functions like a mirror—neutral and non-judgmental, simply illuminating whatever arises. Through sustained mindfulness, we naturally begin to abandon unwholesome states and cultivate wholesome ones, not through force but through clearly seeing their effects.

The talk offers practical guidance for touching into the quality of pure knowing, including noticing the moment of waking up from distraction and paying attention during neutral daily activities like brushing teeth. Fella shares her retreat experience of discovering how ordinary consciousness, when met with continuous clarity, opens into what the tradition calls 'the bliss of seclusion'—freedom from unwholesome mind states. She concludes with Lama Gendun Rinpoche's poem celebrating how happiness and peace are already present, available in every instant of open, relaxed awareness.

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

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

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

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

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

Mindfulness is like the air we breathe, actually. It happens to us all the time throughout our day. It's not something we even actually have to try to do. It will happen to us in brief moments all the time throughout the day. For example, if you are washing your hands and you put them in the water and it's really hot, you know that it's hot when it's happening. There's a moment of mindfulness there, of recognition: "Oh, this is hot." That kind of thing happens all the time to us. But we don't typically pay attention to the fact that it has happened, that we are aware of what's happening while it's happening.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

take some time, but mindfulness will lead us that way. Simply paying attention to our experience will lead us that way. So that's how unskillful mind states are abandoned through mindfulness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As we start to see this process of life—just this seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, and things happening in the mind—as we start to see this happen, we begin to get a sense that this whole thing is just a process. It's really just an ever-changing flow of things happening. Things appear, they disappear.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

These five aggregates are: the body, as I mentioned, and the other four—consciousness, perception, feeling, and what are sometimes called mental formations. Consciousness is just the quality of mind that knows, just the simple bare knowing part. Perception is the part of our mind that recognizes what we're knowing. It's connected to memory. So it's the part of our mind that recognizes, "Oh, this is a white piece of paper," or "this is hardness," or "this is a clock." There are many levels of perception. There's the perception of very bare experience down to the level of just vibration and heat and cold. And there's the perception of person, carpet, wood, floor. All of these things are perception.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Emaho! Marvelous. Everything happens by itself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 204

Why vs. What

Andrea Fella · 55 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella examines a fundamental distinction in contemplative practice: the difference between intellectually analyzing why we suffer versus directly observing what is actually occurring in our present-moment experience. Drawing from the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), she highlights the Buddha's teaching that a well-trained disciple attends wisely to the Four Noble Truths as lived experience rather than getting lost in questions about past and future.*
>
> *Through vivid personal examples—from recurring memories of forgetting lines in a play to working with deep patterns of self-hatred on long retreat—Andrea demonstrates how suffering is constructed fresh in each moment through our reactions to thoughts and sensations. She explains that the 'why' of our history is less important than recognizing the 'why' of the present moment: seeing how reactivity arises right now in response to memories and triggers. This direct seeing itself has the power to dismantle habitual patterns.*
>
> *The talk offers practical guidance on working with emotions through body awareness, noting pleasant and unpleasant qualities, and Joseph Goldstein's technique of noting 'contact' with difficult experiences. Andrea distinguishes between psychological insight (understanding the historical causes of our patterns) and meditative insight (vipassanā)—seeing directly into the insubstantial, impermanent nature of thoughts and feelings. While psychological insight can reduce resistance to difficult states, it is the meditative insight that truly cuts the deep ruts of habitual suffering. She also addresses working skillfully with trauma, recommending Peter Levine's somatic experiencing approach for those dealing with overwhelming material.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

I find that this kind of intellectual reflection can sometimes help. In my own experience, I can see that if I'm in a state of agitation or anger or some kind of difficult mind state, a thought about it can help to reduce it somewhat. It can help me to not act out on anger if I think, "Well, it's really not such a good thing to do, and I don't really have a good reason to be angry. I know this is coming from my conditioning." So it can be helpful to make those kinds of reflections.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But what became clear to me on this retreat, having seen this sequence a number of times, was that it wasn't as if that embarrassment was waiting, lurking in my psyche somewhere, just ready to appear. It was actually being constructed right then and there

in the present moment—because that thought arose and because I reacted to the thought. It was not necessary for that reaction to occur. That thought can appear in the mind, and has many times now since then, and I don't get embarrassed about it. So there's not an absolute direct link between the memory and the reaction to it. And in the present moment is where we can dismantle that. It's the only place we have that opportunity.

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

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

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

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

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

But what surprised me even more was the next night. I went to bed, was setting my alarm clock, and I remembered the thought because I had seen it clearly the night before. I remembered that thought, and I didn't get lonely. I was really surprised by that. I

think, looking back at it, that the seeing—the clear seeing that the loneliness had been caused by a reaction to the thought—had the power to dismantle the reactivity just through the seeing of it. And so that every-evening loneliness didn't return. Now I'm not saying I never got lonely again. Definitely not saying that. But that regular every-night going-to-bed feeling lonely—that stopped.

So this is an example of looking at our experience, just looking at what is actually happening, what is actually going on in our experience. And what I saw was a chain of events in the mind that triggered the loneliness. By looking at the what of my present moment experience, I saw the why of the present moment experience. It didn't have anything to do with the fact that I'd had this relationship. Well, it did of course have something to do with having had the relationship, but it didn't have so much to do with the history of the relationship. The why had to do with the reaction in the present moment. It was not automatic that I had to react to that thought in that way.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

be a little bit unpleasant when we actually notice them. There's a little bit of spinning, a little bit of agitation and churning in the body. So look at what is pleasant and particularly what is unpleasant.

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

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

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

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

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

So he started noticing what was happening. He said, "I noticed the tension in my neck, the tightness in my jaw, and then I'd feel this rising of sensation." And over the course of some months of paying attention to what was happening, he began to notice that it wasn't nearly as intense when he was simply attending to what was happening. He actually began to notice some of the triggers, some of the beginnings of the panic attack. And just staying right with what was happening in the moment, often the panic attacks would simply dissipate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This connection between the mind and the body is really powerful, and it can be misleading. It can mislead us sometimes into making erroneous judgments. I noticed this in my own meditation when I'd notice a particular physical pattern appear in the body. The pattern generally was one that felt kind of familiar—a familiar set of contractions, perhaps contraction in the throat and tightening around the heart. There was a feeling that was very familiar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now this particular pattern of self-hatred and unworthiness—I had some idea already through a lot of therapy that it had to do with a particular relationship from my early life. I knew that kind of intellectually; there was a connection between these feel-

ings and that relationship. But I hadn't really had a direct experience, a real direct connection. It was all intellectual. I could see how things had unfolded and it made sense to me, but it wasn't an actual direct experience of knowing that connection.

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

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

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

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

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

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

So I just continued observing, just continued observing the self-hatred and unworthiness. And I remember so clearly one night, I left the meditation hall and I was fine, no problem. As I walked up the stairs out of the meditation hall, the self-hatred descended

and I was powerless. Even seeing the pattern begin, it was so strong. The habit towards that pattern was so strong. I was powerless to touch it. All that I could do was just witness it. And so I witnessed it.

I went back to my room and it was getting to be bedtime, the last part of the day. And I just decided, "I'm not going to go to bed until I have seen this really, really clearly." Fortunately that evening—I thought very fortunately—Joseph Goldstein had given the dharma talk and he'd given an instruction on how to pay attention to something that was really sticky, really hard for us. He'd suggested that noting the pleasant or unpleasant aspect of the experience was a key piece of it. So noticing what the feeling of it was: Is it pleasant or unpleasant? Well, this was clearly unpleasant. But he also said that's often not enough with something really sticky, that you have to note the moment you feel that unpleasant hit. Contact. Note the contact of that experience and then note the unpleasant.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Actually, the first thing we start to see is that it's somewhat easier. It's less suffering to be present for our experience than to be caught in it. It's less suffering to be aware of anger and self-hatred than it is to just be caught in it and continuing to feed the pattern. So there's that immediate benefit. And we also start to see through these moments of witnessing that this is actually the way out. We have to go in to get out, essentially. We have to go through in order to break the patterns.

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

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

Someone shared that in other traditions of meditation, the approach often seemed to assume you could leave your history at the door. What they found valuable was this understanding that while insight has certain benefits, there's also a behavioral aspect of

being with our patterns as they gradually change. I appreciate that reflection. It's immensely helpful to know what we're bringing into the room. We can't really leave it behind—it comes with us. So we allow it.

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

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

Sometimes you really need to spend considerable time cultivating the resources first—the grounding, the place where you can feel comfortable in your body. That's the first priority, like building concentration. Get yourself to a place where you can reliably come back to stability. And then you may want to just bring up a thought of the trauma.

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

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

*

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

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

CHAPTER 205

Hindrances: Restlessness

Andrea Fella · 44 min

In this comprehensive exploration of restlessness and remorse (uddhacca-kukkucca), Andrea Fella examines how this fundamental hindrance operates as a covering (nīvaraṇa) that obscures mental clarity and concentration. She explains how restlessness can underlie the other four hindrances—desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, and doubt—making it particularly important to understand. The talk distinguishes between physical restlessness, mental agitation, remorse about past actions, and anxiety about the future.

Fella draws on the Buddha's similes for restlessness: a pond with wind-ruffled water that cannot reflect clearly, and the experience of being enslaved to one's habitual patterns. She emphasizes the Buddha's key instruction that suffering should be understood rather than eliminated, noting that when we bring mindful attention to hindrances, they transform from obstacles into the path itself. Mindfulness has the unique quality of diminishing unwholesome states while strengthening wholesome ones.

Practical techniques offered include: simply putting the body there and sitting through restlessness; allowing awareness to expand widely rather than focusing narrowly; releasing resistance to the experience; shifting attention to the knowing of restlessness rather than the restlessness itself; and coming into bodily sensations to cut the momentum of mental spinning. Fella notes that restlessness is the last hindrance to fall away on the Buddhist path, disappearing only at full awakening, making it a lifelong companion worthy of patient investigation.

I will speak on the hindrance of restlessness this evening.

I'll start with a brief review of the hindrances, since I know you've been hearing about them. Restlessness is one of the five hindrances. I don't know how Shiloh has been translating them, but the translations I usually use are desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety (or restlessness and remorse), and doubt. These are states of mind that typically obstruct our concentration, our ability to stay present in the present moment. They're called the hindrances, but the Pali term, *nivarana*, is also sometimes translated as "covering." These hindrances are covering states. They cover the clarity of the mind. They cover the concentration of the mind.

The hindrance of restlessness is a very fundamental hindrance. It can underlie the other hindrances. A mind that is restless is one that's not settled or stable, so it's the antithesis of concentration. In that unsettled, unstable state, the mind is likely to go out and latch onto something it likes and start wanting it, desiring it—the hindrance of desire—or latch onto something that it doesn't like, that it wants to fix, that it wants to get rid of. That becomes the hindrance of aversion or ill will.

Restlessness can also underlie the state of doubt. If the mind is agitated and not able to settle, doubt can often manifest out of that state of the mind not being able to land on anything in particular. It can even underlie the hindrances of sloth and torpor. I'm sure many of you are familiar with how a baby, when it gets overstimulated, will just conk out. It receives so much stimulation that it gets exhausted and conks out. Sometimes that happens with restlessness also. We get so much energy going through our system that we go on overload, and then we get exhausted from being on overload.

The hindrance of restlessness is a fundamental hindrance to become familiar with. If we can become familiar with this restless state, we can sometimes start to see the mind in that restless, agitated state before it leaps into desire or before it leaps into ill will.

These hindrances of desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt tend to be some of the key ways that we suffer in our experience. The Buddha had some very good advice for us when we suffer. He didn't say to try to get rid of it. He said to try to understand it. That was his key instruction around suffering: that it should be understood.

This points us to what we should do with these hindrances. We should try to understand them when we experience them—not to get rid of them, but to understand them for the sake of understanding them. When we turn our attention to the hindrances and we're no longer caught by them, when our mind is no longer running out after them, we are no longer hindered in our practice.

The hindrances have this interesting role for us. They do obscure our practice when we don't recognize that they are present. But as soon as we see they're present, they become our practice. They're not in the way of our practice. They simply are the grist for the mill—the compost of our experience.

In my experience with meditation practice, really understanding something has meant not understanding intellectually, but really understanding the experience itself. Understanding what the experience of ill will is, what the experience of restlessness is. Bringing mindfulness to our experience.

Mindfulness has this beautiful, counterintuitive quality. Sometimes when we're told to pay attention to states that seem so difficult or unpleasant, we wonder if it will just increase that state. We tend to think that when we pay attention to something, it makes it stronger. But mindfulness has a very interesting quality. When we pay attention to wholesome states of mind—kindness, generosity, compassion, equanimity, tranquility, loving-kindness—being mindful of them in a non-judgmental, alert way creates the conditions for them to appear more frequently in our experience. Mindfulness does create the conditions to enhance or increase the wholesome qualities of our mind.

But when we bring that same mindful, non-judgmental attention to ill will, to desire, to restlessness, to anxiety, to fear, to frustration, to aversion, it creates the conditions for these states to appear less frequently in our experience.

It is as if the wholesome qualities of mind bask in the light and warmth of mindfulness, while the unwholesome qualities shrink from its clarity and brightness. So there's no need to worry about bringing mindful attention to these unwholesome states of mind. As we do that, they become transforming. They transform. They become the path. They become the way that we walk out of suffering.

Another wonderful quality of mindfulness is that we can be mindful of anything. We can be mindful of sloth and torpor, we can be mindful of restlessness. So much of what I'll talk about tonight is how to work with this hindrance of restlessness, since this is the hindrance that is up for this week—how to get to know it, how to understand how it functions for us, and how to simply be with it.

Restlessness and remorse are related to an excess of energy. The sloth and torpor that you talked about last week are usually related to a lowering or reduction of energy. This is the opposite side of things—restlessness is the quality when the mind has a little too much energy going on. But there are two aspects of this hindrance: there's the restlessness, and then there's what's translated as remorse, sometimes also translated as worry or anxiety.

Restlessness can refer to either restlessness of body or restlessness of mind. Restlessness of body I'm sure you're all familiar with. It's just when the body does not feel like it can sit still. Sometimes in meditation this can get really unpleasant. It can feel like there are jumping beans under the skin, or like your whole body has this energy coursing through it. It can be a very unpleasant experience.

The mind can also be restless, unable to settle on any particular object. You try to bring it to the sensations of breathing, and it's just off to hearing and body sensations and thoughts, spinning off into thinking. The mind can have that restless quality, a kind of jumpy quality to it.

The quality of remorse usually has to do with when the mind is agitated or restless because of something we've done in the past, or something we've not done—something we regret either having done or not done. The mind in those situations tends to play the situation over and over again. That's the restless quality of mind, when it just keeps repeating about something from the past like that.

The translation around worry or anxiety points to the way we can be restless about things that might happen in the future—the way we're worried about how something is going to come out, what we're going to do, how we're going to plan to do something. Planning often has this quality of anxiety to it, and the mind just keeps spinning. How am I going to do this? How am I going to figure this out? This piece doesn't fit with that piece. I can't do that when I do this. How can I figure this out? The mind just keeps spinning in this kind of restlessness.

Restlessness can manifest in really obvious, hard-to-ignore forms, like the sensation of it being nearly impossible to stay seated in your chair, or the mind that's just spinning out into the future or reviewing the past. Or it can take much more subtle forms—just a very subtle stirring when the mind is pretty quiet and the body is pretty settled. Just a little tiny bit of "Oh, how can I make this continue?" or "How can I make this go a little deeper?" Just a little restlessness of mind to change things, even very subtly. That can be a very subtle kind of restlessness manifesting even when the mind is fairly stable and fairly settled.

The Buddha had a number of similes for all of the hindrances, but I'll just talk about the similes he used for restlessness tonight. He had a simile around a body of water for all the hindrances, and for restlessness he likened the mind to a pool of water that's blown by wind. Anyone who tries to lean over that pool and look is not going to be able to see their reflection because the surface of the pond is agitated. You can even sometimes feel that—the Buddha had a genius for creating similes. The quality of the ruffled waves on the pond, the body can actually sometimes feel like that. The mind can sometimes have that feeling of being ruffled.

The other analogy the Buddha used about restlessness is that it is like being enslaved—like you're a slave and you have a master that says, "You have to do this now, you have to do that now, you have to do this." That quality of mind, of the mind just going, "Oh, I've got to think about this now."

I've got to do that now. Our habitual patterns leap in and become like a master to us. The habit comes along and says, "We've got to do this now. I've got to fix this. I've got to figure out how to get rid of that." We become slaves to our habits, and that restlessness of mind is responding to those habitual patterns.

One way I like to think about stilling restlessness is through this image of rippling water—you can envision the stilling of the pond and then the pond becoming very clear. There's another analogy I also find helpful, especially for the subtle kinds of restlessness. There's a restlessness that we sometimes don't even know is present until it disappears. We've become so habituated to a low level of restlessness that we don't notice it. Then suddenly, when we drop into a state of deeper calmness, it becomes really clear. It's like the experience you have in your house when the refrigerator is running and you don't notice it, but then when it goes off, there's that quietness and peace. That's the subtle distinction between subtle restlessness in the mind and the dropping into silence and stillness.

So how do we work with restlessness in our practice? It's a challenging one sometimes, because the body can be so coursed with energy that it's very difficult to stay in meditation practice. The first thing to do is simply recognize it. Recognize that it is happening at a very gross level. You can use naming or noting: noting "restlessness" or "agitation." I like the term agitation—it feels a little more neutral to me. There's just an agitation of mind.

One of my teachers, Sharon Salzberg, tells a story about when she found herself in this restless state. She simply didn't sit, because she figured it wasn't worthwhile—that there wasn't any point to sitting when the mind was restless. She could see that she wasn't able to be present. The mind would go off, then she'd come back for a split second, then the mind would go off again, then she'd come back for a moment, and then it would go off again. Well, what's the point of this? So when her mind was very settled and still, she would sit in meditation and have a lovely experience of quiet, of concentration, of calm, of peace. She thought that's what meditation was supposed to be like.

But at some point she went to her teacher—she was in India doing this practice—and his name was Munindraji. She reported this experience to him and said, "You know, when I'm restless, I just don't sit. I just get up." His advice to her was: when you're experiencing that restlessness, just put your body there. You don't have to try to be present all the time. Notice when you come back, and the mind will go off again. But just put your body there. There is some value to simply sitting through this experience, to knowing this is what the mind is doing, and coming back as best you can. Just keep coming back and coming back.

Sometimes my teacher Gil Fronsdal likes to say that a successful sitting is simply getting to the end of it. It doesn't have to be particularly mindful or clear, but just the fact that you have the determination and resolve to stay present—you're cultivating good qualities in this. You're cultivating the quality of determination. You're cultivating the quality of patience. And you're cultivating what mindfulness you can. So just put your body there. See what happens if you just put your body there.

The rest of what I'll talk about assumes pretty much that you will be able to put your body there and hang out with it a little bit. Although sometimes it is helpful, if you find yourself extremely restless in a sitting meditation, to get up and try walking meditation or standing meditation. Sometimes it can help to allow the body to be in a posture that consumes a little more energy so that the mind can be a little more present.

If you are able to just sit with it, to put your body there, the physical version of restlessness is usually pretty easy to recognize. It has that quality of coursing energy, or sometimes, like I mentioned before, jumping beans under the skin. It's just so unpleasant.

In working with physical restlessness, it's often really helpful to let the mind not try to focus on the specific sensations of restlessness—to not try to directly focus on the physical experience—but instead let the mind get really big. As I mentioned at the end of the guided meditation, when I pointed you to this quality, perhaps some of you might have been feeling a little bit of restlessness. Letting the mind get really big, allowing the restlessness to get as big as it wants to, encompassing the whole room so that it doesn't feel like it just has to stay in this body. The experience can get very large, and when you allow the mind to relax and just get large with the experience, sometimes it's a little easier to stay present.

At one point I was doing a self-retreat at home, and every night I had this incredible restlessness coursing through the body. It was so difficult to stay put, but I had a pretty strong determination to just stay with it for the period of time that I had set for my meditation, which was forty-five minutes. At some point one evening, partway through the retreat, I recognized that there was a resistance to the experience, a resistance to the feeling, and that there was some kind of way in which the body knew what it wanted to do with this experience. I was trying to do something with the restlessness, but really the body knew what it wanted to do with it.

So I just kind of let go and allowed the body to do what it wanted. At that point it felt like the energy just blew a hole in the top of my head. There was this energy streaming through the body out the top of my head, and it became much easier to just be with it, as it felt like the energy had a path through the body. It wasn't contained in the body anymore—it was moving through. And that became much easier.

Letting go as much as possible of resistance to restlessness is key. If there's any resistance to restlessness, that's a form of ill will, a form of aversion—one of the other hindrances. We sometimes call that a multiple hindrance attack, because there's more than one hindrance going on at the same time. What we do in that case is generally try to pay attention to whichever one is most obvious or primary.

So if you're experiencing this resistance to restlessness or aversion to restlessness, then allowing yourself to feel what that aversion is like, what that resistance is like—can you allow yourself to experience that? It's helpful in this process to come into the body, to allow yourself to just experience the bodily sensations, especially when there is aversion. Often the aversion will manifest as some kind of story: "I can't stand this. I've got to get rid of this. I'm never going to be able to sit through this." There's some kind of story going. And if we can let go of the story and just be with what it feels like to resist this restlessness—where is the tightness? where is the holding?—you might in moments see the resistance let go and then just feel the restlessness. And you'll see, actually, that it's easier to just experience the restlessness than it is to experience the resistance to the restlessness or the aversion to the restlessness.

The fewer the hindrances, the easier it is. When you get hindrances piled on top of each other, it can get kind of chaotic in the experience. So just noticing what is the primary hindrance and bringing your attention there, perhaps to where it manifests in your physical experience.

Another way to work with restlessness—and this is an interesting one, a subtle one, but I'm going to go ahead and mention it—is to become aware that you know that restlessness is happening. Every experience that we have, whether it's a physical sensation or a mental experience, with every experience there's the thing itself, the experience—restlessness in this case—and then there is the mind that knows the experience. So there's the knowing of the experience, and there is the experience. In this case there's restlessness, and there is the knowing of the restlessness.

If you can recognize that you know you're restless, sometimes all it takes is a shifting of the noting in your mind, if you're using noting. You move from a noting of "restless" to "knowing restlessness." Or sometimes people find it helpful to think "the mind is knowing restlessness" rather than "I am knowing restlessness." The mind is processing, doing this experience. The mind knows restlessness.

The knowing experience has some really interesting qualities to it. It's very clear, it's very nonjudgmental, and it's neutral. It's a neutral experience to be in the experience of knowing. One of the interesting aspects of playing with this knowing of restlessness is that it will be very clear to you when you actually land in the knowing versus being in the restlessness, because restlessness is a pretty unpleasant experience. It'll be really clear that you're in the restlessness if you're experiencing all these unpleasant physical sensations. If you can shift to the knowing, if your mind can be more aware of the knowing, there will be a shift, and the experience will become more neutral because the mind is more attending to the knowing of the restlessness than it is to the restlessness itself.

So it's very clear when you actually can touch into that knowing, because there's a shift of experience. It becomes, "Oh, this is just restlessness in the body." And the charge is taken out of it when we can land in the knowing.

The mental form of restlessness often manifests as a lot of thinking. You can tell when there's just this quality of mind that can't stop. And often in this case, there's something fueling the thinking—some kind of emotion perhaps, worry or fear, the mind spinning out and churning into the future.

Again, it's really helpful sometimes to allow the attention to go very wide, to kind of step back and ask, "What's going on? Why is the mind just spinning out?" Sometimes the mind will start spinning and we don't really know what it's spinning about. Other times it's very clear—we're angry about something or we're wanting something, and then the hindrance of ill will or the hindrance of desire is primary. But sometimes it's just spinning and we don't really know what it's spinning about or what emotion lies underneath it.

So opening up, stepping back and asking, "What is going on here?"—you can even just ask yourself that question directly—and sometimes it will become clear.

I had an experience of this at one point. I was driving and I noticed that the mind just kept projecting into the future. It would spin out into the future, and I kept noticing that and coming back, noticing the hands on the steering wheel, trying to stay present

for the driving. But the mind just kept spinning out. And it wasn't a pleasant spinning. It was, "How am I going to do this? How am I going to figure this out?" A very unpleasant kind of experience.

At some point, after having come back and seen the mind spin out many times, I realized there's something going on here. So I stepped back and asked, "What is happening in the mind?" And what I realized was that I was really happy. The mind was trying to figure out how to stay happy—how can I keep this state of mind? And I hadn't even noticed the happiness. So that restlessness came from a kind of big energy that emerged out of the happiness. And it was like, "Oh, how is this going to happen in my life? I better make sure that person understands how this is going to work." It was ridiculous.

So sometimes we can be surprised when we open up like this. I would not have expected happiness to underlie that very unpleasant spinning in my mind. I was completely taken by surprise.

Opening up, taking a step back and asking what's going on here when there's restlessness—you can sometimes uncover something you hadn't seen before.

If there are a lot of thoughts going on with restlessness, it's really helpful, particularly in this kind of experience, to come into the body and see if you can notice where the restlessness is manifesting physically. Sometimes I find that when the mind is spinning out, it's actually more unpleasant than the body being jittery. If the body is jittery, you can sometimes stay present for it, but when the mind is spinning out, it's hard to stay mindful.

So if you can bring your attention into the body and notice where the physical manifestation of this mental spinning is happening—you might notice some energy through the body, a tension or tightness in your heart, a contraction in your stomach—just notice where in your physical experience this energy appears. This serves the purpose of keeping you mindful in the present moment, and it also helps to cut the attachment to the thinking. The thinking process tends to perpetuate the restlessness, so if you can cut the thinking by coming into the physical experience of the body, you'll have a chance then to allow it to wind itself out.

These hindrances, and restlessness in particular—it's kind of like your mind is rushing sixty or a hundred miles an hour down the freeway. It's just going so fast.

And when we come into mindfulness around it, it doesn't mean that it stops just like that. It's like putting a car into neutral. When you put a car into neutral that's going a hundred miles an hour down the freeway, it doesn't stop. It just stops going quite as fast. It begins to slow.

So when we stop feeding the momentum of the restlessness with thoughts, we have a chance to allow it to wind itself out in a natural way, as if that car is coming to rest by putting it into neutral. When we bring mindfulness to our experience, to something like restlessness, it doesn't mean that it ends immediately, but it does mean it has a chance to kind of live out its life and then flow out almost like a breath flowing out.

It's also helpful in this to try the exercise of knowing restlessness when you're in mental restlessness as well. See if you can just recognize that the mind knows it's got this mental restlessness. You could use noting again: knowing restlessness, knowing agitation, knowing spinning.

The quality of remorse is sometimes difficult to be with. This is when the mind is going back over something that we wish we hadn't done. Often what seems to happen is that we're trying to figure out how to relive our past—how do we have a better past? And it's not really possible, so it's not terribly helpful.

The thing I found most helpful with remorse is to actually allow myself to feel the remorse. It's not an unskillful thing. It's like, this is the consequence of having done this thing. If we've done something that we legitimately have reason to feel bad about, if we've legitimately hurt somebody or caused someone harm in some way, the feeling of remorse around that is just the recognition of: it's like this. When I've behaved in that way, this is the consequence.

There's a way in which not resisting that feeling of remorse allows us to drop into the actual connection with the person that we've hurt. A way that we drop into a connection with the sadness. Sadness is really the place it drops into most for me when I allow myself to not resist the remorse, when it's just able to be with that sadness. And there may, out of that, also come some desire or wish, a wholesome wish, to make amends, to apologize, or to make some kind of redress.

So remorse is not something necessarily to run away from. It's something that can inform us about how we can more skillfully choose in the future. We can learn from it and move on. There's no need to beat ourselves up with guilt around it. Guilt and remorse are different things. Guilt is: I shouldn't have done that, that was so stupid. Re-

morse is more: this is the consequence. How can I move on from here? What can I do to make amends? What can I do to redress this action? There's no way to fix the past. We have to move on from here.

So often we have a feeling with the hindrances in general that they're in the way. I mean, after all, they're called hindrances. So we think they're in the way of our meditation practice. We think our task with them is to get rid of them so that we can then become concentrated and then be mindful. But wanting to get rid of them is just another form of ill will—so it's adding another hindrance to the situation, another multiple hindrance attack.

We can be mindful, we can be aware of these hindrances. And as I said before, when we're aware of them, they are no longer hindering our experience. They become our path when we are aware of them. And we can experience very clear, deep insights around these hindrances. I'm sure Shaila has talked about the understandings of impermanence, of suffering, of not-self. We can come to understanding of the impermanence of hindrances. We can come to an understanding of the process nature of hindrances, that they are not me—I am not this hindrance. We can come to an understanding of the suffering nature, the unsatisfactory nature of the hindrance. And these are insights in our practice.

So the hindrances, when we bring our attention to them, can actually be the doorway. They are the path when they're happening. They're not something to get rid of in order that we can get on the path again. They are the path.

The hindrance of restlessness in particular is not one that we will lose anytime soon. The Buddhist path talks about four stages of awakening, and perhaps Shaila has discussed this. The hindrance of doubt disappears at the first stage of awakening. At the second stage of awakening, along with some other developments, there's just an attenuation of greed and aversion, of the hindrances of ill will and desire. They don't go away at the second stage of awakening. So even after the second stage of awakening, after you've gained very clear, deep understanding of the truth of the end of suffering, the hindrances of aversion and desire are still present. It's only at the third stage of awakening that those hindrances drop away. And it's only at the fourth stage, the very end of the path, that restlessness drops away.

So restlessness is something that underlies a lot of the movement of mind. It can be very subtle, this movement of restlessness. Get to know it. It will be with us for a very long time. But as we learn to work with it, it can become our path, observing the restlessness—when we're restless, when the restlessness disappears, it shows us how we walk the path. It points our way forward.

Question and Answer Period

A student asked whether acceptance of restlessness could itself become sloth. Yes, it could be. You could just get dull, sitting and thinking for the whole meditation session, accepting the restlessness without ever making an effort to work with it. It really depends on how that acceptance is manifesting. All of these hindrances weave through each other. We can get restless out of being aversive, or we can fall into sloth and torpor as a response to restlessness. They can all become intertwined. So we really have to be very honest with ourselves about what the actual experience is. Is it just a dullness setting in that allows us to sit through the session while we space out? Or are we actually making an effort to come back? We have to be honest with ourselves.

Another student raised a question about remorse and the pattern of trying to edit the past, noting that while I had focused primarily on situations where one may have unskillfully injured someone, there seems to be another source of that editing—when we have acted in ways that are inconsistent with our self-concept. Perhaps it's about wanting to have been more clever, less forgetful, or more efficient.

This is a different kind of remorse, I think. It's not necessarily about having done something wrong. Though it can be—I can imagine if you have an image of yourself as a green person, someone who doesn't waste energy, and you neglect to combine your errands into one trip, there may be a sense of having injured the planet. So there could be a feeling of wanting to be more careful in the future around that.

But I think the key is letting go of trying to edit the past and simply experiencing whatever the feeling is now, because that will give you some clue as to what aspect of your self-image is in contest here. Is this actually a part of your self-image that you want to cultivate, or is it a part of your self-image that you want to let go of? It's really about coming into the experience of the moment, and you'll see something about what the tension is about.

That's a kind of form of ill will towards yourself. So that's what you pay attention to. You notice that feeling, and that's a hard thing to feel. So that's what you bring your attention to. What does it feel like to be beating myself up like this?

And again, can you let go of the thoughts and come into the body? It's really helpful to use the body as a tool, particularly for this kind of experience. What does it feel like in the body to have this feeling of self-recrimination? You'll probably feel both the remorse and the self-recrimination at the same time. And you may find, as you come into the body, that you come down to just the remorse as the thoughts begin to dissipate, as you stay with the body more.

Now, you're going to end up leaping back out. What happens is you touch the feelings and then it's like, "Oh, I don't want to feel this. I'd rather figure out how I can change my past." Our minds do that kind of thing. So you just have to keep trying to come back into the body as much as possible. And at some point, you may notice a slight shift, at which point you can just touch into the pure remorse.

I've found it's actually interesting—when I can just touch the remorse, it's like, "Oh right, this is what it feels like." And it's no longer the recrimination. The recrimination is far worse than the remorse. It's interesting. It's almost like what we're trying to do is punish ourselves because we think we need to suffer for having done something wrong, so we punish ourselves that way. But we find, I think, that once we actually touch the remorse, we can find a more skillful way to deal with it. We find a more skillful way to approach it rather than beating ourselves up and trying to figure out how to fix the past.

So we should stop. Thank you all for your attention and your participation. I'd like to wish that the practice we've shared here this evening be offered to be of benefit to all beings everywhere.

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

CHAPTER 206

Practicing with Vedanā

Andrea Fella · 38 min

In this talk, Andrea Fella offers a comprehensive exploration of vedanā—the feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral that accompanies every moment of experience. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching on paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), she explains how vedanā serves as a crucial weak link in the chain leading from sense contact to craving, clinging, and ultimately suffering. When we bring mindfulness to this subtle quality of experience, we gain the opportunity to short-circuit our automatic reactivity.

Fella references the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), where feeling constitutes one of the four foundations of mindfulness, and quotes the Aṅguttara Nikāya teaching that "all things converge on feeling." She illuminates how vedanā functions as a narrow channel through which all our responses are born—we don't actually react to objects themselves, but to the pleasant or unpleasant quality we experience through them.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with vedanā in daily life, particularly recommending mindful eating as an excellent training ground where all senses come together. Fella shares personal examples, including noticing how a neutral sound became unpleasant through fear-based reactivity, and discovering the initial pleasant warmth underlying anger. As practitioners become more attuned to feeling tone, they begin to witness the very birth of reactivity and find the seeds of freedom in that seeing.

So as Leanne mentioned, I'd like to speak about the feeling tone of our experience, the vedanā of our experience. This is not about emotion in particular, but about a very simple, very specific experience: whether something is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

On the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha had insight into what he understood to be the main cause of our difficulty in life—the problem of suffering, the nature of dissatisfaction. We all experience this. We all experience suffering or dissatisfaction. We all experience this feeling of wanting something that we don't have, of having something that we don't want, of things simply not being the way we'd like them to be, of wanting to change them.

One aspect of the Buddha's insight around suffering is that he understood the cause of suffering to be wanting or craving, as he put it. But his insight went beyond the simple understanding that craving causes suffering. He actually uncovered a whole chain of conditions—causes and conditions—that lead us from our experience into suffering over and over again. He called this chain of conditions dependent origination.

I'm not going to go through the entire set of dependent origination this evening, but just talk about the links in the chain, the various steps or stages of causes that relate to this evening's topic of feeling tone.

Basically, because we have a body and a mind, we experience sense contact. We experience sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and everything that comes into our mind. These are the six senses in the Buddhist understanding: our five usual senses plus the sense door of the mind. Each of these sense impressions has a particular flavor to it. It's either a pleasant experience, an unpleasant experience, or a neutral experience. Every single bodily sense and every mental impression has this quality of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Once we experience that pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality in a very simple, normal kind of way, we either like the pleasant and want it, or we don't like the unpleasant and don't want it, or we perhaps don't even notice the neutral experience. So primarily what happens out of this sense impression of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is that we in some way react to it, respond to it with this kind of either wanting or not wanting. That's the next link in the chain: wanting or craving.

From the craving, from this wanting, we kind of automatically begin to move—also in a very simple and natural way—to do something about it. We move towards getting the thing that we want or actively getting rid of the thing that we don't want. This movement of mind, this part of our experience, is called clinging. This is where we've actually latched onto our experience in some way, either to grab onto it, to keep it, or to push it away.

Sometimes it's hard to understand what it means to crave something unpleasant. But the craving to get rid of something, the wanting to get rid of something unpleasant, is a form of clinging to it. It's almost as if we get stuck to the thing we want to get rid of. If I want to get rid of this thing, it's like I'm stuck to it with superglue, trying to push it away. That's the way in which it's clinging to the experience.

Once we've clung to something, there is a kind of identification that comes out of that—an identification of perhaps it being mine or not mine. There's this latching on and the identification: "Oh, this belongs to me." Whether it's a state of mind or a physic-

al thing. If it's a physical thing, we might think of it as mine—my glass. If it's a mental thing, like a mood or an emotion, we might think of ourselves as being that emotion: "I'm an angry person" or "I'm a happy person." We latch onto and identify with these states of mind too.

This identification piece in this set of links of dependent origination is called becoming. And actually, in a funny way—or maybe not so funny—we like becoming. It seems like a very natural thing to us. We like knowing what we have. We like knowing who we are. Even if it's identifying with something negative, there's some piece of us that likes knowing who we are and what we have. So that becoming piece is actually something we're drawn to.

From this point, there's a kind of hit in that moment when we get what we want or get rid of what we don't want, and we know that we're the ones that did that. There's a moment of happiness, a kind of a hit of "Ah, everything's all right," even if it's just for a moment in that place of becoming.

But from here, in the Buddha's understanding of this chain of dependent origination, suffering is inevitable—if only for the reason that whatever it is we've latched onto is impermanent and will go away. For example, if I think of this as my glass, if I'm attached to it—it's a lovely glass, it's got a nice swirly pattern on it, it's got the right depth to meet your lip, it's just a very nice glass—but if I happen to drop it and break it, I might get upset about that because it was my glass and I really liked it. I really had an attachment to it. So the clinging and the identification, the clinging to and the constructing of a me or a mine around it, will lead us into some form of suffering.

Now, the suffering that arises might not be very profound or difficult, but it can also be quite profound indeed.

The Buddha realized how this chain of events is linked together, how one thing conditions the next. We start with our body and our sense impressions. From there arises feeling. From feeling comes the very natural wanting or not wanting. From there emerges the natural movement to hold onto or get rid of our experience. And then comes this identification. These things all happen in a fairly natural and normal way—it's almost as if we're built this way. It makes perfect sense that we move towards something pleasant and away from something unpleasant. Even a single-celled creature will move towards food and away from some noxious chemical. So that makes perfect sense; it's not a particular mystery to us.

But the additional piece—the clinging and creating an identity around experience—that part is what leads us towards suffering. The Buddha saw that these things flow from one to another, that there's a tendency for one to move into the next, for one to condition the arising of the next, almost like dominoes falling over.

But he also saw that there are some weak links in this chain, some places where it's easier to short-circuit the pattern and avoid flowing from the natural sense impression into suffering. We can't avoid sense impressions as human beings—they're going to come into us. Cutting that one off is challenging, although it is doable if you get into very deep states of concentration. But in our normal everyday life, we live with sense impressions, and we live with this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality of experience. So is there a way that we can not move on into the wanting, the craving, the clinging, the identification?

The Buddha pointed to this link of the feeling tone—the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—as being one of the key weak links in this chain. He taught that if you bring mindfulness to this weak link, if you actually recognize when something is happening that's pleasant or unpleasant, it gives you the possibility to short-circuit this automatic movement from pleasant to liking to wanting to grasping. It's possible.

It's possible to experience something pleasant without wanting it. It's possible to experience something pleasant and experience the liking, and not have that liking move into wanting. It's possible to experience something unpleasant, not like it, and not have that not-liking move into not-wanting. It's also possible to experience the pleasant and not have even liking arise—that's a slightly subtler version of this.

But the only way this can happen is when we see the feeling tone itself, when we actually experience through awareness, through consciously knowing and recognizing as it happens, this experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral as it arises. If we can do that and the wanting does not follow, we will not suffer over it.

The Buddha talked about mindfulness of feeling most prominently in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness. This teaching describes or lays out four different frames or points of view into our experience that we can bring our mindfulness to. Of those four foundations, the second one is mindfulness of feeling. An entire foundation of mindfulness is devoted to this notion of whether something is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. I think that partly highlights how important this quality is to pay attention to.

I'm going to read you a little bit of that part of the sutta. It's brief. The Buddha uses the term *bhikkhu* here, which means monk, but it says elsewhere in the commentaries to the sutta that whenever the Buddha refers to bhikkhu, he's referring to anyone who's practicing this meditation practice. So he's speaking to all of us when he says this:

"When feeling a pleasant feeling, a bhikkhu understands: 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' When feeling a painful feeling, he understands: 'I feel a painful feeling.' When feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling"—that's the term for neutral feeling—"he understands: 'I feel a neither-painful-nor-pleasant experience.'"

That's it. Those are the instructions from the Buddha about how to work with feeling. When you feel it, know that you feel it. It's a pretty simple instruction, but not so easy to follow through on.

Typically, what happens to us when we experience something pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is that we immediately leap onto it in some way and start to think about it. We like it. We want it. We start to plan how to get it, or how to get rid of it if it's something unpleasant. Very quickly we lose track of the fact that it's even pleasant or unpleasant—we're already in the stages of trying to figure out how to get more of it or how to get rid of it.

So stopping the usual momentum of the mind from spinning away from pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is not easy. But it's helped immensely by recognizing or knowing that this quality of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral is worth paying attention to. Most of the time, we don't think of it as being worth paying attention to. We immediately think it's important to react to it or respond to it. Oh, there's something pleasant—

I need to get more of that. So we lose track of the fact that we've experienced something pleasant. Often we don't even notice it. We're already leaping onto it to do something about it.

This feeling tone is subtle in the sense that we don't usually consciously recognize it. It's not something that normally appears in our experience for very long, because we so quickly move on from it—thinking about it, trying to arrange our environment to either get more of what's pleasant or get rid of what's unpleasant.

But once we know that it's an interesting thing to pay attention to, a helpful thing to pay attention to, it can become quite clear. It can become quite obvious. If you bump your head getting out of your car, it's pretty clear that the experience of the bump is painful. If you're eating ice cream, it's pretty clear that the experience is pleasant. But we have to know to recognize it, to notice actually the pleasant quality or the unpleasant quality. And even when we do recognize it, it's hard to stop there.

When you start recognizing this feeling tone, you'll begin seeing this reaction, this chain of events that I described. You'll feel the bump on your head. You'll feel the unpleasantness. Then you'll start to see yourself reacting in some way—"How could I have been so stupid?" or whatever you go on to think. There's some kind of movement happening. It's not simply "Oh, there's an unpleasant feeling." Very few of us respond that way when something like that happens. We get angry, we get frustrated, and that represents a reactivity to the pleasant or unpleasant experience.

As you start to witness the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral quality of experience and see the reactivity begin to get born out of that pleasant or unpleasant experience, you're actually starting to see something very profound about the way the mind works. This is the way in which it leaps off of pleasant or unpleasant, and this is what sets into motion the whole cascading chain that leads us into greed, aversion, delusion, identification, and suffering.

Every single experience that we have—whether it's a bodily experience through one of our five physical sense doors or a mental experience through our mind—every single experience has this feeling tone associated with it. It's easiest to see with our bodily senses. Our sense of touch, for instance, is highly tuned to pleasant and unpleasant. It's also pretty easy to notice in taste, the things we find pleasant or unpleasant. So it's fairly easy to recognize this quality of pleasant and unpleasant in our bodily experience.

But the sense of our mind—everything that happens in our mind, moods, emotions, thoughts—also has this quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Thoughts themselves actually have a subtle feeling tone associated with them. But usually what we associate with the feeling tone of a thought is actually a kind of reaction. A thought arises about something, and then we react to it, and it's that reaction that has a feeling tone more than the thought itself, which probably has a more neutral feeling tone. The simple fact that a thought arises in our mind can be pretty neutral. It's the content of the thought and our reaction to that thought that carries the feeling tone.

This kind of experience—a thought and then the reaction to the thought—actually underlies a lot of what we think of as pleasant or unpleasant. Let me give you an example. One night I was trying to sleep. I had woken up in the middle of the night and was having difficulty sleeping, so I got up to meditate, which is something I often do when I have trouble sleeping. I was meditating and started to hear this very gentle, quiet tapping sound—just a soft tap, tap, tap. To me, that experience was unpleasant. I experienced that sound as unpleasant.

As I kept paying attention, I noticed that unpleasantness. And as I continued paying attention, I noticed that when I heard the sound, a little bit of fear arose. And that was definitely unpleasant—this feeling of contraction in the body. The fear had an unpleasant quality to it. But as I could just be with the fear, the next time the sound came, the next time I actually heard it, I realized that the sound itself was neutral or even slightly pleasant. It was the reaction to the sound that was unpleasant—the fear—which made me associate that fear with the sound. The sound became unpleasant because of the fear.

This kind of thing happens to us a lot with our physical sense experience. So it's very helpful to begin to recognize the feeling tone of our experience and start to see when there is some extra feeling added on top of what the actual feeling is.

Another sutta that I like states that all things converge on feeling. What I take that to mean is that essentially the feeling tone of our experience is where all of our responses are born. For instance, some people like blue, or they hate the smell of hot roofing tar, or they like a particular kind of car. We think it's the color blue we're responding to, or we think it's the hot roofing tar that we're reacting to. But actually, for some of us, the color blue is pleasant and the smell of hot roofing tar is unpleasant—and that is what we're reacting to. That quality of pleasant or unpleasant underneath.

This feeling tone is like a springboard.

It's this narrow channel through which all of our reactivity arises. So that's what I take this to mean: all things converge on feeling. And if we can identify or recognize or be mindful of this feeling tone, we have an opportunity to not end up being so reactive to our experience. Instead of being whipped around by things all day, we can simply recognize, "Oh, this is a pleasant experience, this is an unpleasant experience."

So I'd like to talk for a few minutes about ways to practice with this feeling tone. The sutta I described simply instructs: when you feel a pleasant feeling, know that it's pleasant. When you feel an unpleasant feeling, know that it's unpleasant. But it's a little harder for us because initially it's difficult to even recognize things as pleasant or unpleasant—we're so conditioned to leap away from them.

So initially, in playing with or practicing with this feeling tone, it's helpful to actually consciously direct our attention to it. The easiest place to do this is in the sense door of the body, to check into our physical experience. What's pleasant? What's unpleasant?

An excellent place to explore this is in eating, because eating brings together all of our senses. We see the food, we identify it, we know what we want and don't want, what we like and dislike. There may be colors or forms on the plate that are particu-

larly pleasing or displeasing. There's the smell of the food, which may be pleasing or displeasing. There's the contact of the food, the touch sensations of the texture in our mouth. There's the taste of the food. All of these things have pleasant and unpleasant aspects to them.

And you may find, for example, that something pleasant over time becomes something neutral or even slightly unpleasant. Chewing an apple, for instance—initially there's that burst of juice and sweet tartness in the mouth that may bring a sense of pleasantness, and the crunchiness, the texture, is pleasant at first. But you chew for a while, the sweetness dissipates, the juiciness dissipates, and it's just this pulpy thing in your mouth before you swallow it. It may be neutral or even slightly unpleasant, depending on your experience. The qualities can shift and change as we eat our food, and it's a very interesting place to begin really recognizing and noticing this quality of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

If it's a food that we like, we can also notice any mental experiences about it—any sense of, "Ooh, I want more of that. Is there more? Is somebody else taking the extra piece that I want?" All of the thoughts that arise around it, which themselves may be pleasant or unpleasant.

Another good place to look at feeling tone is when strong emotions are present. Whenever there's any kind of strong emotion, there will always be some quality of pleasant or unpleasant underneath. It can be very interesting to simply observe, without any judgment, whether there's pleasant or unpleasant there. Sometimes you might be surprised.

For example, the feeling of excitement has qualities of pleasantness to it. There can be a lightening of the mind and a kind of movement of joy in the excitement. But there can also be an unpleasant agitation quality to excitement. So there can be both pleasant and unpleasant aspects to emotions that we might think of generally as pleasant.

Or take anger, for instance. On one retreat, I was observing anger quite closely. It was coming up a lot, and I got to the place where I began to see the anger arising right at the beginning—just the very inception of that anger. What I noticed was that mostly I had been experiencing anger as a very unpleasant sensation of heat and pressure. But what I noticed as it just started was warmth and fullness. And that was pleasant. That initial hit of anger was a pleasant experience.

I was rather surprised at that. But in some way it made sense to me, because anger is something that hooks us. And I think that initial hit of fullness and warmth—it's just a feeling of life, of aliveness—that is what hooks us in anger.

So we practice noticing the qualities of pleasant and unpleasant in our experience. If you're experiencing aversion, some kind of not-wanting, some urge to get rid of something in your experience—even if it's just a general feeling of aversion, you're having a difficult day of some kind—you might simply check and see: is there something unpleasant in your experience? For me, for instance, when I get hungry, it colors everything.

A lot of things become very unpleasant or difficult when I get hungry. That kind of gnawing experience of unpleasantness, especially when it's not recognized, can filter everything—like a gray glass placed over my experience. If it's not recognized, if I don't notice, "Oh, there's that hunger. I'm just hungry right now," then when I do recognize that experience, it becomes much easier not to be so reactive to everything else.

As you become more familiar with this feeling tone, as you become more attuned to the qualities of pleasant and unpleasant, it gets easier to work with it as the Buddha recommended: simply when there's pleasant, know that it's pleasant; when there's unpleasant, know that it's unpleasant. Then you can start to practice that true mindfulness of feeling. When something unpleasant arises in your experience, just know, "Oh, this is an unpleasant experience."

But it seems to be helpful initially in exploring this to actually look for the pleasant and unpleasant, because we do tend to just leap off of it so quickly. When you can notice this feeling tone and start to notice that the mind reacts and responds to it, you have the opportunity to actually witness the birth of this reactivity—to witness the whole chain of causes and conditions leading us into this reactive, clinging, suffering identification with experience.

In that seeing of the birth of this pattern, that is where the seeds of freedom lie. In seeing the pattern, we have an opportunity to not get caught by it, to not automatically respond in our habitual way. We can actually unwind this chain. This automatic chain can be unwound, and we can live much freer lives—not being whipsawed by this quality of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, as we are when we don't really see it and recognize it.

We have just a couple of minutes, but if there are any questions... Yes, the reference for "all things converge on feeling" is in the Aṅguttara Nikāya. It's in this book, the Numerical Discourses of the Buddha—Aṅguttara Nikāya 10.58.

Is it desirable to be neutral? And what does neutral mean? Neutral, as the description goes, is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. That's the technical term for it—when something is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, it's neutral. Things are what they are, in

general. When experience arises, it has one of these qualities to it. Whether something is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is essentially conditioned. We don't have a lot of control over that as it arises in our experience.

However, in our practice, what seems to happen is that as we continue to practice, we begin to see more things as they really are. We begin to see that most of our sense contact actually is on the neutral side. Sight, for instance—much of our sight is actually neutral. It's our thoughts around it that are pleasant or unpleasant, that we react to. So we begin to actually experience more and more neutral as we do the practice. This seems to be the direction that the practice moves.

That sounds perhaps like it might be flat or boring, but the quality of equanimity is essentially a neutral mind state, and yet it gives you such a sense of peace that there's a way in which it feels pleasant.

I'm going to read one last quote to end. I find it very interesting. The Buddha is talking about what's pleasant and unpleasant with respect to each of these three aspects: "Pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists and painful when it changes. Painful feeling is painful when it persists and pleasant when it changes. Neither painful nor pleasant feeling is pleasant when there is knowledge of it, and unpleasant when there is no knowledge of it."

I'll just leave you with that to peruse. That quote is from Majjhima Nikāya 44, paragraph 24.

So it's nine o'clock and we need to finish. Let's do a little dedication of merit.

May the beneficial results of our practice together be offered to support the welfare and liberation of all beings everywhere. May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be safe.

May all beings live with ease.

May all beings be free from suffering.

Thank you.

The quotation referenced is from Aṅguttara Nikāya 44, paragraph 24.

CHAPTER 207

Yathābhūta: Seeing Things As They Actually Are

Andrea Fella · 54 min

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella unpacks the frequently occurring Pāli term yathābhūta, which appears 187 times in the suttas and means "as it actually is" or "as things have come to be." She presents this concept as a fundamental meditation instruction from the Buddha, inviting practitioners to explore experience free from the additions of views, opinions, and reactions.

Drawing from the Sallatha Sutta (SN 36.6), the famous "two arrows" teaching, Fella explains how untrained minds compound suffering by adding mental reactivity to physical pain. She shares her personal journey with anger, describing how turning attention toward the feeling itself—rather than the object of anger—created space for wisdom to arise. The talk explores how views and beliefs function as invisible filters, using examples from cultural assumptions to personal identity patterns like self-hatred, demonstrating how both "it's not supposed to be like this" and "this is how it should be" create suffering.

Fella examines progressively subtler layers of mental addition, from gross reactivity to the conceptual overlay through which we normally experience reality, illustrated by her memorable story of misperceiving bat sounds as squealing pigs in Burma. She concludes with the Bāhiya Sutta (Ud 1.10), where the Buddha instructs: "In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen." This teaching reveals that as we train to meet experience directly, the concept of self naturally falls away, ending suffering. The path is one of gradual exploration—not forcing views to disappear, but becoming conscious of how we add to experience moment by moment.

Here at CIMC, I feel I owe a debt of gratitude because I usually teach in California, at the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City. I heard about the sandwich retreat from CIMC and begged my teacher at the time to offer it, but he didn't want to commit to that kind of retreat—the daily life practice retreat every evening and the weekends around it. So when I became a teacher, I decided I would offer one. I've been offering my own version of a sandwich retreat at the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City now for about the past five or six years, and there's a whole community of practitioners that have really appreciated it. Your community has offered this form that has now migrated out into the world. Thank you for that. I really appreciate CIMC.

In the Buddha's teachings, there's a phrase that is actually used quite a lot, but it can just disappear into the text. The phrase is *yathābhūta*, and it's translated as something like "as it actually is." This phrase is used all over the place in the suttas. You'll see the Buddha talking about how one understands suffering as it actually is, one understands the cause of suffering as it actually is, or he talks about understanding the eye and sight as it actually is. I actually looked on Access to Insight tonight to see how many places it was used, and I found 187 places where that phrase appears.

This notion of "as it actually is"—in my understanding, this *yathābhūta*, "things as they are," "things as they have come to be," "as it actually is"—these are various translations of the term. I understand it to be a kind of meditation instruction from the Buddha: that we should explore our experience as it actually is, free from views, opinions, ideas, and reactions. And that is not the easiest thing to do.

What I'd like to do tonight is explore with you this facet of *yathābhūta*, this aspect of looking at our experience as it actually is. Why it's so difficult is that we tend to add a lot to our experience. Our mind adds things to our experience. I'd like to look at some of the things that we add and explore how bringing mindfulness and wisdom to those additions can support us to begin to see things as they actually are.

In many places where the Buddha uses this term *yathābhūta*, he expresses that when one doesn't see things as they actually are, one suffers. So the exploration of seeing things as they actually are is that of letting go of suffering, letting go of the things that we add.

In this exploration of the things we add, I'd like to start with some of the more obvious ones and then work inward to the more subtle ways we add to our experience—things that catch us, that create struggle, that create this dukkha, this suffering.

In one of the Buddha's texts, he almost explicitly talks about the ways we add to our experience. It's a rather famous sutta, so you may have heard this story. The Buddha asks his followers: whether somebody has trained in the practice or not, whether one is an ordinary person or a trained disciple of the Buddha, one experiences pleasant experience, one experiences unpleasant experience, and one experiences neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience. Given that—given that whether we're trained or not, we experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience—what's the difference between someone who is an ordinary person, a run-of-the-mill person, and someone who has training?

He goes on to answer his own question, and I'll read a bit of this text to you:

"When the uninstructed worldling is contacted by a painful feeling, one sorrows, grieves, and laments. One weeps, beating one's breast, and becomes distraught. One feels two feelings, a bodily one and a mental one. Suppose they were to strike a man with a dart and then were to strike him immediately afterwards with a second dart, so that man would feel a feeling caused by two darts."

What he's saying here is that when we experience something unpleasant, we don't leave it simply as an unpleasant experience. As he says, we grieve, sorrow, weep, lament, beat our breast, become distraught. Basically: Why me? Why is this happening to me? This shouldn't be happening to me. So when we have an unpleasant experience, there's the unpleasant experience, and then there is the reactivity to that unpleasant experience.

And what the Buddha says is that these are two unpleasant experiences combined together. In my own experience, they don't simply add—they multiply. The mental reactivity layered on top of a painful physical feeling greatly compounds the suffering. We add reactivity to our experience.

He goes on to describe the instructed noble disciple. When the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling, that one does not sorrow, grieve, or lament, does not weep beating one's breast and become distraught. One feels one feeling—a bodily one, not a mental one.

So this training the Buddha offers helps us let go of the reactivity we add to experience. This is perhaps the most obvious way we don't meet things as they actually are. When something pleasant arises, we don't simply meet it as pleasant. We like it, we want it, we want more of it. Yes, more of that, please. When something unpleasant arises, we don't like it, we want to get rid of it. Again, additional movement of mind accompanies the pleasant and unpleasant. With neutral experience, the additional movement tends to be something like non-connecting—we simply don't recognize much of our neutral experience at all.

This movement of reactivity—wanting what's pleasant, pushing away what's unpleasant—is an addition to our experience. We're not simply meeting experience as it is. As we explore more deeply, we begin to understand that the pleasant or unpleasant experience is one thing, and our reaction to it is something else entirely.

With unpleasant experience, as the Buddha described in this sutta, we see how reactivity compounds suffering. We often think we don't have much choice in this matter. It feels like, "This is just the way I am. When that happens to me, I react. That's who I am." We don't always recognize that there is some choice here, that reactivity is actually a process happening in our minds around which there can be just a little space.

When an unpleasant experience arises, if we're mindful, if we're aware with mindfulness of that experience, there can be just a bit of space, and we can choose not to act out of reactivity. This is challenging—not something that happens after looking at it once or twice. It's an ongoing exploration. We can begin by simply recognizing that reactivity is happening, allowing it without acting on it.

How does this work? When I first heard this kind of instruction, I was very new to meditation practice. I received it through reading a book: don't act on your difficult emotions. Anger was the emotion I was working with at the time. Don't act on your anger—just experience it, feel it. My thinking was, "What good is that going to do? If I just pay attention to my anger, won't I get more angry?" I didn't quite understand how it worked. However, I trusted enough to try it.

What I began to understand through exploration is that there's a difference between bringing attention to the experience of anger—turning toward that experience—and being caught in what we're reacting to. Normally when we react, there's something in the world we're reacting to, and then there's the reaction itself. The outer thing and the inner reaction. This exploration of the inner reaction takes our attention away from the thing we're reacting to.

In my situation, I was angry at a particular person. Exploring the feeling of anger took my attention away from thoughts about that person and brought it to the feeling itself. This is what it feels like to be a human being experiencing anger. I still didn't quite understand how it worked, but over several months I saw for myself how valuable it was, how effective it was to take my attention out of the thing in the world—where reactivity was fueling the anger—and turn it toward the feeling of anger itself. I found much more space around the anger, much more ability to navigate my world without acting from that reactive place.

This exploration, this turning toward our reactivity—this is the first step.

to beginning to have some space around that reactivity. And as we get some space around it, slowly over time—and it is a slow process—our mind begins to understand how that reactivity is formed. Slowly it begins to re-educate itself. It begins to understand how a choice is made around that reactivity.

I still remember very clearly one situation, after having observed this anger for many months. I found myself in a situation where I saw a thought arise in my mind about the person I was angry with. I saw the inclination to jump on that thought and think more thoughts in order to get angry at that person. And in seeing that, essentially in that moment, my mind saw the choice that was possible.

The choice that the mind made—actually, I didn't even feel like I made the choice. It wasn't a feeling of consciously deciding, "Oh, don't think those thoughts, don't jump on that train." What happened is that the mind recognized: that way lies suffering. That way lies anger that burns inside, because I had been feeling that burning by turning towards the feeling of anger. So the mind got an education. The mind got an education that anger is suffering. And when the mind saw itself headed towards that suffering, it just said, "Not going there."

This observing of our reactivity, this willingness to turn towards our difficult emotions, the ways that we react—that willingness is the beginning of our minds starting to let go and loosen around that reactivity.

Sometimes when we reflect on the suffering around the way we react to things, we notice different kinds of suffering. There's suffering that might come when we react to somebody cutting us off on a freeway. There's suffering that might happen if we lose our jobs. Or there's the suffering that might happen if we have a dear friend we learn is dying of cancer.

If we start to look at this, we see that most of us would be pretty happy to let go of some kinds of reactivity—let go of the reactivity around somebody cutting us off on the freeway. But the reactivity around a friend dying from cancer, the anger, the sense of "it shouldn't be like that"—that kind of reactivity, we feel like it proves that we care. There can be a way that we cling to some of our reactivity because of our relationship to our views, our beliefs around that reactivity. We believe that certain kinds of reactivity make us human.

What I'd like to explore is the possibility—and I've seen this in my own practice—that, certainly not all the time, but I've seen times where I find I can meet a really challenging situation. A situation like, "This shouldn't be happening"—such as a friend dying from cancer—where rather than reacting to that and being angry about it, there can be the heart that doesn't contract. The heart that feels the suffering of that, resonates with the pain of that, but doesn't contract.

This is the possibility, and this is actually meeting things as they are. Rather than resisting the truth of impermanence, the heart can open and respond with kindness, with love, with compassion.

This exploration around reactivity, the letting go of that reactivity—it doesn't take us to a place where we're flat and non-responsive. That's a misunderstanding. It can open us to a place where the heart feels like it's vibrating with the world, out of love. This offers the possibility of being responsive to the world rather than reactive to the world.

I think of this as coming into alignment with truth. Rather than reacting to the challenges of unreliability, of impermanence, of suffering, rather than railing against it—"It shouldn't be like this"—well, it is like this. Coming into alignment with that truth, meeting it without resistance, we can respond skillfully. We can meet the pain.

I remember one friend who told me of a very deep pain that he had experienced. He was reliving it in the moment through reflection. I was able, through just trying to be there—I didn't want to close down or contract—I just tried to be there with him, with his pain. I didn't try to fix it. I didn't try to talk him out of it. Just sitting with him. A feeling on my part of that open-heartedness, that willingness to meet the pain.

A couple of days later, he asked me, "Were you doing mettā? Were you doing loving-kindness?" Because it felt to him like there was love there. What I was doing was just trying to keep my heart open to the pain. That openness, that willingness to just meet reality, coming into alignment with things as they are—it can be felt as love. It can have that quality.

So that's one way that we add to our experience, and the exploration of reactivity can help us come into alignment with things as they are, meet things as they are.

Another way that we add to our experience is through views, opinions, beliefs. There are so many different kinds of beliefs that operate in our minds. It's like we're swimming in these beliefs.

We don't necessarily recognize that we're believing things or that we have this orientation. It's like views are a filter on our minds. If I had a pair of blue glasses that I put on and wore around all the time, at some point it would stop being apparent to me that I was looking through blue glasses. The mind would adjust to that and it would just be, "That's the way it is, things look that way." Similarly with our views—we're just seeing through that perspective and we don't actually recognize that we're seeing with a view in mind.

There are views that we have about our person, kind of personal views. Views of who we are, what we do, what we're capable of doing. Views of what our partners should be. Views of what our children should be. These personal views are individual—ones that we each have because of our conditioning.

One simple example from my life: I was both very short when I was a child, and I had really bad eyes. Those two things together meant the teacher always put me in the front row in the classroom. That created this view in my mind, which years later I finally recognized—well, this is why I always sit in the front row, wherever I am. It's a silly little thing in a way, but it created a kind of belief in myself: I like to sit in the front row. There was even a story around it—it shows that I'm really interested to sit in the front row. So it became part of my identity, this sitting in the front row. We have many of these that we may not be so aware of.

Then there are views that are developed based on our life in a particular culture, in our society. Societal views that relate to me personally. For instance, I have this job, so I deserve this job. Ways that we believe we have a right to what we have, essentially—whereas it's really conditions coming together to create the situation that we have these things.

And then there are broader societal views that we pick up. Views about—well, here's a good one: America is a land of opportunity. Anyone who works hard enough can fulfill their dream. This is a view that pervades the dominant culture in this society. Believing that view, swimming in that view, not seeing that view, leads to a kind of denial of the privilege of white people in this culture. Because for a certain class of people in society, perhaps if you work hard enough, you can get what you want—but it is not uniformly the case. So many views that we carry around, that we swim in, that we're unaware of living with.

Some of these views don't necessarily cause us problems. Like the sitting in the front row for me—that didn't particularly cause me problems. But what is the issue? What's the problem with views? Some of the views we carry around do cause suffering, and this is an important place to explore our views. But in any case, views of who we are and views of who other people are, these are limiting. It's like we've put ourselves in a box. This is who I am. This is the kind of thing I do. This is what I'm capable of. This is what that person is capable of. This is who that person is.

When other people do this to us, we don't like it. We chafe at it when somebody else says, "Well, that's just the way you are." We're like, "No, that's not just the way I am. You don't know me." But we do that to ourselves. We put these boxes around ourselves. We live in these views ourselves, often without even recognizing it.

So these views are not necessarily all leading to suffering, but we need to at least be aware that we are carrying these views around. There's a saying in one of my favorite suttas, in the Sutta Nipata in the chapter of the eights: "Those attached to views roam the world offending people." This attachment to views—the Buddha actually points to this as being a source of conflict in our culture.

So anytime we are suffering, there is some kind of view operating. This is an important thing to recognize.

A common view that leads to suffering is something like, "It's not supposed to be like this." And underlying that is often a belief or a meaning. There's the view—"it's not supposed to be like this"—and underlying that is some kind of meaning. Perhaps something along the lines of: "If it's like this, it means I'm a failure. If it's like this, it means I'm not lovable. If it's like this, it means I didn't try hard enough. If it's like this, it means I'm not as good as someone else." A variety of meanings can be attached to that.

So it can be very interesting to start exploring: what do I believe when I'm suffering? There's some kind of suffering happening—what's the belief that's operating? The meaning that's associated with the belief is often a place where we identify, something we're holding on to. We even hold on to things like "I'm a failure." We identify with that. We have habits of identifying with even these negative views, these negative meanings.

As you explore this and start to recognize the belief, you might also notice how much belief is happening around a particular thought. For example, an example from my own exploration: I had a pretty strong pattern of self-hatred, and there was a lot of meaning attached to that—"I'm a failure, I'm no good, I'm not lovable," some of those things I just mentioned. The way it often popped into my mind was simply the words: "You're no good."

As I began to explore this, I saw that there was a process of belief that began to solidify that thought into place. There's the thought—"you're no good"—and then there's a process of believing that thought. They're actually separate things, as I discovered.

I had a recognition at one point, a clear recognition, that these thoughts around self-hatred were just thoughts. There was nothing more to them. They were just phenomena created in the mind. And somehow that insight deeply undercut the belief pattern in those thoughts. At this point, I still will from time to time see these thoughts arise—"You're no good. You're a failure"—but there is not belief in those thoughts.

You can explore this kind of view for yourself. There's a thought that comes up, and there's the belief in that thought. You can ask: how much do I believe this? How much do I actually believe this? At times, if you catch a thought arising early enough, the belief process may not have taken hold so tightly, and you may recognize, "Oh, this is just a thought. I actually don't believe this so much right now."

So there's the common view of "it's not supposed to be like this" that can lead to suffering. And equally, a view that leads to suffering—at least in my exploration—is "it is supposed to be like this." This is right. This is the way it's supposed to be. When I first started exploring my suffering around views...

Along these lines, I found the suffering really congealed—I mean, the experience of suffering really congealed—around the "it's not supposed to be like this." I'm a failure. I'm no good at this. I'm bad. I can't succeed. I really felt the suffering in that side of it, so it was clear that there was suffering there.

The view around that is that it's not supposed to be like this, and because it is like this, I'm a failure. That's the belief underneath it. So there was suffering there. I could see this pattern of belief, and I began looking at that pattern of suffering and beliefs and meaning associated with it.

At some point I began to see that there was another side to the story. That was the side when things were going well, and I told myself, "This is the way it's supposed to be. I can do this. I'm good at this. In fact, I may be better than anybody else at this." That created a kind of flip-side identity that I believed was the way it was supposed to be. So again, the belief was operating—the view that this is the way it's supposed to be.

That didn't particularly feel like suffering in the moment of it happening. It actually felt good. It's like, "Yeah, this feels good. This is the way it's supposed to be." But what I began to recognize is that feeling of "this is the way it's supposed to be" was a setup. It was setting myself to a standard that if I've attained this, I have to keep this. It has to always be like this. And when it can't always be like this—because things are impermanent, they change, things fall apart—then I crashed into the failure side of things.

Actually, in this exploration, I saw it was equally, if not more important, to recognize those times when I felt, "Oh, this is the way it's supposed to be. This is good. This is right." To recognize when I was praising myself, when I was feeling like this is it. To acknowledge that. To acknowledge that as a view, as a belief, not as reality, not as this is how it has to be. And when I began acknowledging that side of it, it really evened out the whole pattern.

We often can't just decide to stop believing something. We can't decide to stop reacting to things. We can't stop our views. We can't decide, "I'm not going to have this view anymore." But we can begin to become conscious of our views. We can begin to recognize the beliefs that are operating.

Having a curiosity about what these views are—when we're suffering, beginning to explore: What do I think needs to happen? What do I think needs to stop happening? What beliefs are functioning here? Begin to become conscious of your views. That's the first step in maybe not letting go of views entirely, but at least recognizing when we have these filters on, recognizing when we are operating out of a perspective so that it's not blind acting out of a view, but consciously recognizing, "Oh, here's a view that's happening right now."

Certain views are skillful to act on in a moment. Other views we may begin to recognize—wow, this one is not so skillful. Maybe I shouldn't act on this one.

So that's another way that we add to our experience, this adding, seeing things through views. Again, when we're experiencing things through views, we're not seeing things as they are.

A subtler way of adding to our experience is the process of recognizing things, of perceiving things, of working with concepts. This is a very normal way that our mind works. I look out at this room and I see men and women and I see green zabutans and I see walls and I see lights. I see

But all of those things are concepts. It happens very quickly in our minds, these concepts, and we tend to relate to our experience through concept rather than through our direct meeting of experience.

A simple example of this: put your attention in your hand right now. Just feel the experience that is your hand right now. You might feel vibration, pulsing, tingling, heat or coolness, pressure. Just the feeling, just the experience there. And now look at your hand and think about it as a hand. When I do that, at least, there's a shift of the experience. I lose touch with some of that experience that I was just exploring with you.

Hand is a concept. The direct experience is not hand. The direct experience is vibration, pulsing, tingling, pressure, coolness, heat. But when we relate to it as a hand, there's a little bit of a distance that happens from the actual experience. This kind of thing happens to us a lot—we relate to our experience through a layer of concept.

Now, that's not necessarily a problem. It's actually a really good shortcut for us. If I had to walk in here and from form and color actually figure out every time I walked into a room, "Oh, those are people, and that's the floor, and that's the wall," it would take forever to navigate our world. So concepts are really useful. They're a really useful shortcut.

But the way we add around concepts is that we believe we are experiencing the real thing. We believe that when we are experiencing things through concept, we're experiencing reality. That is the way we're adding around concepts.

We can start to really see how this works, and the problems that it can introduce for us, when perception—this process of creating concepts—makes a mistake. Because this process of perception is very prone to making mistakes. It does a pretty good job. It's a pretty good pattern-matching algorithm in there that figures out what is happening out there, based on my history. It's kind of like a memory lookup thing. I look out there, and I've seen walls before, so that becomes identified as a wall, and I relate to it as the concept of a wall. But perception can make mistakes.

An example of this: I was in Burma, practicing in a monastery that was close to a village right next door. My room was right next to the monastery wall. Sounds of the village came over the wall—the loudspeakers, the sounds of people doing their things. Every evening I was meditating in my room, and every evening at about dusk, I began hearing a squealing sound. To me, the mind heard that sound and identified it as pig. A squealing pig—this is what I identified.

And then the mind went a little further than that, to create the idea that this sound of squealing had a distress to it. So my mind constructed this idea—and I knew this was a construction, I knew this part was a construction—that what I was hearing was a pig being butchered. That this was the regular every-evening butcher shop just across the wall there, and I was hearing that happen. So there was compassion that was born in my heart for this pig. It happened every night, and so I got to practice with this every evening.

And then one evening, instead of sitting in my room at that hour of the day, I decided to take a walk. I was doing walking meditation, walking up and down at the monastery, and there were bats flying. They fly kind of close, so it's a little startling. And the bats were squealing. I recognized in that moment that the squealing sound I had been hearing, that I had identified as pigs being murdered, were simply bats.

I mean, perception had clearly made a mistake here. It wasn't any kind of willful mistake—it was simply that I had never heard bats squealing before. The sound of squealing, in my experience, matched to pig. So perception made that mistake, and from that created this whole construct, this whole idea.

In that case, it became clear to me that my reaction of compassion—the whole thing just went poof. The compassion vanished because there was no need for compassion. What are we actually reacting to? Much of the time, what we are reacting to is a concept. It's not what's actually happening. That's something very interesting to explore.

And then the most insidious concept that we live with is the concept of self. Actually, all of the other ways that we add to our experience are born out of this very fundamental concept—a misperception, actually. I don't have time to explore all of that notion of self except to say that we can begin to understand how that concept of self is created by exploring all of these other ways that we add. If we explore our reactivity, we begin to understand something about a sense of self involved in that reactivity. We explore our views, our opinions, our beliefs—we begin to understand something about the sense of self that holds that view, that opinion, that belief. From time to time in this exploration, we may see a moment of views falling away. We may see a moment of a sense of self falling away. And then we get an understanding of how that is simply a concept. It's not something that's actually there. It's a very useful concept, actually, and it's not necessarily a problem that we function with that concept. The problem is that we believe that concept to be reality.

I'd like to come back to the words of the Buddha here at the end of my talk. This text I'm going to read is another really famous one you've probably heard, and to me it really expresses this notion of coming to meet things as they are—just what's actually happening in the moment without the filter of views, opinions, beliefs, ideas. Again, we can't just go right there. The way to explore this is to see our reactivity, explore our reactivity, explore our views, our opinions, our beliefs. That helps us to begin to let go of them.

This text is from the Bāhiya Sutta. The Buddha was approached by this renunciate, Bāhiya, who came many, many miles to ask the Buddha for his teachings. He had been a renunciate for many years but just hadn't quite heard the teachings of the Buddha. He came to the Buddha and said, "Please give me your teachings in brief." He had to ask three times because the Buddha was getting ready to go on alms round, but after the third time, this is what the Buddha said:

"Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This is the end of suffering."

I love this exploration. He offers a training: in reference to the seen is only the seen. This is the training. We practice exploring what it means to see things. We notice our reactivity. We notice our views, our beliefs around seeing. We notice our views, opinions, beliefs around our thoughts. We notice our views, our opinions, our beliefs around what's heard, sensed, cognized. In the seen is only the seen.

We can't arrive there immediately. But that's the training. The Buddha calls it a training.

And what I appreciate about this sutta is that he then points out the benefits of this training. As we begin to meet experience in this way, as it actually is, we see clearly for ourselves: there is no "you" in terms of that. No you there.

This exploration of the falling away of identity view, that concept of self, comes quite naturally as we begin to simply meet things as they are. It's not something we have to force—"Oh, I have to get rid of myself. I have to figure out how to not feel this sense of self." The Buddha points to just seeing things as they actually are, and this begins to reveal the truth to us. And this is the end of stress, the end of suffering.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 208

Where Rubber Meets the Road: A Series on Mindful Living

Andrea Fella · 38 min

In this opening talk of a series on mindful living, Shila Catherine examines how relationships serve as the crucial arena where our meditation practice is truly tested. Rather than adding "right relationship" as a separate path factor, she argues that working skillfully with relationships requires embracing the foundational practices of sīla (precepts), mettā (loving-kindness), samādhi (concentration), and paññā (wisdom).

Drawing from multiple suttas in the Saṃyutta Nikāya and Aṅguttara Nikāya, Catherine highlights the Buddha's teaching that admirable friendship constitutes "the whole of the holy life" rather than merely half of it. She explores the qualities that define a true spiritual friend—one who gives what is difficult to give, keeps confidences, and doesn't abandon us in misfortune. The talk also addresses how relationships inevitably trigger the process of "selfing," creating opportunities to recognize and unravel the self-concepts that sustain suffering.

Catherine weaves together teachings on harmony, the criteria for choosing skillful associations, and the importance of balancing solitary retreat practice with engaged community life. She invites practitioners to examine their relationship to saṅgha, the practice of dāna (generosity), and how mindfulness in daily interactions reveals the subtle dynamics of craving and attachment. Ultimately, she points toward how penetrating the illusion of self and other can reveal the boundless freedom of mettā—the immeasurable deliverance of mind through loving-kindness.

Well, I'm going to begin this speaker series on where the rubber meets the road with a talk on roles and relationships. Although we might hear jokes that if the Buddha was teaching today, he might have taught a ninefold path with right relationship added, I would disagree. I believe it's better to deal with relationship dynamics by embracing the basics of the practice: precepts, metta, calmness, wisdom, and mindfulness. I prefer this approach to emphasizing relationship as a separate path factor. Buddhist teachers, communities, and authors may too easily project their social and ideological beliefs into what the Buddha taught, distorting the liberating potential of the teachings.

Relationships are very often the means for building up a sense of being someone, of selfing. I am me in relationship to you. I am a teacher because you're a student. I'm a daughter when I'm in relationship with my mother. I can only be an employee if an employer employs me. Working mindfully with relationships will not only reveal our personal psychological patterns and help us be better people in the world, but an in-depth examination of what happens when we relate with other people will inevitably reveal and unravel the self-concepts that feed and sometimes fester in relationships.

It is essential to bring mindfulness and wisdom into our interactive lives. This is the arena that quickly triggers defilements. Unexamined relationships can feed those defilements and sustain the very patterns that promote suffering. Relationships may be the place where the rubber meets the road in our practice because it's in relationships that the quality of our attention, our mindfulness, and our virtue is often tested.

We see this all the time in the integration process at the end of retreats. We establish such lovely samadhi where the mind has no hindrances. It's a beautiful mind. There's patience, self-compassion, concentration—lovely qualities, all the good stuff that we want. We might be having a fantastic retreat, and then silence breaks on the last day. In the interactions as we begin to speak with people, sometimes we realize that we're not quite as enlightened as we had thought we were in the silence.

This is not a bad thing, and it's not a criticism of retreats. If anything, it tells us how powerful it is to have the periodic retreat experience, a kind of respite from the defilements that are fueled in unhealthy relationships. It creates a space in our lives where we can periodically step outside of the self-concepts that sustain our worlds and our worldly duties. It's incredibly important to learn how to be comfortable alone, at ease in silence, and learn to work with our own minds without the constant influence of the desires, expectations, and judgments of others.

A full insight practice will include working in the deep, silent experience of retreat and also working to bring mindfulness, focus, and attention into the dynamic interrelationships of our lives. This is one of the wonderful ways that we practice as lay people. We might commit time every year to go deep in silent retreats, and then we work between the retreats in a more active engagement with people, with things, with duties, with work. We integrate the purity that we experienced in the silence with the complexity of our daily lives. We use interactions to reveal our personal patterns, and we also periodically go deeper than those personal patterns to recognize the impersonal and liberating truths of the Dhamma.

I think a deep and liberating practice must include both components: some degree of solitude and some degree of community and interaction, silence and relationship. For some people, it's easy to be equanimous when we're alone, but relationships and the complexities of daily life might test our equanimity. In moments of family tragedy, are you sunk in grief and despair? Obsessed with fear? Or can you respond with sensitivity, compassion, and wisdom to the inevitable losses in life? Is your understanding of impermanence deep enough that the mind is undisturbed in the face of death?

I don't believe that there can be a right relationship or a Buddhist code of relating beyond the basic practices of virtue, mental development, and wisdom. We can maintain precepts. We can cultivate meditation. We can live wisely together as parent and child, as sister and brother, as friend and friend, colleague and colleague, as teacher and student, and as married couples.

There's a sweet little story of four old men who approach a house in a monsoon rain. The farmer invites them into the house for shelter, but they first ask the farmer to choose one of them because they will only enter the house if he chooses the one that they would follow. If the farmer chooses the wrong man, then only that man will enter and the other three will stay out in the rain. What are these four men? It's said one is named Wealth, the other is named Success, the next is named Peace, and the fourth is named Harmony. Now the father wants to invite Wealth in—he works really hard to support the family. The mother, though, wants to invite Success in, and the parents start to fight.

After listening to the argument, the daughter says that she wants peace and would like to invite Peace in. Now all three are arguing. And the son says all he ever wanted is harmony. Finally, they all agree to invite Harmony in, and all four men find shelter in their home—because wealth, success, and peace are said to follow in the footsteps of harmony.

Harmony develops not through power or conformity alone. When we stop thinking primarily about ourselves and become willing to deeply consider the needs of others, we begin to find a harmonious relationship to life. This should not go to the extreme of sacrificing ourselves for the benefit of others. There is a balance between self-sacrifice and selfishness, which might be found simply by including the community in our thoughts of what is best.

Sometimes we disrupt harmony with blaming and fault-finding tendencies. How critical are we of others? How demanding are we? How easily do we offer a helping hand, get involved, or assist other people in their needs? How strictly do we define what we will help with or get involved with?

There is a lovely description of a group of monks who lived very harmoniously together. One of them described their practice by saying: "Whichever of us returns from the village with alms food prepares the seats, sets out the water for drinking and for washing, and puts the refuse bucket in its place. Whichever of us returns last eats any food left over, if he wishes. Otherwise, he throws it away where there is no greenery or drops it into water where there is no life. He puts away the seats and the water for drinking and for washing. He puts away the refuse bucket after washing it and sweeps out the refectory. Whoever notices that the pots of water for drinking, washing, or the latrine are low or empty takes care of them. If they are too heavy for him, he calls someone else with a signal of the hand, and they move it by joining hands. Because of this, we do not break out into speech. But every five days, we sit together all night discussing the Dhamma. That is how we abide—diligent, ardent, and resolute."

These monks were renowned not only for living in harmony but for profoundly supporting the development of each other's practice. They remain an excellent example of how to be a good friend, a good partner.

When we live in harmony with others, we do not need to be overly identified with job descriptions and roles or with the relationships those roles define. We might fluidly contribute to the smooth functioning of any communal situation without needing to make a lot of self-statements. I quite appreciate it at Insight Meditation South Bay when people just help clean up this room without necessarily needing to be asked or reminded, without having to organize every single task into formal volunteer assignments.

After coming for several weeks, you'll notice that when the talk ends, the tables get rolled back out, chairs get put around the tables, and the stack of chairs outside the room that the AA group stacked for us get brought inside and hung up on the rack. We go through this procedure at the end of every session. It's lovely to see that this task is just done by everybody. Usually a bunch of people pitch in to help, and when many people contribute, the task gets done quickly and easily. It feels light and not burdensome.

There's an interesting discourse in the Saṃyutta Nikāya where the Buddha's attendant, Venerable Ānanda, said to him, "This is half of the holy life, Lord—admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie." And the Buddha replied, "Don't say that, Ānanda, don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, and comrades, he can be expected to develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path."

So what makes someone an admirable friend, a good friend? How do your friends, family, and associates influence you? And how do you influence them? Do your friendships encourage the best in you? Do they support your development of wholesome states?

Also in the Saṃyutta Nikāya: "Bhikkhus, this is the forerunner and precursor of the rising of the sun—that is, the dawn. So too, bhikkhus, for a bhikkhu, this is the forerunner and precursor for the arising of the Noble Eightfold Path—that is, good friendship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, it is expected that he will develop and cultivate this Noble Eightfold Path."

A wise choice of friends and associates is essential for our development and success in life. In the Itivuttaka it says: "The follower and the followed, one who contacts and one contacted, are like an arrow coated with poison that contaminates its quiver. Fearing contamination, the wise person should not have evil friends. A man who ties up putrid fish with the blades of kusa grass makes the kusa grass smell putrid. So it is with those who follow fools. But a man who wraps tagara powder in the broad leaf of a tree makes the leaf smell fragrant. So it is with those who follow sages."

The destructive influences of bad associations can spread like contagion, putting ourselves and our friends in harm's way, creating conditions that can lead to danger and suffering. The Buddha indicated that it would be better to walk alone like a rhinoceros with only a single horn than to associate with unskillful friends.

Sometimes we might think that friends are just the people we scarf down popcorn with at the movies, or the people we confide our personal problems to, or the people who happen to frequent the same gym. But true friendships are the field for developing and expressing the beautiful qualities of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. Most of the five precepts explicitly involve our associations with other people.

To kill, to steal, to engage in sexual misconduct, to lie—these are obviously hurtful ways to relate to people. When we practice the precepts of not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, refraining from lying, and also refraining from intoxication, we are integrating wisdom and compassion into our daily interactions.

And so in this practice, we consider not only what we do when we meditate with our eyes closed, but we consider how we choose our friends. Do we choose friends just because they share our taste in movies, or they share our hobbies, or they flatter us? Or they have pleasing personalities? Or they offer professional advantages?

The Buddha recommended in the Anguttara Nikaya: "A friend should be followed when he possesses seven factors. What seven? He gives what is difficult to give. He does what is difficult to do. He patiently endures what is difficult to endure. He reveals his own secrets. He keeps one's secrets. He does not abandon one in misfortune. He does not despise one because of one's loss. A friend should be followed when he possesses these seven factors."

Is this your criteria? You can consider what sort of friends you follow today. What kind of blogs do you read? What kind of groups do you seek to join? Perhaps it would be worth seeking friendships and associations that strengthen our virtue, our meditative development, and our understanding of reality. It matters less perhaps if they share our clothing style, our taste in music, or our political views.

As important as friendship is for spiritual growth, though, it's not easy to actually know the inner qualities of others—at least not for sure. In the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha said: "By living with the person, his virtue can be known. And this too, only after a long time. Not casually, by close attention. Not without attention. By one who is wise, not by one who is stupid. It is by having dealings with the person that his integrity can be known. And this too, only after a long time." And it continues: "In misfortune, a person's fortitude can be known. And this too, only after a long time. By conversation a person's wisdom can be known, and this too only after a long time. Not casually, by close attention. Not without attention. By one who is wise, not by one who is stupid."

Now what about intimate relationships, sexual relationships? Perhaps few topics elicit as much suffering and confusion, anxiety, fear, and obsession as the topic of love, of sex, and intimate relations. People suffer when they are in relationships. They suffer when they are not in relationships. They suffer when they want to be in relationships. They suffer when they want to get out of relationships.

Buddhist teachings are not as prescriptive regarding intimate relationships as many other religions seem to be. The Buddha did not idealize the institution of marriage. He did not link women's value to their role as a child bearer. He did not stigmatize divorce. He did not condemn homosexuality, prostitution, polygamy, or monogamy.

But in his time, gender oppression was pervasive. He lived in a culture that had slavery, where women's rights and freedoms were extremely limited, and their very identities were defined in large part by their relationship to male members of the family. Customarily, women's status at that time depended upon being a daughter, a mother, a daughter-in-law, or a wife. Sexual misconduct is usually described as men having sex

with women who are under the protection of other men—that is, as their wife, their daughter, or their slave. And that's why the precept of sexual misconduct today is usually interpreted as prohibiting adultery.

But today, with greater freedoms, more diverse economic opportunities, less gender inequality, and a broader acceptance of a variety of love relationships, we must contemplate what sexual misconduct implies for us. Perhaps it might mean a forced relationship. Perhaps it might mean coercion. Or perhaps simply love and respect become the most critical factors for developing harmonious, intimate relationships.

These qualities, though, are difficult to define. Love can easily be distorted and confused with lust, power, or personal desire. When teaching love as a spiritual quality, one of my Dhamma teachers made the point when he said, "Love needs to be liberated from all that is wrapped around it." When love is liberated from the constraints of personal desire and the deluding view that separates self from other, it might be possible to experience an all-embracing love in which we are truly intimate with all of life.

Poonjaji said, "If I love some people and not others, then my love is divided. And love that is divided is not love."

Perhaps because the Buddha primarily taught a monastic community. Perhaps because in ancient times marriages served primarily to establish economic agreements between families rather than expressions of intimate love. Or perhaps because sensual desire and self-interest, which are involved in most relationships, are considered great obstructions to awakening. Whatever the reason, we find very few teachings on relational love beyond the basics of virtuous conduct and the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion.

In fact, I think it's in some way stretching the Buddha's teaching even to give a talk on relationships beyond the basics of abandoning unwholesome states of lust, hatred, and self-delusion, and cultivating wholesome states of compassion, friendliness, and equanimity. But when we look at monastic communities, we find that relationships certainly characterize these communities. It's harmony that is emphasized more than close, personal, individual relationships.

None of us here are monastics. But still, spiritual community is important. And so we might ask: What is our relationship to spiritual community? What is our relationship to sangha? Do you consider yourself a member of Insight Meditation South Bay? If yes, why? If no, why not? Is this a relationship that you're actively cultivating? Is it a relationship that you value? Or are you just attending Insight Meditation South Bay as you would any evening class, perhaps the way you might come to learn a professional skill?

For insight meditation communities to thrive, we must consider how we relate to the community, what we give to support it, and what we put into its development. Clearly, we have not formed IMSB as an educational group. We're not here simply offering lectures on spiritual topics. If we were, there would be a ticket price at the door. You'd all pay forty dollars to enter, and when you came to a daylong, you would register online and pay your one hundred fifty dollars.

In giving the dana reminder, we're pretty careful to never say that our programs are free. We offer them instead on a dana basis, a donation basis. The teachings may be offered freely, but every event includes a structured opportunity to practice generosity. I'd hate to think that people come here because it's just a cheap activity for a Tuesday night. Once you connect with the dana system and respect the practices that we teach here, I really hope that everyone, without exception, will embrace the practice of generosity and participate in building a relationship with the sangha by supporting it. Dana practice is part of our relationship here. Dana practice is every bit as important to what we do and what we teach here as mindfulness, attention skills, and insight practices.

In the Samyutta Nikaya it says, "By giving one unites friends." Sangha relationships develop by supporting each other. Primarily we are supporting each other's spiritual growth. And that growth happens in the context of complex life relationships.

Community is not a static thing. It's not an object. It's us. We are creating the community by the ways that we interact with each other. Through our communities, we determine how the Dhamma will take root in the West.

How do we discuss the Dhamma? How do we challenge each other? How do we disagree with each other? What qualities do we nurture in each other? How do we help each other when we're sick, when we're getting old, when we're confused? How do we work together to plan events, to sustain our activities? How do we communicate with each other? How do we resolve conflicts when they arise? How do we treat newcomers who walk through our doors? Have we established any internal cliques or social hierarchies that we really should question? Do we swoon over wealthy members or those with social influence? Do we value the intelligence of both the young and the old? Are there any prejudices that blind us to each other's needs? What do we expect from each other—from our leaders, from our teachers, from our volunteers, from our members? What roles do we take?

The roles that we step into are important. But they don't need to be fixed. They don't need to become a source of self-grasping. Social roles can be fluid.

They can be ever-changing. Like in ballroom dance, leaders and followers are equally important, and both must be skillful in their execution of the role. Partner dance is a continuous act of communication. If we don't respect the dialogue of the lead and the follow, we are going to trip each other. All teamwork requires a dynamic engagement in respectful communication and a responsible performance of our roles. This inevitably will require letting go of attachments—attachments to position, opinions, and self-interests.

Roles are embedded in most human communications. So we can perform our roles, but with mindfulness, with integrity, with wisdom. We can use our social interactions to examine the mind, to uproot conceit and self-centered perspectives, cultivating the beautiful qualities of compassion, of love, of equanimity.

The Buddha taught liberation through not clinging. And there are endless opportunities to discover the moments of contraction, clinging, and selfing when we are engaged in relationships. There are endless opportunities to purify the mind in the dynamic of human interactions.

Just notice when and why you suffer. Perhaps you were expecting something from someone and didn't get it. Perhaps we're expecting somebody to satisfy our needs, our wants, our hopes. Perhaps we're expecting someone to make us happy. Of course, when we think about it, we'll remember—ah, yes, craving. That's the cause of suffering. Self-interest—ah, that's the primary delusion. We'll have enough wisdom to fall back on what we know to be true. Craving causes suffering. We know that. Everything is impermanent, and yet we still try to hold on.

Sometimes, though, when we interact with other people, we forget all the great Dhamma lessons that are so clear when we're meditating. And we might just find ourselves again and again trying to assert our interests and satisfy our personal desires. So relationships then become great vehicles for our practice.

People change. People will disappoint us—maybe not one hundred percent of the time, but often enough. Often enough to learn. People don't comply with our fantasies of them. There's often a dissonance between what we hoped for and what's actually happening in a relationship. When this happens, we have a chance to see what's going on, not just in the relationship, but we have a chance to see what's going on in the subtle dynamics of how we are relating to life.

Even our most faithful and satisfying relationships are going to change, simply because all conditioned things change. All conditioned things are impermanent. Everyone that is born will age, get sick, and die. We all will be separated from those we love. And yet we still love, and we grow, and we learn to let go right in the midst of that dynamic relationship.

There is much that we can do to open to human relationships. And more broadly, the Dhamma teachings invite us to consider: what is our relationship to every encounter in life? Being mindful, we are observing not only the meditation object, not only what is impacting our senses. We're examining the quality of the mind that is perceiving our experience. We're essentially mindful of our relationship to life.

And as we're increasingly aware of our relationships, we may find that they don't need to be defined by the divisions of self and other. Penetrating this illusion of self and other, we dissolve all boundaries, revealing an immeasurable freedom that we might call love—the immeasurable deliverance of mind, of loving-kindness, of mettā.

CHAPTER 209

Where Rubber Meets the Road: A Series on Mindful Living

Andrea Fella · 38 min

In this opening talk of a series on mindful living, Shaila Catherine addresses the complex territory where meditation practice meets daily relationships. Rather than advocating for relationship as a separate path factor, she argues that the traditional foundations of sīla (virtue), samādhi (concentration), mettā (loving-kindness), and paññā (wisdom) provide all the tools needed for skillful relating. She illuminates how relationships inevitably trigger defilements and reveal the self-concepts we construct through our identities as parent, child, teacher, student, or partner.

Drawing from multiple suttas in the Saṃyutta Nikāya and Aṅguttara Nikāya, Catherine examines the Buddha's teaching that admirable friendship constitutes "the whole of the holy life" rather than merely half of it. She explores the seven qualities of a true friend, the criteria for knowing another's virtue and wisdom, and the importance of choosing associations that strengthen wholesome states rather than merely sharing superficial interests.

The talk extends to intimate relationships and sexual misconduct, noting how the Buddha's teachings were less prescriptive than many religions, then broadens to examine our relationship to saṅgha and spiritual community. Catherine emphasizes that community is not static but continuously created through our interactions—how we support each other, resolve conflicts, welcome newcomers, and practice generosity through dāna. She concludes by pointing toward the ultimate teaching: as mindfulness reveals our relationship to all of life, the illusion of self and other dissolves, revealing the immeasurable liberation of mettā.

Well, I'm going to begin this speaker series on where the rubber meets the road with a talk on roles and relationships.

Although we might hear jokes that if the Buddha was teaching today, he might have taught a ninefold path with right relationship added, I would disagree. I believe it's better to deal with relationship dynamics by embracing the basics of the practice: precepts, metta, calmness, wisdom, and mindfulness. I prefer this approach to emphasizing relationship as a separate path factor. Buddhist teachers, communities, and authors may too easily project their social and ideological beliefs into what the Buddha taught, distorting the liberating potential of the teachings.

Relationships are very often the means for building up a sense of being someone, of selfing. I am me in relationship to you. I am a teacher because you're a student. I'm a daughter when I'm in relationship with my mother. I can only be an employee if an employer employs me. Working mindfully with relationships will not only reveal personal psychological patterns and help us be better people in the world, but an in-depth examination of what happens when we relate with other people will inevitably reveal and unravel the self-concepts that feed and sometimes fester in relationships.

It is essential to bring mindfulness and wisdom into our interactive lives. This is the arena that quickly triggers defilements. Unexamined relationships can feed those defilements and sustain the very patterns that promote suffering. Relationships may be the place where the rubber meets the road in our practice because it's in relationships that the quality of our attention, our mindfulness, and our virtue is often tested.

We see this all the time in the integration process at the end of retreats. We establish such lovely samadhi where the mind has no hindrances. It's a beautiful mind. There's patience, self-compassion, concentration—lovely qualities, all the good stuff that we want. We might be having a fantastic retreat and then silence breaks on the last day. In the interactions as we begin to speak with people, sometimes we might realize that we're not quite as enlightened as we had thought we were in the silence.

This is not a bad thing, and it's not a criticism of retreats. If anything, it tells us how powerful it is to have the periodic retreat experience, a kind of respite from the defilements that are fueled in unhealthy relationships. It creates a space in our lives where we can periodically step outside of the self-concepts that sustain our worlds and our worldly duties. It's incredibly important to learn how to be comfortable alone, at ease in silence, and to work with our own minds without the constant influence of the desires, expectations, and judgments of others.

A full insight practice will include working in the deep, silent experience of retreat and also working to bring mindfulness and focus and attention into the dynamic interrelationships of our lives. This is one of the wonderful ways that we practice as lay people. We might commit time every year to go deep in silent retreats, and then we work between the retreats in a more active engagement with people, with things, with duties, with work. We integrate the purity that we experienced in the silence with the complexity of our daily lives. We use interactions to reveal our personal patterns, and we also periodically go deeper than those personal patterns to recognize the impersonal and liberating truths of the Dhamma.

I think a deep and liberating practice must include both components: some degree of solitude and some degree of community and interaction, silence and relationship. For some people, it's easy to be equanimous when we're alone, but relationships and the complexities of daily life might test our equanimity. In moments of family tragedy, are you sunk in grief and despair? Obsessed with fear? Or can you respond with sensitivity, compassion, and wisdom to the inevitable losses in life? Is your understanding of impermanence deep enough that the mind is undisturbed in the face of death?

I don't believe that there can be a right relationship or a Buddhist code of relating beyond the basic practices of virtue, mental development, and wisdom. We can maintain precepts. We can cultivate meditation. We can live wisely together as parent and child, as sister and brother, as friend and friend, colleague and colleague, as teacher and student, and as married couples.

There's a sweet little story of four old men who approach a house in a monsoon rain. The farmer invites them into the house for shelter, but they first ask the farmer to choose one of them because they will only enter the house if he chooses the one that he would follow. If the farmer chooses the wrong man, then only that man will enter and the other three will stay out in the rain. What are these four men? It's said one is named Wealth, the other is named Success, the next is named Peace, and the fourth is named Harmony.

Now the father wants to invite Wealth in—he works really hard to support the family. The mother, though, wants to invite Success in, and the parents start to fight.

After listening to the argument, the daughter simply says that she wants peace and wishes to invite Peace in. Now all three are arguing. And the son says all he ever wanted is harmony. Finally, they all agree to invite Harmony in, and all four men find shelter in their home—because wealth, success, and peace are said to follow in the footsteps of Harmony.

Harmony develops not through mere conformity alone. When we stop thinking primarily about ourselves and become willing to deeply consider the needs of others, we begin to find a harmonious relationship to life. This should not go to the extreme of sacrificing ourselves for the benefit of others. There's a balance between self-sacrifice and selfishness, which might be found simply by including the community in our thoughts of what is best.

Sometimes we disrupt harmony with blaming and fault-finding tendencies. How critical are we of others? How demanding are we? How easily do you offer a helping hand, get involved, or simply assist other people in their needs? How strictly do you define what you will help with or get involved with?

There's a lovely description of a group of monks who lived very harmoniously together. One of them described their practice by saying, "Whichever of us returns from the village with alms food prepares the seats, sets out the water for drinking and for washing, and puts the refuse bucket in its place. Whichever of us returns last eats any food left over, if he wishes. Otherwise, he throws it away where there is no greenery or drops it into water where there is no life. He puts away the seats and the water for drinking and for washing. He puts away the refuse bucket after washing it and sweeps out the refectory. Whoever notices that the pots of water for drinking, washing, or the latrine are low or empty takes care of them. If they are too heavy for him, he calls someone else with a signal of the hand, and they move it by joining hands. Because of this, we do not break out into speech. But every five days, we sit together all night discussing the Dhamma. That is how we abide—diligent, ardent, and resolute."

These monks were renowned not only for living in harmony but for profoundly supporting the development of each other's practice. They remain an excellent example of how to be a good friend, a good partner.

When we live in harmony with others, we do not need to be overly identified with job descriptions and roles and the relationships those roles define. We might fluidly contribute to the smooth functioning of any communal situation without needing to make a lot of self-statements.

I quite appreciate it at Insight Meditation South Bay when people simply help clean up this room without necessarily needing to be asked or reminded, without having to organize every single task into formal volunteer assignments. After coming for several weeks, you'll notice that when the talk ends, the tables get rolled back out, chairs get put around the tables, and the stack of chairs outside the room that the AA group stacked for us get brought inside and hung up on the rack. We go through this procedure at the end of every session, and it's lovely to see that this task is just done by everybody. Usually a bunch of people pitch in to help, and when many people participate, the task gets done quickly and easily. It feels light, not burdensome.

There's an interesting discourse in the Saṃyutta Nikāya where the Buddha's attendant, Venerable Ānanda, said to him, "This is half of the holy life, Lord—admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie." And the Buddha replied, "Don't say that, Ānanda, don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable com-

panionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, and comrades, he can be expected to develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path."

So what makes someone an admirable friend, a good friend? How do your friends, family, and associates influence you? And how do you influence them? Do your friendships encourage the best in you? Do they support your development of wholesome states?

Also in the Saṃyutta Nikāya: "Bhikkhus, this is the forerunner and precursor of the rising of the sun—that is, the dawn. So too, bhikkhus, for a bhikkhu, this is the forerunner and precursor for the arising of the Noble Eightfold Path—that is, good friendship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, it is expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path."

A wise choice of friends and associates is essential for our development and success in life. In the Itivuttaka it says, "The follower and the followed, one who contacts and one contacted, are like an arrow coated with poison that contaminates its quiver. Fearing contamination, the wise person should not have evil friends. A man who ties up putrid fish with blades of kusa grass makes the kusa grass smell putrid. So it is with those who follow fools. But a man who wraps tagara powder in the broad leaf of a tree makes the leaf smell fragrant. So it is with those who follow sages."

The destructive influences of bad associations can spread like contagion, putting ourselves and our friends in harm's way and creating conditions that lead to danger and suffering. The Buddha indicated that it would be better to walk alone like a rhinoceros with only a single horn than to associate with unskillful friends.

Sometimes we might think that friends are just the people we scarf down popcorn with at the movies, or the people we confide our personal problems to, or the people who happen to go to the same gym. But true friendships are the field for developing and expressing the beautiful qualities of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. Most of the five precepts explicitly involve our associations with other people.

To kill, to steal, to engage in sexual misconduct, to lie—these are obviously hurtful ways to relate to people. When we practice the precepts of not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, refraining from lying, and also refraining from intoxication, we are integrating wisdom and compassion into our daily interactions.

And so in this practice, we consider not only what we do when we meditate with our eyes closed, but also how we choose our friends. Do we choose friends just because they share our taste in movies, or they share our hobbies, or they flatter us? Or they have pleasing personalities or they offer professional advantages?

The Buddha recommended in the Anguttara Nikaya: a friend should be followed when he possesses seven factors. What seven? He gives what is difficult to give. He does what is difficult to do. He patiently endures what is difficult to endure. He reveals his own secrets. He keeps one's secrets. He does not abandon one in misfortune. He does not despise one because of one's loss. A friend should be followed when he possesses these seven factors.

Is this your criteria? You can consider what sort of friends you follow today. What kind of blogs do you read? What kind of groups do you seek to join? Perhaps it would be worth seeking friendships and associations that strengthen our virtue, our meditative development, and our understanding of reality. It matters less, perhaps, if they share our clothing style, our taste in music, or our political views.

As important as friendship is for spiritual growth, though, it's not easy to actually know the inner qualities of others—at least not for sure. In the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha said: by living with the person, his virtue can be known. And this too, only after a long time. Not casually, but by close attention. Not without attention. By one who is wise, not by one who is stupid. It is by having dealings with the person that his integrity can be known. And this too, only after a long time. In misfortune, a person's fortitude can be known. And this too, only after a long time. By conversation a person's wisdom can be known, and this too only after a long time. Not casually, but by close attention. Not without attention. By one who is wise, not by one who is stupid.

Now, what about intimate relationships, sexual relationships? Perhaps few topics elicit as much suffering and confusion, anxiety, fear, and obsession as the topic of love, of sex, and intimate relations. People suffer when they are in relationships. They suffer when they are not in relationships. They suffer when they want to be in relationships. They suffer when they want to get out of relationships.

Buddhist teachings are not as prescriptive regarding intimate relationships as many other religions seem to be. The Buddha did not idealize the institution of marriage. He did not link women's value to their role as child bearers. He did not stigmatize divorce. He did not condemn homosexuality, prostitution, polygamy, or monogamy.

But in his time, gender oppression was pervasive. He lived in a culture that had slavery, where women's rights and freedoms were extremely limited, and their very identities were defined in large part by their relationship to male members of the family. Customarily, women's status at that time depended upon being a daughter, a mother, a daughter-in-law, or a wife. Sexual misconduct was usually described as men having sex with women who were under the protection of other men—that is, as their wife, their daughter, or their slave. And that's why the precept of sexual misconduct today is usually interpreted as prohibiting adultery.

But today, with greater freedoms, more diverse economic opportunities, less gender inequality, and a broader acceptance of a variety of love relationships, we must contemplate what sexual misconduct implies for us. Perhaps it might mean a forced relationship. Perhaps it might mean coercion. Or perhaps simply love and respect become the most critical factors for developing harmonious, intimate relationships.

These qualities, though, are difficult to define. Love can easily be distorted and confused with lust, power, or personal desire. When teaching love as a spiritual quality, one of my Dhamma teachers made the point when he said: love needs to be liberated from all that is wrapped around it. When love is liberated from the constraints of personal desire and the deluding view that separates self from other, it might be possible to experience an all-embracing love in which we are truly intimate with all of life.

Poonjaji said, "If I love some people and not others, then my love is divided. And love that is divided is not love."

Perhaps because the Buddha primarily taught a monastic community. Perhaps because in ancient times marriages served primarily to establish economic agreements between families—not really expressions of intimate love. Or perhaps because sensual desire and self-interest, which are involved in most relationships, are considered great obstructions to awakening. Whatever the reason, we find very few teachings on relational love beyond the basics of virtuous conduct and the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion.

In fact, I think it's in some way stretching the Buddha's teaching even to give a talk on relationships beyond the basics of abandoning unwholesome states—lust, hatred, and self-delusion—and cultivating wholesome states of compassion, friendliness, and equanimity. But when we look at monastic communities, we find that relationships certainly characterize these communities. It's harmony that is emphasized more than close, personal, individual relationships.

Now, none of us here are monastics. But still, spiritual community is important. And so we might ask: What is our relationship to spiritual community? What is our relationship to Sangha? Do you consider yourself a member of Insight Meditation South Bay? If yes, why? If no, why not? Is this a relationship that you're actively cultivating? Is it a relationship that you value? Or are you just attending Insight Meditation South Bay as you would any evening class, perhaps the way you might come to learn a professional skill?

For insight meditation communities to thrive, we must consider how we relate to the community, what we give to support it, and what we put into its development. Clearly, we have not formed IMSB as an educational group. We're not here simply offering lectures on spiritual topics. If we were, there would be a ticket price at the door—you'd all pay forty dollars to enter, and when you came to a daylong, you would register online and pay your one hundred fifty dollars.

Although many people share in giving the dana reminder, we're pretty careful to never say that our programs are free. We offer them instead on a dana basis, a donation basis. The teachings may be offered freely, but every event includes a structured opportunity to practice generosity. I'd hate to think that people come here because it's just a cheap activity for a Tuesday night. Once you connect with the dana system and respect the practices that we teach here, I really hope that everyone, without exception, will embrace the practice of generosity and participate in building a relationship with the sangha by supporting it. Dana practice is part of our relationship here. Dana practice is every bit as important to what we do and teach here as mindfulness, attention skills, and insight practices.

In the Samyutta Nikaya it says, "By giving, one unites friends." Sangha relationships develop by supporting each other. Primarily we are supporting each other's spiritual growth, and that growth happens in the context of complex life relationships.

Community is not a static thing. It's not an object. It's us. We are creating the community by the ways that we interact with each other. Through our communities, we determine how the Dhamma will take root in the West. How do we discuss the Dhamma? How do we challenge each other? How do we disagree with each other? What qualities do we nurture in each other? How do we help each other when we're sick, when we're getting old, when we're confused? How do we work together to plan events, to sustain our activities? How do we communicate with each other? How do we resolve conflicts when they arise? How do we treat newcomers who walk through our doors?

Have we established any internal cliques or social hierarchies that we really should question? Do we swoon over wealthy members or those with social influence? Do we value the intelligence of both the young and the old? Are there any prejudices that blind us to each other's needs? What do we expect from each other—from our leaders, from our teachers, from our volunteers, from our members? What roles do we take?

The roles that we step into are important. But they don't need to be fixed. They don't need to become a source of self-grasping. Social roles can be fluid.

They can be ever-changing. Like in ballroom dance, leaders and followers are equally important, and both must be skillful in their execution of the role. Partner dance is a continuous act of communication. If we don't respect the dialogue of the lead and the follow, we are going to trip each other.

All teamwork requires a dynamic engagement in respectful communication and a responsible performance of our roles. This inevitably will require letting go of attachments—attachments to position, opinions, and self-interests. Roles are embedded in most human communications, so we can perform our roles, but with mindfulness, with integrity, with wisdom. We can use our social interactions to examine the mind, to uproot conceit and self-centered perspectives, cultivating the beautiful qualities of compassion, of love, of equanimity.

The Buddha taught liberation through not clinging. And there are endless opportunities to discover the moments of contraction, clinging, and selfing when we are engaged in relationships. There are endless opportunities to purify the mind in the dynamic of human interactions.

Just notice when and why you suffer. Perhaps you were expecting something from someone and didn't get it. Perhaps we're expecting somebody to satisfy our needs, our wants, our hopes. Perhaps we're expecting someone to make us happy. Of course, when we think about it, we'll remember—ah, yes, craving. That's the cause of suffering. Self-interest—ah, that's the primary delusion. We'll have enough wisdom to fall back on what we know to be true. Craving causes suffering. We know that. Everything is impermanent, and yet we still try to hold on.

Sometimes, though, when we interact with other people, we forget all the great Dhamma lessons that are so clear when we're meditating. And we might just find ourselves again and again trying to assert our interests and satisfy our personal desires. So relationships then become great vehicles for our practice.

People change. They will disappoint us—maybe not one hundred percent of the time, but often enough. Often enough to learn. People don't comply with our fantasies of them. There's often a dissonance between what we hoped for and what's actually happening in a relationship. When this happens, we have a chance to see what's going on—not just in the relationship, but in the subtle dynamics of how we are relating to life.

Even our most faithful and satisfying relationships are going to change, simply because all conditioned things change. All conditioned things are impermanent. Everyone that is born will age, get sick, and die. We all will be separated from those we love. And yet we still love, and we grow, and we learn to let go right in the midst of that dynamic relationship.

There is much we can do to open to human relationships. And more broadly, the Dhamma teachings invite us to consider: what is our relationship to every encounter in life? Being mindful, we are observing not only the meditation object, not only what is impacting our senses—we're examining the quality of the mind that is perceiving our experience. We're essentially mindful of our relationship to life.

And as we're increasingly aware of our relationships, we may find that they don't need to be defined by the divisions of self and other. Penetrating this illusion of self and other, we dissolve all boundaries, revealing an immeasurable freedom that we might call love—the immeasurable deliverance of mind, of loving-kindness, of mettā.

CHAPTER 210

The Rebellious Path of Freedom from Habits of Mind

Andrea Fella · 43 min

In this engaging talk, Andrea Fella presents meditation practice as a revolutionary act—a conscious rebellion against the mind's deeply ingrained habits of grasping, aversion, and confusion. Drawing from her twenty years of practice, she explores how the simple recognition that "we are not our thoughts, we are not our feelings" can create profound space for liberation. She references the Buddha's emphatic teachings on mindfulness from the Saṃyutta Nikāya and Aṅguttara Nikāya, emphasizing that "all things can be mastered by mindfulness."

Fella introduces the Satipaṭṭhāna practice as both beginning and end point of the path, quoting the Buddha's declaration that this is "the only way for the purification of beings." She offers the practical RAIN technique (Recognize, Accept, Investigate, Non-identify) as a method for working skillfully with difficult mind states. The teaching beautifully weaves together wisdom and compassion, acknowledging her own journey of initially prioritizing insight over mettā before recognizing their essential balance.

The talk includes a powerful teaching from Mahāghosānanda, the Cambodian monk who returned after the Khmer Rouge to teach forgiveness, along with verses from the Dhammapada on how our thoughts shape our world. Fella concludes with the understanding that the Buddha's path was inherently revolutionary—challenging us to rebel against our own unwholesome tendencies while inclining toward openness, loving-kindness, and freedom from dukkha.

This talk was recorded by Insight Meditation South Bay in Mountain View, California. For more talks and information, visit www.imsb.org.

Thank you for having me. I appreciate the invitation. Several months ago, I was asked to provide a dharma topic, which is really my least favorite thing to do because I have no idea what I'm going to talk about or want to talk about several months in advance. So I just said, "Rebelling against the habits of mind," because I feel like that's the essence of this practice. We have so many habits, don't we? So that's the title of the talk. We'll see how it goes. Another version of this topic is "The Liberating Power of Awareness."

I'm going to start with a poem by Kabir:

Hold this mind you carry on your back.
Your actions are like a heavy sack.
Strains enough to break your neck.
So drop that stupid load.
This is the last stop on the road.
Stay.
Be love's guest.

I was reflecting on that as I was giving instructions about just being aware of sound. Every time the clapping happened, it was like an encouragement. I felt encouraged. Just now. Just now.

This mind has a mind of its own, doesn't it? It's often unruly, inappropriate—just thinking what it thinks. I remember when I first realized that it's not *my* mind. It's just the mind. It's just this mind. Your mind, our mind, minds. And that realization helped me. I just didn't personalize it as much all of a sudden. There was some space.

So this idea of rebelling against the mind, rebelling against the mind's tendencies—I believe this is really the heart of what the Buddha is asking. He's saying, okay, first see that the mind is crazy and out of control. That's the first step. One of my teachers says that's the first insight. So if you were new tonight and you experienced flooding thoughts and images and memories and aversions and smells and all the things, that's just the way things are. But when we can see that, when we have some space between us and it, when we're not caught by it, there can be a real liberation from the chaos of everyday life.

A lot of what comes up in meditation—what the Buddha talked about and what is talked about from the Buddhist perspective—are the hindrances: the things that hinder the natural peace and ease of the mind, its resting place. Yet we have these hindrances, these things that get in the way. I'm sure you know them.

So don't worry. Be easy on yourself about that. Because until the Buddha's enlightenment, he battled with the hindrances. Until the evening of his freedom, he battled with anger, with wanting, with craving, with ill will, with drowsiness, with restlessness or worry, irritation, agitation, doubt and disbelief. These are the flavors of this mind, of this mind-body complex.

So this theme of where the rubber meets the road is really, in my opinion—for tonight or this moment anyway—it's really about how we can both befriend and rebel. We're not rebelling against the mind's tendencies towards these hindrances as an enemy, but more as a friend. So I gave the instruction to recognize where the mind goes, and then with a sense of friendliness or kindness with the mind.

Towards the mind, we're inclining friendliness and kindness right in that moment of being lost. That is where the rubber meets the road. Because you can do that however many hundreds of thousands of times a day. Ten is good.

These hindrances—it's important to reflect on them. I was on a retreat once, long ago, at the beginning of my practice. Robert Hall, who is a well-known veteran dharma teacher and also a psychiatrist, retired now, studied with Fritz Perls—smart guy, I really like him a lot. I just visited him down in Mexico; he has a group in Baja.

So he came out one evening. I had been struggling with the hindrances for several days. The lights were low and it was just him. Sometimes there's a parade of dharma teachers, but it was just him that night. And he said, "So, have you figured it out yet?" Of course, I was like, absolutely not. He said, "Have you figured it out? We're not our thoughts. We're not our feelings."

And that was the essence of his dharma talk. That's pretty much all I heard him say. He might have spoken for another forty-five minutes, but all that I heard was: you're not your thoughts, you're not your feelings.

The moment that sunk in on a deeper level, I was able to see that I don't have to be afflicted by my thoughts and feelings. I don't have to be run by them. And actually, now that I could see that, I could even rebel against the tendencies my thoughts have. At that particular time there were lots of themes of anger, resentment, unworthiness, doubt—tons of doubt that first retreat. So it gave me a little space. I wasn't *of* my thoughts; I was *with* them. That was really helpful for me.

Meditation—not only in my view, but in many people's view—is a fierce practice in the way that it reveals the stark reality of our everyday mind. We're constantly muttering and scheming and planning, wondering under our breath. Trying to comfort ourselves, I think. This is a strategy of trying to comfort ourselves.

Our internal life is constantly preoccupied with these voices: I like this, I don't like that. She hurt me. He left me. How can I get that? More of this. No more of that. Just this constant chatter. It's in the background, subtle. Sometimes it's very much in the foreground.

The important thing is that we can see it. This is what this practice gives us. This is what's liberating about it. Because if we can't see it, we're just mindlessly grasping.

Like monkeys swinging from one vine to the next, from one thought, from one want to the next want. I have a long-standing relationship with monkeys—I've traveled through Asia and Southeast Asia, through India. Monkeys are a trip, but they're very focused on what they want and what they don't want. And so often, as I'm sure you've heard, Western dharma teachers talk about this unruliness, or the hindrances, as a kind of monkey mind—the restlessness, the jumping back and forth.

So this is all an attempt to find pleasure and comfort, and possibly avoid discomfort or unpleasant thoughts or feelings, even situations. Vipassana takes this untrained everyday mind as a natural starting point. That's the first thing to understand. Whether you're a beginning meditator tonight or someone who has been doing this for ten years, this is the natural starting point.

And you know, the wonderful thing about practice is that it's just that—practice. There's that saying from the Dalai Lama. I heard it a long time ago, but I've been reflecting on it recently. A student asked, "How long will it take before I really notice some progress in my practice?" And the Dalai Lama—I'm paraphrasing obviously—said something like, "It's a good idea to evaluate your practice every ten years." Not to focus on where you are in your practice, how free you are, after you've been doing it a year or two years or even five years. Ten years.

That was really helpful for me when it first sunk in. I heard it a few times before I really let it sink in. And it was helpful because I stopped evaluating my practice. I started just being the practice, doing the practice, exploring the practice, instead of evaluating it. Where am I? Because that's the way our Western minds often think. And it's not just Western, but it's definitely in our culture, in our ethos—this "get more now, fast, quick." You can look on the internet for "enlightenment now, five easy steps" for ninety-nine dollars. "Learn to be a meditation teacher in five weeks." It's just the way we are. It's important to recognize that. It's just the tendency. The Buddha called it greed. Wanting. Desire—unwholesome desire, unskillful desire. Grasping, really. Craving.

So Vipassana takes this untrained everyday mind as a natural starting point and gives a clear and systematic way of developing awareness of this process. That's helpful.

So it's been twenty years now that I've been practicing. And just recently, I was in meditation, and it actually happened a few times—a few periods, a few days, a few weeks—of just checking in: What's going on in here? The Dalai Lama said I could do it. I waited, actually, an extra ten years because I'm particularly stubborn in my mind.

And you know what I've come to recognize? I'm less angry. I'm less quick to judgment. I have a lot less suffering in my life. Not that there isn't difficulty, and there hasn't been difficulty, but I have less attachment to the difficulty. And so I see it arising and passing away sooner—days and weeks instead of months and years. I feel much more connected to my heart, to this emotional self that I, in a lot of ways, for a lot of years, as a survival mechanism, denied.

One of the topics I was thinking of focusing on is kind awareness, or mettā, loving-kindness. It's super important. It's really helpful to focus on seeing the mind and seeing the habits of mind. And equally as important to focus on compassion and loving-kindness and the cultivation of that. I denied that for a long time. I was like, "I just want wisdom. I want the wisdom to see clearly. I want to get enlightened." There was a craving around that, although I had no idea what enlightenment meant. I thought it meant I could levitate or something, read people's minds—some kind of cool power.

But what I've come to find is that the balance of both wisdom and compassion is exactly what the Buddha taught. And it is liberating. Even the awareness, the liberation, the liberating power of awareness that is found through metta or through karuna—loving kindness or what I like to think about as unconditional positive regard. I think of metta that way because "loving kindness" is just a little too woo-woo for me, although I'm more open to it now than I was. I'm not going to talk a whole lot about that, but just to name it—I feel like that's super important. And for a long time in my practice, as I said, I denied it.

This bare awareness or attention is defined by Mark Epstein, who wrote several books. He's a psychotherapist and psychiatrist, and also a Dharma practitioner and teacher across multiple traditions. He described bare awareness as "a clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us in successive moments of perception." What is happening within me and around me in every given moment?

The challenge I have for you—and I think the Buddha gave this same challenge—is how often can you check into that throughout the day? What's happening within me and around me? Not evaluating, not fixing, not problem solving, not judging. Just awareness. What's happening here, just now, just this breath? That's my challenge for you.

Bare awareness takes the unexamined mind and opens it up—not by trying to change anything, but by observing the mind, our emotions, and the body just the way they are. Just the way they are.

The Buddha spoke of the power of mindfulness, sati, in a very emphatic way several times throughout the suttas. I have just a couple here. "Mindfulness, I declare, is all helpful," said the Buddha in the Samyutta Nikaya. "All things can be mastered by mindfulness," from the Anguttara Nikaya.

The third Zen patriarch had this to say, and it stuck out to me. I heard it in a teaching first and then later studied the text directly: "Stop thinking and talking and there's nothing you cannot know." This was really helpful. I think it's helpful for us with this kind of intellectualizing that we may tend to do, especially in the Dharma.

One of the things I'm really grateful for is that when I learned to meditate, I knew nothing about Buddhism. I knew that in a Chinese restaurant there's the happy Buddha—put a little quarter on his belly, maybe you get good fortune or something. That's really all I knew about the Buddha. And somewhere in Asia, I don't even know where. But I just learned to practice. I'm really grateful for that, because the practice became experiential. Then later, as I started taking philosophy classes—I started meditating when I was about sixteen.

So this teaching, "Stop thinking and talking and there's nothing you can't know"—it points to the practice. The rubber meets the road. Doing it, which we're doing. My friend Noah Levine talks about how there's the spiritual revolutionary, the one percent of our population that actually does the practice, that actually meditates. He calls it the spiritual one-percenters.

So how might we work with this in our day-to-day life—this present-time awareness, this mindfulness, this seeing things as they really are? Love and loss. People die. People leave. How do we go on?

As I work with others—one of the things that I do is I'm a psychotherapist and a Dharma teacher and consultant and educator—I come into contact with those who are in denial of the reality of change, in denial of anicca, impermanence. That which arises, passes away. And in turn, they cause much suffering for themselves.

I'm not saying don't feel pain, or that you're not going to have pain and loss. The Buddha never claimed that. But he made a very clear differentiation between pain and suffering. Suffering being when we cling or crave for things to be other than they are. There's the story of the two darts, the arrow of life.

Pain. The First Noble Truth talks all about it, all the ways. Not getting what we want. Or getting what we don't want—that's a particular kind of pain. And then suffering being when we push it away or grasp. This is another way of thinking about the relationship between pain and suffering.

There's a story I heard some years ago, a Zen story. There was this Zen priest who was the abbot of a monastery, and he had all of these monks that were ardent in their practice. He was always talking about seeing through the illusion. And one day, he was off at the edge of the monastery, and he was weeping, crying. Some of the younger monks came upon him and said, "Abbot, Sensei, what's the matter?" And the Sensei said, "I lost my brother. My brother died." The young monks responded, "But it's all illusion. Nothing really—it's just conditions arising and passing away." And he said, "Yes, but this is a very painful illusion."

It was that moment of teaching: yeah, we're still of this world. There still is pain and grief and loss and separation. How can we be with it, actually? Turn toward it, not away from it. The instinctual part of our psyche, our ego, is to turn away or we'll be overwhelmed. So it's important, I think, just to see that.

And then the Buddha's teaching on the mindfulness of impermanence—so helpful in this. That which arises passes away as we experience the pains of life: old age, sickness, death. No escaping it.

So there are a few ways of looking at this mindfulness or this awareness. Being aware of its arising—being aware of the arising of really all kinds of mental fabrications, thoughts and feelings. And then there's the establishment. Once we've established mindfulness, we can develop mindfulness. This is less about what is arising and passing away, but more the minute changes, which is really a nuanced practice. I actually think working with pain can be really helpful—chronic pain or just the dharma pain, the pain of sitting. Seeing how it's changing constantly. It doesn't feel like it all the time, right? Ten years, remember? Ten years of practice.

There are a couple of things I was thinking about. The Buddha talked of this development of mindfulness: "It's better to live a single day seeing the rapid arising and passing away of all phenomena than to live a hundred years not seeing." That's pretty weighty, pointing to the liberating power of this awareness and how we need to rebel against our tendencies to numb out, to check out. To be on our iPhones or work eighty hours a week.

This liberating power of seeing clearly reorients our mind towards freedom from attachment and in turn freedom from suffering. Non-clinging.

I heard you had a talk recently on the four foundations of mindfulness. This is the beginning and the end of the four foundations of mindfulness, which I think talks specifically and emphatically about how necessary this is. This is the only way, folks—he says monks or bhikkhus, but—this is the only way, folks, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of pain and grief, for reaching the right path, for the attainment of Nibbana. Namely, these four foundations of mindfulness.

I believe what the Buddha is saying is that the only way is to start by seeing clearly – our relationship to our thoughts and our feelings, this body, this life, our attachment to it, our aversion towards it. We have to start there again and again. The only way out is through.

How many people have heard the acronym RAIN? I think this is a really helpful way to work with the content of experience and non-identifying with it. I'll briefly go through it.

RAIN begins with recognize – you need to recognize what's happening. That's essentially what I've been talking about for the last twenty minutes or so. Then accept it. Accept that it's there – not that it's taking over, but accepting that it is present. There is whatever: pain, sickness, loss, story, habitual response. You have to have some acceptance.

And then begin to investigate. So then we're turning actually away from the mind. This is part of the rebellious quality, rebelling against the mind's tendency to just do the rat race – thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking about thinking, thinking about thinking about thinking. How many people do that? Yes, the engineers in the room perhaps.

So investigate: How does it feel in this body? Where can I feel sorrow or grief or loneliness or agitation or anger or joy? Where can it be felt? And how does it change?

Then comes this non-identification, sometimes called dis-identification. One of the ways I've been talking about it more recently is non-personalizing. How can I be with experience without being overwhelmed by it or overcome or lost in it? This non-personalizing, dis-identifying – it's a very complicated thing to do. That's at the crux, actually, of the teaching of anatta, not-self.

If we can see how we're not our thoughts and we're not our feelings, then we can begin to see how it changes. But if we're identified with it, then we're identified with it as a self – as an "I am my anger," "I am this pain," "I am even this joy," or "I am this medita-

tion." Anytime we're clinging or identifying, we're creating a sense of self: "I am spiritual." So this process can develop – this is a process of developing a non-judgmental awareness to our experience – and it can be liberating and healing.

I'm going to read something called "Habits of Mind" by Mahagosananda. Mahagosananda was a Cambodian monk who was alive in the time of the Khmer Rouge. He was exiled to Thailand during the Khmer Rouge because they were killing monks and nuns and the educated – just this horrible genocide. So Mahagosananda was training in Thailand and came back after the Khmer Rouge lost power. He went on a mission, walking around to villages teaching the Buddha Dharma. And there was a lot of anger, a lot of frustration, a lot of vengeance – "Kill the Khmer Rouge! Look at what they've done to us."

Their own people.

And so there's one particular story—the way I understand it—where Mahagosananda actually went back to the village he grew up in and lived in. So many of the elders he knew had died, so many people he'd known his whole life were gone. And he gave a teaching there, and this was part of his teaching around forgiveness and around loving-kindness and compassion.

He said this: "The thought manifests as word. The word manifests as the deed. The deed develops into the habit. Habit hardens into character. Character gives birth to destiny. So watch your thoughts with care, and let them spring from love born out of respect for all beings."

I believe he's saying: rebel against the tendencies of greed, hatred, and delusion. Rebel against those tendencies.

There's another teaching I want to share. This is from the Buddha. There's a great little book called *The Teachings of the Buddha* by Jack Kornfield—it's my little cheat sheet. I take it with me pretty much everywhere I go. This passage is from the Dhammapada:

"We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with an impure mind, an unskillful mind, and trouble will follow you as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart. We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with a pure mind, a skillful mind, and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakable. How can a troubled mind understand the way? Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own thoughts unguarded. But once mastered, no one can help you as much—not even your father or your mother."

We are what we think. With our thoughts we make the world.

So this awareness of what's happening within us and around us in any given moment is the key to not being a slave to our thoughts. It's learning to rebel against those tendencies. The precepts are also extremely helpful—they help us from spilling over. And this is intention, the very thing Mahagosananda is speaking about. He's talking quite a bit about intention.

So this final quote comes from Ajahn Sumedho, Luang Por Sumedho, the lineage holder of my tradition—the Theravadan tradition, Thai forest tradition. He wrote a book called *Intuitive Awareness*, and he had this to say:

"Awareness is your refuge. Awareness of the changingness of feelings, of attitudes, of moods, of material change. Stay with that, because it is a refuge that is indestructible. It's not something that changes. It's a refuge that can be trusted in. This refuge is not something that you create. It's not a creation. It's not an ideal. It's very practical and very simple, but easily overlooked or not noticed. When you're mindful, you're beginning to notice: it's like this."

"It's like this" is one of the simplest and most difficult practices. And it points again and again to the ever-changing phenomena. When we can see this, when we can be open to this—which is exactly what this practice does—it helps us to see moments of change, moments of openness.

So we're not so locked in.

I call my group in Santa Cruz "Rebel Dharma" because I believe that the essence of the Buddha's teaching—and actually the essence of the Buddha's life—was rebellious, was revolutionary. It had to have been. It's carried on for so long. And so his teaching's challenge to us is to rebel against our own tendencies toward greed, hatred, and delusion, and to incline the mind towards openness, freedom from suffering, loving-kindness, care, compassion, and equanimity.

Let's end with a little compassion, a little loving-kindness. Mettā. One of my friends calls this the after-dinner mint of the Dharma—after the hard work.

So just sitting relaxed, allowing the eyes to close. Connecting with the breath in the body. This heart space, this emotional center.

Breathing in, silently saying the phrase: *May I be happy. May I be happy.*

From the head to the heart and the heart to the head: *May I be peaceful. May I be peaceful.*

May I be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. May I be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.

Oh, this mind you carry on your back—your actions are like a heavy sack. No wonder that your shoulders ache. Another strain's enough to break your neck. So drop this stupid load. This is the last stop on the road where you can find rest. Stay. Stay. Be love's guest.

May any goodness that's come from our practice—may this goodness be dedicated to the freedom from suffering for all beings everywhere. May we all be free.

CHAPTER 211

Intention, Motivation and Purpose

Andrea Fella · 37 min

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella examines the Buddhist understanding of cetanā (intention/volition) as the pivotal factor connecting mind and body. She explains how this mental impulse precedes every action of body, speech, and mind, and how our habitual patterns—often rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion—shape our motivations when we're not mindfully aware. The Buddha identified this moment of intention as a key place for transformation, where we can shift from reactive habits toward wholesome motivations of kindness, generosity, and wisdom.

Andrea offers practical exercises for exploring intention, including sitting without a timer until the urge to get up arises, then watching that impulse pass before acting. She emphasizes the power of pausing before speaking as a daily life practice, noting that this brief pause creates space to recognize our motivation and potentially choose a more skillful response. Throughout, she stresses the importance of self-compassion when we inevitably forget or fail to catch our reactive impulses.

The talk also addresses connecting momentary intentions with our deeper life purposes and aspirations. Andrea suggests that even mundane activities like grocery shopping can become expressions of our highest values when we consciously recognize the caring inherent in these acts. She shares a touching example of exchanging smiles with strangers during walks, illustrating how simple acts of connection, approached with presence and without expectation, can generate profound joy. The teaching concludes with guidance on working with disappointment when our attempts at connection aren't reciprocated, pointing toward equanimity and the recognition that we cannot control others' responses.

We are familiar with just how much the mind and body influence each other. We certainly see this when we start to meditate. But I think many of us, even before we meditated, were aware that when a strong emotion arose, like anger, it impacts the body. And when calm or happiness comes up, it also gives us a different sense in the body.

So there's a connection between the mind and the body. We're very familiar with the way our emotions impact our body. But also our body impacts our mind as well. When, for instance, we stub our toe—which I did just yesterday—that painful sensation can create stuff in the mind. It can create reactivity, frustration, or self-criticism. So this is a two-way street. The mind influences the body, the body influences the mind.

And not just emotions influence the body. Even thoughts, even the simplicity of a thought, can impact the body. Sometimes, just think about this as an example: maybe in your meditation, a thought came up about something you were doing last week. All that was, was an arising of a thought about something you remembered. But sometimes—and I'm sure you're familiar with this experience—when thoughts come up in the mind, they come along with the emotional terrain or content that was present when that experience happened. The memory arose just as a thought in the mind, and that memory brings with it a whole emotional and bodily interaction.

So this two-way street between body and mind—there's so much connection between the two. In the teachings of the Buddha, he particularly highlighted a quality of mind at which this point of connection between body and mind happens. It's a factor in the mind that he called intention or volition. Volition, intention, is just a little urge, a mental urge. It's a mental urge that impels us to act. Every single action that we do—of body, of speech, even of our minds—has this impulse that precedes it.

In the guided meditation, I suggested at the end that you see if you could just be still, remain still—not with the sense of holding yourself still, but just having that sense of relaxing into stillness—and then see if you might notice an urge to move. You might have felt an itch or just a little bit of discomfort in the body and a little bit of an urge to move. Did any of you notice that urge before you moved? A couple of you. So this urge that happens, it's possible to see it. And this kind of exercise can highlight it.

If you're interested in playing with this at home, you could explore in your sitting meditation one time, when you don't have a particular constraint on the end of the sitting, to sit until there's a strong impulse to get up. Don't set a timer for the sitting. Sit until the strong impulse to get up, to finish the sitting, comes up. But then don't get up. Sit through it. Watch the urge. Feel what it feels like to have that urge to move. And it will pass. It actually won't take very long—probably within a minute, less than a minute even. It might take just fifteen seconds.

So watch that urge pass. And then the second time it happens, do it again. Watch that urge arise and pass. The third time it happens, get up. This gives you a little bit of a flavor of this impulse. It might give you a taste of what I'm talking about—this impulse to move before we move.

So it's possible to see this impulse. It's possible to recognize it. It's possible to know we're going to move our body before we move it. It's possible to know we're going to speak before we speak. It's possible even to know we're going to think before we think.

That one is more subtle, not so easy to see, but it is possible to see. It's possible to see the mind kind of headed towards an emotion before that emotion arises.

So this place of intention—intention itself is just a little impulse, a sense of "about to." Maybe you have a sense of what that is: just about to get up, about to move, about to speak. That little urge in the mind, pointing us toward or having us recognize that something is about to happen—that can be seen, that can be known. And in and of itself, it's a neutral thing. It's just an urge, just an urge to act.

The Pali for this—I know that Shiloh likes to keep you current with the Pali terms—is *cetanā*. And it's just this impulse, this impulse that arises right before something is going to happen.

I would say the urge itself isn't the crucial part of what this exploration around intention is about. But with an intention to move, with an intention to speak, comes what we can call a motivation—a reason why we are going to say something or do something. This is a place the Buddha said is really interesting to pay attention to. Why we do something. What's our motivation? The Buddha actually pointed to this as a key place in our experience.

When we are not aware of our intentions, our habits of mind—the ways we've been conditioned, the familiar patterns that we all live with—when we're not present and aware for these moments of intention, which we're not present for a lot of them, then basically our habits are deciding, choosing our motivations for us. When we're not aware of this moment of intention, this moment of motivation associated with an intention, then essentially we're at the mercy of our habits. And often those habits are not so helpful.

Aversion has been one of my really strong habits of mind. I would walk into a room and notice everything I didn't like about the room. That would be my orientation because of that aversive habit in the mind. If I wasn't aware of it, if I wasn't aware of that aversive tendency, then walking into a room, the intentions around what I paid attention to were motivated by that aversion.

We have these habits of our mind, and the Buddha said if we're not aware of them, if we're not aware of what's motivating our actions, we're probably doing things, acting on intentions, acting on motivations, that are probably not so helpful.

The whole of what the Buddha pointed us to was a movement towards peace, towards freedom, towards ease. And the exploration around that was to see what's in the way. What is it that makes us struggle? What is it that makes us suffer? How is it that we

get caught? He pointed to three particular motivations in our mind—motivations of greed, motivations of aversion, motivations of delusion—as being the motivations that tend to lead us down the path of struggle.

When we act out of aversion, we tend to be strengthening that quality of aversion in our minds. When we act out of greed, we tend to be strengthening the quality of greed in our minds. When we act out of confusion, we tend to be strengthening the quality of confusion in our minds.

So this moment of choice, when we have this intention to act, this intention to speak—the motivation that accompanies that intention is what will either lead us down the path towards more struggle in our lives, or lead us down the path of more happiness in our lives.

The Buddha pointed to those motivations that take us more towards happiness, towards letting go of struggle, as being non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. To put it more positively: motivations of kindness, of generosity, and of wisdom.

We may have a sense sometimes that if we're not acting based on what we want and what we don't want, what would be the motivation for doing anything? There actually are some wholesome motivations, these beautiful motivations of love, of kindness, of compassion, of generosity, of wisdom. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says that when wisdom is present in the mind—which is non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—when wisdom is present in the mind, wisdom also wants to act. It wants to act to alleviate suffering. It wants to act to move towards ease and peace. And so there is this possibility of wholesome motivation, the possibility of action from skillful motivations.

The word "intention" in English carries the connotation of being aware of our intentions. We use the word intention when we say, "I intend to do something," in the sense of "I know that I'm going to do something." The Pali word *cetanā* is sometimes called a universal factor of mind. It arises in every single moment of experience.

Just that movement I made, that movement of my hands—there were hundreds if not thousands of intentions happening in my mind to make that movement happen. Every single moment there's a little tiny intention happening: just that movement of my hand or the movement of my head, there's an intention arising that I'm not aware of. Teaching in this form right now, I can sometimes see that level of intention when I'm on retreat.

So there are many intentions that we don't see. This factor of intention is not just about the times when we can see it. Every single action of body, speech, or mind is accompanied by an intention, and that intention has a motivation connected to it.

Just this movement of my hands—I can see that in my mind. I don't see the individual intentions, but I can see that the intention is to support what I'm saying, to offer a little bit of visuals, I suppose. So the intention is to help, to clarify. That's the intention in the mind as this movement happens.

The Buddha pointed to this: being aware of our intention to act, to speak, just in this moment. This is the only moment we can be aware of our intentions. We can't redo our intentions from the past. We can't act on intentions in the future. The only place we can act on intentions is right now.

In exploring intention in our practice—and I'll give you some ways to explore this in your daily lives in just a few minutes—we start to see that actually this moment, the choices made in this moment, are the only thing we have. That's it. That's all there is: this moment and the unfolding that happens as a result of choices right now. The Buddha really pointed to this very split second and the choices that we make, inclining our minds towards wholesome choices, skillful motivations with respect to our actions.

When we're not conscious, when we're in a kind of mindless state or lost in thought, then our habits are choosing for us. Sometimes these habits know what to do. When we're driving down the freeway and we're lost in thought, our habits know how to drive the car. Who's doing the driving anyway? The mind is completely on another planet, and yet the signal's going on, lanes are being changed, you're looking over to see if someone's coming up. The habits of mind know how to do that activity. So there are some intentions that are very neutral—they just know how to take care of us.

And then there are other intentions around speech, for instance, where we may bring in our habits of reactivity. When we're not aware—when we speak, and this is actually a really great place to practice in daily life, with our speech—when we're not aware of the intention to speak, when we're not aware of speaking while we're speaking, usually we are speaking out of habit, and often speaking from reactive habit. I think I can probably safely say that everyone in this room has at one time or another said something they wish they hadn't said. That habit of mind—aversion or frustration or impatience—burst out of the mouth.

If we could be present for that moment of knowing when we're going to speak before we speak. It actually takes just a moment. One great practice around this is to simply see if you can pause for a split second before you say something. If you can do

that, you have caught the intention to speak before you speak. You may not see the impulse itself, but there's something in us that knows it. That pause is a kind of manifestation of seeing the urge to speak.

If you can pause before you speak, in that moment you will probably already know what is going to come out of your mouth. So you have the opportunity to see that. You may also know why you're going to say what you're going to say—the motivation associated with what you're about to say. Frustration might be the motivation. Wanting to impress might be the motivation. Wanting to convey information. There are many different reasons why we speak.

But in that moment of pausing, we have the opportunity to catch that intention to speak and notice the motivation. And if you see a motivation of frustration or impatience, there's the opportunity to refrain—to recognize the language of harshness or divisiveness that may be about to burst out of your mouth.

And perhaps you might be able to say something with a gentler tone, with more compassionate language. So that moment of catching the intention, that moment of seeing that impulse, is very powerful—simply noticing it and seeing what the motivation is.

Now, doing this as a practice, there's probably going to be many times when you forget entirely. Part of our practice is being very compassionate with ourselves, really forgiving of the ways our mind just goes into mindlessness. We have to be compassionate with ourselves. And when we recognize that we've forgotten, we simply recommit to keep trying. That intention, that motivation to just keep trying, is where the whole practice unfolds from.

I think it's Bhikkhu Bodhi who says that really there are only two things we have to do in practice: we have to start, and we have to continue. And it will unfold from there.

We'll forget. We'll forget. But if in the forgetting—I mean, this happened to me when I very first started. I was first introduced to mindfulness practice reading Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Miracle of Mindfulness*. I was in my twenties, and I'd read the book at night and think, "Wow, this is really cool. I want to try this tomorrow." And I'd go to my job, and I'd forget. I would forget until I picked up the book on the nightstand the next night. After several days of that, I gave up. What I basically said to myself was, "Obviously this doesn't work for me." And I didn't meet mindfulness again for another fifteen years.

At that point, I didn't give up. At that point, I began watching what was happening in my mind, seeing, "Wow, I'm forgetting mindfulness a lot." And when I noticed that I had forgotten, I simply recommitted: "I'm going to keep trying." That brought an intention into the mind of *continue, continue*—that motivation to keep trying.

So when you notice that you've forgotten for a day to remember to pause before speaking, just recommit. Keep trying. That commitment, that motivation to keep trying, will bear fruit. It takes time. It may be that the way it bears fruit is by remembering three or four times during the day that you've forgotten, instead of only once every two days. And then maybe five or six times during the day, remembering you've forgotten to be aware while speaking, to be aware of that moment before speaking. At some point, if you keep recommitting every time you remember you've forgotten, it will start to happen. So you really have to be compassionate in that moment, bringing in the intention of compassion when you remember. It's like, "Yeah, I forgot, but just keep trying."

So likely you'll forget a lot. You may notice that moment of intention, you may notice that pause, and the momentum of that mind just wanting to blurt it out is so strong that even seeing the intention didn't matter. Again, compassion. Don't beat yourself up about it. Really, don't beat yourself up about it. But notice what happens. There may be in that moment a wholesome sense of, "Wow, I wish I hadn't said that"—not in a self-hatred kind of way, but a recognition that it wasn't a skillful thing to say, noticing the twist that came out in your language. Recognizing that, you may in that moment be able to stop and say, "I apologize right now. I'm sorry."

In the moment, you may be able to change course.

It takes a lot of compassion to watch our motivations. When we start to watch our minds for our motivations, it's very humbling. We get to see in spades just how powerful those habits of mind are. And so it takes a lot of honesty and commitment and openheartedness for our own foibles, for our own habits and patterns of mind. And again, that motivation to just keep trying will bear fruit. I'm proof of this. It's amazing how much transformation can happen through just continuing. Just continuing.

We can also start to explore larger motivations. The motivations I'm talking about right now are the momentary motivations. And yet, we all have a sense of our ideals or our aspirations. It can be helpful to reflect on those larger motivations, those larger intentions, the sense of purpose in our lives. So right now, what is your aspiration for your life? What is meaningful for you in your life?

Sometimes we have larger motivations in our lives, larger purposes that we're unaware of—having a good job, earning a lot of money, looking good to other people. Sometimes we're living our lives with purposes that we're not really conscious of. And sometimes we can reflect on what our deeper purpose is and begin to see if we might be able to connect our moment-to-moment motivations with that deeper purpose.

Our deeper purpose might be something like: I'd like to not cause harm in the world. I'd like to have an open heart. I'd like to be kind. I'd like to let go of the way my mind ties me into knots. I'd like to experience ease and peace. I'd like to have peacefulness be the frame for my life.

Spending some time reflecting on what a deeper motivation is, what an orienting purpose of your life might be—if you connect with that deeper purpose, then even the simple activities of your life can be connected. It can be interesting to explore: How can I tie a thread from that deeper purpose to the simple activities of my life?

If the intention is opening the heart, kindness, how might going to the grocery store connect to that intention? We go to the grocery store with the intention to buy our food, and that's a perfectly valid intention. We buy our food to support our families. So right there, there's that intention to support our own bodies, to support our friends and family. Right there is the connection with that intention of caring. Purchasing food is an act of caring. Can you be aware of that?

When we just go through the motions, our motivations for getting stuff off the shelves might be impatience and frustration. Whereas if we can connect to the recognition that this activity is actually a kind thing to do for myself—as opposed to something I have to do to get it over with so I can get home to make the food so I can do these other things I haven't done today—can we actually connect with how our simple activities support our deeper purpose? The simple activity of caring for ourselves, right there in buying food.

And then in the people we interact with in the store—the cashier. A friendly smile. I'm not talking about a deep, soulful gaze. Just a simple "How are you today?" Really simply. Kindness in interactions. Smiling at people.

The practice of smiling at strangers is one of my favorite things. At one point, I was doing my exercise in my neighborhood, walking in the streets. I'd do it roughly the same time of day, and I would start to get familiar with the various people. We would exchange smiles. And when I was really present, it was such a beautiful feeling to smile at someone and have a smile back. At one point I wondered: How long does that good feeling last? It was amazing.

I timed it. There was one person in particular, an older man. He would be looking down, and when he looked up and saw me, this amazing smile came over his face. Waves of joy washed through me, and it lasted forty seconds. A smile gave me forty seconds of waves of happiness. Be there for it. Connect to those deeper intentions and be present.

We can orient so much of our lives with these wholesome motivations just through conscious reflection, consciously inclining our minds in that direction.

During the question period, someone shared an experience from a restaurant in Half Moon Bay. She had been trying to make a connection with the waitress but wasn't able to. She tried a number of times and was met with what she called a vacuousness. She experienced disappointment in not being able to make that connection and asked how to work with that.

This kind of experience, I think, calls for equanimity practice—the practice of recognizing that we can't make other people do what we want them to do. You don't know what was going on for her. Compassion is another doorway sometimes. When you see somebody who seems distant, disconnected, there could be something going on. We don't know. You don't want to make something up, but just recognize that we don't know the causes and conditions unfolding for someone else. Often behavior that is disconnected has suffering underneath it, has pain underneath it—pain that may or may not even be conscious.

The reflection on equanimity is basically the reflection that we each have to make our own choices and that we cannot make choices for other people. No matter what we wish—if we wish for a connection, wish for some spark of friendliness or kindness—we can't make the choices for the other person. We can wish them well, but we cannot make them well.

And then also look at whether there's a sense of expectation. That's probably where the disappointment comes from—some kind of unarticulated or unaware expectation that if I behave in this way, I'll get a certain response. Maybe you've done this with other people in the past and there's been that spark of joy. It's like if you get the kind of hit I got with that man smiling, and then another day he doesn't look up. You're trying to get him to smile and he doesn't. You think, "I'm not going to get that hit. This isn't going to feel good." So watch for expecting a particular result from your own actions.

Our work in this world really is, in some ways, to put goodness into the world. And that goodness is amazing—it really does impact the world. And yet we have to put that goodness into the world without expectation of any particular result. It's hard. Some-

times we have to just watch the contraction, the disappointment, and recognize that there was some expectation there. We see it after the fact because we feel that contraction happening.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 212

Intention, Motivation and Purpose

Andrea Fella · 37 min

In this talk, Andrea Fella examines the Buddhist understanding of cetanā (intention or volition) as a universal factor of mind that precedes every action of body, speech, and thought. She explains how intention serves as the critical junction between mind and body, and how our motivations—whether rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion or in generosity, kindness, and wisdom—shape the trajectory of our lives toward either suffering or peace.

Fella offers accessible practices for exploring intention, including sitting without a timer to observe the urge to move, and pausing before speaking to catch the motivation behind our words. She emphasizes that when we're unaware of our intentions, habitual patterns choose our actions for us, often leading to reactive speech and behavior we later regret. Drawing on teachings from her teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, she notes that wisdom itself wants to act—to alleviate suffering and move toward ease.

The talk also addresses larger life purposes and how to connect moment-to-moment motivations with deeper aspirations like kindness and non-harming. Fella shares personal examples, including the transformative power of simply smiling at strangers, while also discussing how to work with disappointment when our wholesome intentions don't produce expected results. Throughout, she stresses the importance of self-compassion when we forget to be mindful, reminding practitioners that the practice unfolds through simply starting and continuing.

We are familiar with just how much the mind and body influence each other. We certainly see this when we start to meditate. But I think many of us, even before we meditated, were aware that when a strong emotion arose, like anger, it impacts the body. And when calm or happiness comes up, it also gives us a different sense in the body. So there's a connection between the mind and the body. We're very familiar with the way our emotions impact our body.

But our body also impacts our mind. When we stub our toe, for instance—which I did just yesterday—that painful sensation can create stuff in the mind. It can create reactivity, frustration, or self-criticism. So this is a two-way street: the mind influences the body, and the body influences the mind.

And it's not just emotions that influence the body. Even thoughts, even the simplicity of a thought, can impact the body. Think about this as an example: maybe in your meditation, a thought came up about something you were doing last week. All that was, was an arising of a thought about something you remembered. But sometimes—and I'm sure you're familiar with this experience—when thoughts come up in the mind, they come along with the emotional terrain or content that was present when that experience happened. So the memory arose just as a thought in the mind, and that memory brings with it a whole emotional and bodily interaction. There is so much connection between the two.

In the teachings of the Buddha, he particularly highlighted a quality of mind at which this point of connection between body and mind happens. It's a factor in the mind that he called intention or volition. Volition, intention, is just a little urge, a mental urge. It's a mental urge that impels us to act. Every single action that we do of body, of speech, even of our minds, has this impulse that precedes it.

In the guided meditation, I suggested at the end that you see if you could just be still, remain still—not with the sense of holding yourself still, but just having that sense of relaxing into stillness—and then to see if you might notice an urge to move. You might have felt an itch or just a little bit of discomfort in the body and a little bit of an urge to move. Did any of you notice that urge before you moved? A couple of you. So this urge that happens, it's possible to see it, and this kind of exercise can highlight it.

If you're interested in playing with this at home, you could explore in your sitting meditation sometime—when you don't have a particular constraint on the end of the sitting—to sit until there's a strong impulse to get up. Don't set a timer for the sitting. Sit until the strong impulse to get up, to finish the sitting, comes up. But then don't get up. Sit through it. Watch the urge. Feel what it feels like to have that urge to move. And it will pass. It actually won't take very long—probably within a minute, less than a minute even. It might take fifteen seconds. Watch that urge pass.

Then the second time it happens, do it again. Watch that urge arise and pass. The third time it happens, get up.

This gives you a little bit of a flavor of this impulse. It might give you a taste of what I'm talking about—this impulse to move before we move. It's possible to see this impulse. It's possible to recognize it. It's possible to know we're going to move our body before we move it. It's possible to know we're going to speak before we speak. It's possible even to know we're going to think before we think.

That one is more subtle, not so easy to see, but it is possible to see. It's possible to see the mind kind of headed towards an emotion before that emotion comes up.

So this place of intention—intention itself is just a little like impulse, a sense of "about to." Maybe you have a sense of what that is: just about to get up, about to move, about to speak. This little urge in the mind, pointing us to or having us recognize that something is about to happen, can be seen, can be known. And in and of itself, it's a neutral thing. It's just an urge—just an urge to act.

The Pali for this (I know that Shiloh likes to keep you up with the Pali on these terms) is *cetanā*. And it's just this impulse that arises right before something's going to happen.

I would say the urge itself isn't the crucial part of what this exploration is about around intention. But with an intention to move, with an intention to speak, comes what we can call a motivation—a reason why we are going to say something or do something. Now this is a place that the Buddha said is really interesting to pay attention to: why we do something, what our motivation is. The Buddha actually pointed to this as a key place in our experience.

When we are not aware of our intentions, our habits of mind—the ways that we've been conditioned, the familiar habits and patterns that we all live with—when we're not present and aware for these moments of intention (which we're not present for a lot of them), then basically our habits are deciding, choosing our motivations for us. And so when we're not aware of this moment of intention, this moment of motivation associated with an intention, then essentially we're kind of at the mercy of our habits. And often those habits are not so helpful.

Aversion has been one of my really strong habits of mind. I would walk into a room and notice everything I didn't like about the room—that would be my orientation because of that aversive habit in the mind. And so if I wasn't aware of it, if I wasn't aware of that aversive tendency, then walking into a room, the intentions around what I paid attention to were motivated by that aversion.

We have these habits of our mind, and the Buddha said, if we're not aware of the habits of our mind, and we're not aware of what's motivating our actions, we're probably doing things, acting on intentions, acting on motivations, that are probably not so helpful.

Let's say the whole of what the Buddha pointed us to was a movement towards peace, towards freedom, towards ease. And the exploration around that was to see what's in the way. What is it that makes us struggle? What is it that makes us suffer?

How is it that we get caught? He pointed to three particular motivations in our mind—motivations of greed, motivations of aversion, motivations of delusion—as being the motivations that tend to lead us down the path of struggle.

When we act out of aversion, we tend to be strengthening that quality of aversion in our minds. When we act out of greed, we tend to be strengthening the quality of greed in our minds. When we act out of confusion, we tend to be strengthening the quality of confusion in our minds. And so this moment of choice, when we have this intention to act, this intention to speak, the motivation that accompanies that intention is what will either lead us down the path towards more struggle in our lives, or lead us down the path of more happiness in our lives.

The Buddha pointed to those motivations that take us more towards happiness, towards letting go of struggle, as being non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. To put it more positively: motivations of kindness, of generosity, and of wisdom.

We may have a sense sometimes that if I'm not acting based on what I want and what I don't want, what would be the motivation for doing anything? There actually are some wholesome motivations, these beautiful motivations of love, of kindness, of compassion, of generosity, of wisdom. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says that when wisdom is present in the mind—which is non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—when wisdom is present in the mind, wisdom also wants to act. It wants to act to alleviate suffering. It wants to act to move towards ease and peace. And so there is this possibility of wholesome motivation, the possibility of action from skillful motivations.

The word "intention" in English, at least, carries the connotation of being aware of our intentions. We use the word intention when we say, "I intend to do something," in the sense of "I know that I'm going to do something." The word *cetanā,* the Pali word, is sometimes called a universal factor of mind. It arises in every single moment of experience.

Just that movement that I made, that movement of my hands—there were hundreds if not thousands of intentions happening in my mind to make that movement happen. Every single moment there's a little tiny intention happening, just to create that movement of my hand or the movement of my head. There's an intention arising that I'm not aware of. Teaching in this form right now, I can sometimes see that level of intention when I'm on retreat.

So there are many intentions that we don't see. This factor of intention is not just about the times when we can see it. Every single action of body, speech, or mind is accompanied by an intention, and that intention has a motivation connected to it.

Just this movement of my hands—I can see that in my mind. I don't see the individual intentions, but I can see that the intention is to support what I'm saying, to offer a little bit of visuals, I suppose. So the intention is to help, to clarify. That's the intention in the mind as this movement happens.

The Buddha pointed to this: in the moment, being aware of our intention to act, to speak. Just in this moment. This is the only moment we can be aware of our intentions. We cannot redo our intentions from the past—our intentions and motivations from the past. We cannot act on intentions in the future. The only place we can act on intentions is right now.

In exploring intention in our practice—and I'll give you some ways to explore this in your daily lives in just a few minutes—we start to see that actually this moment, the choices made in this moment, are the only thing we have. That's it. That's all there is: this moment and the unfolding that happens as a result of choices right now. And so the Buddha really pointed to this very split second and the choices that we make, inclining our minds towards wholesome choices, skillful motivations with respect to our actions.

When we're not conscious, not aware, when we're in a kind of mindless state or lost in thought, then our habits are choosing for us. And sometimes these habits know what to do. When we're driving down the freeway and we're lost in thought, our habits know how to drive the car. Who's doing the driving anyway? The mind is completely on another planet, and yet the signal's going on, lanes are being changed, you're looking over to see if someone's coming up. The habits of mind know how to do that activity.

So there are some intentions that are very neutral. They just know how to take care of us. And then there are other intentions around speech, for instance, where we may bring in our habits of reactivity. When we're not aware—for instance, when we speak—and this is actually a really great place to practice in daily life, with our speech—when we're not aware of the intention to speak, not aware of speaking while we're speaking, usually we are speaking out of habit and often speaking from reactive habit.

I think I can probably safely say that everyone in this room has at one time or another said something they wish they hadn't said. That habit of mind of aversion or frustration or impatience burst out of the mouth. So if we could be present for that moment of knowing when we're going to speak, before we speak.

It actually takes just a moment. One great practice around this is simply to see if you can pause for a split second before you say something. If you can do that, you have caught the intention to speak before you speak. If you can, in that moment, wait for just a moment, you may not see the impulse itself, but there's something in us that knows it. That pause is a kind of manifestation of seeing that urge to speak.

If you can pause before you speak, in that moment you will probably already know what is going to come out of your mouth. So you have that opportunity to see that. You may also know why you're going to say what you're going to say—the motivation that's associated with that thing you're about to say. Frustration might be the motivation. Wanting to impress might be the motivation. Wanting to convey information. There are many different reasons why we speak.

But in that moment of pausing, we have the opportunity to catch that intention to speak and notice the motivation. And if you see a motivation of frustration or impatience, there's the opportunity to refrain—to recognize the language of harshness or divisiveness that may be about to burst out of your mouth.

And maybe you might be able to say something with a gentler tone, with more compassionate language. So that moment of catching the intention, that moment of seeing that impulse, is very powerful. Just simply noticing it and seeing what the motivation is.

Now, doing this as a practice, there's probably going to be a lot of times when you forget entirely. Part of our practice is being very compassionate with ourselves, really forgiving toward ourselves for the ways our mind just goes into mindlessness. We have to be compassionate with ourselves. And when we recognize that we've forgotten, we simply recommit to keep trying. That intention, that motivation to just keep trying, is where the whole practice unfolds from.

I think it's Bhikkhu Bodhi who says that really there are only two things we have to do in practice: we have to start, and we have to continue. And it will unfold from there.

We'll forget. We'll forget. But this happened to me when I very first started, when I was first introduced to mindfulness practice. I was reading Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Miracle of Mindfulness*. I was in my twenties, and I'd read the book at night and think, "Wow, this is really cool. I want to try this tomorrow." And I'd go to my job, and I'd forget. I would forget until I picked up the book on the nightstand the next night. After several days of that, I gave up. What I basically said to myself was, "Obviously this doesn't work for me." And I didn't meet mindfulness again for another fifteen years.

At that point, I didn't give up. At that point, I began watching what was happening in my mind, seeing, "Wow, I'm forgetting mindfulness a lot." And when I noticed that I had forgotten, I simply recommitted. I'm going to keep trying. That brought an intention into the mind of *continue, continue*. That motivation to continue, to keep trying.

So when you notice that you've forgotten for a day to remember to pause before speaking, just recommit. Keep trying. That commitment, that motivation to keep trying, will bear fruit. It takes time. It may be that the way it bears fruit is by remembering three or four times during the day that you've forgotten, instead of only once every two days. And then maybe five or six times during the day, remembering you've forgotten to be aware while speaking, to be aware of that moment before speaking. At some point, if you keep recommitting every time you remember you've forgotten, it will start to happen. So you really have to be compassionate in that moment, bringing in the intention of compassion when you remember. It's like, "Yeah, I forgot, but just keep trying."

So likely you'll forget a lot. You may notice that moment of intention, you may notice that pause, and the momentum of the mind just wanting to blurt it out is so strong that even seeing the intention didn't matter. Again, compassion. Don't beat yourself up about it. Really, don't beat yourself up about it. But notice what happens. There may be in that moment a sense—a wholesome sense—of, "Wow, I wish I hadn't said that." Not in a self-hatred kind of way, but a sense of, "That wasn't a skillful thing to say." Recognizing the twist that came out in your language. Recognizing that, you may in that moment be able to stop and say, "I apologize. I'm sorry. I didn't—"

I didn't want it to come out that way." In the moment, you may be able to change course.

It does take a lot of compassion to watch our motivations. When we start to watch our minds for our motivations, it's very humbling. We get to see in spades just how powerful those habits of mind are. So it takes a lot of honesty and commitment and open-heartedness for our own foibles, for our own habits and patterns of mind. And again, that motivation to just keep trying will bear fruit. I'm proof of this. It's amazing how much transformation can happen through simply continuing—just continuing.

We can also start to explore larger kinds of motivations. The motivations I'm talking about right now are the momentary ones. And yet, we all have a sense of our ideals or aspirations. It can be helpful to reflect on those larger motivations, those larger intentions, the sense of purpose in our lives. Right now, what is your aspiration for your life? What is meaningful for you?

Sometimes we have larger motivations in our lives, larger purposes, that we're kind of unaware of—having a good job, earning a lot of money, looking good to other people. Sometimes we're living our lives with purposes that we're not really conscious of. And sometimes we can reflect on what our deeper purpose is and begin to see if we might be able to connect our moment-to-moment motivations with that deeper purpose.

Our deeper purpose might be something like: I'd like to not cause harm in the world. I'd like to have an open heart. I'd like to be kind. I'd like to let go of the way my mind ties me into knots. I'd like to experience ease and peace. I'd like peacefulness to be the frame for my life.

Spending some time reflecting on what a deeper motivation is, what an orienting purpose of your life might be—if you connect with that deeper purpose, then even the simple activities of your life, it can be interesting to explore: How can I tie a thread from that deeper purpose to the simple activities of my life?

If the intention is opening the heart, kindness, how might going to the grocery store connect to that intention? We go to the grocery store with the intention to buy our food, and that's a perfectly valid intention. We buy our food to support our families. Right there, there's that intention to support our own bodies, to support our friends and family. Right there, there's that connection with caring. Purchasing food is an act of caring. Can you be aware of that?

When we just go through the motions, our motivations for getting stuff off the shelves might be impatience and frustration. Whereas if we can connect to the recognition that this activity is actually a kind thing to do for myself—as opposed to something I have to do, to get it over with so I can get home to make the food so I can do these other things I haven't done today—can we actually connect with how our simple activities support our deeper purpose? The simple activity of caring for ourselves, right there in buying food.

And then there are the people we interact with in the store. The cashier. A friendly smile. I'm not talking about a deep, soulful gaze—just a simple "How are you today?" Really simply. Kindness in interactions. Smiling at people.

The practice of smiling at strangers is one of my favorite things. At one point, I was doing my exercise in my neighborhood, walking in the streets. I'd do it at roughly the same time of day, and I started to get familiar with the various people. We would exchange smiles. When I was really present, it was such a beautiful feeling to smile at someone and have a smile back. At one point I wondered: How long does that good feeling last? It was amazing.

I timed it. There was one person in particular, an older man who tended to look down as he walked. When he looked up and saw me, this amazing smile came over his face. Waves of joy washed through me. It lasted forty seconds. A smile gave me forty seconds of waves of happiness.

Be there for it. Connect to those deeper intentions and be present. We can orient so much of our lives with these wholesome motivations just through conscious reflection, consciously inclining our minds in that direction.

A question arose about being in a restaurant in Half Moon Bay and trying to make a connection with the waitress but not being able to. She tried a number of times and was met with what she called a vacuousness. She experienced disappointment in not being able to make that connection and wondered how to work with that.

That kind of experience, I think, calls for equanimity practice—the practice of recognizing that we can't make other people do what we want them to do, and that we may not be able to control the outcome of our intentions. You don't know what was going on for her. Compassion is another doorway sometimes for that. When you see somebody who seems distant, disconnected, there could be something going on. We don't know. You don't want to make something up, but just recognize that we don't know the causes and conditions that are unfolding for somebody else. And often behavior that is disconnected has suffering underneath it, has pain underneath it—which may or may not even be conscious pain.

The reflection on equanimity is basically the reflection that we each have to make our own choices and that we cannot make choices for other people. No matter what we wish—if we wish for a connection, wish for some kind of spark of friendliness or kindness—we can't make the choices for the other person. We can wish them well, but we cannot make them well.

So that's one part of it: reflection on the suffering that might be occurring, reflection on equanimity. And then also look at whether there's a sense of expectation. When we have expectations—that's probably where the disappointment comes from. There was some kind of expectation, even an unarticulated or unaware expectation, that if I behave in this way, I'll receive something in return. Maybe you've done this with other people in the past and there has been that spark of joy. It's like if you get that kind of hit that I got with that man smiling—if another day he doesn't look up, it's like, I can't make that connection. I'm looking at him, trying to get him to smile, and he doesn't. And there's that feeling: I'm not going to get that hit. This is not going to feel good.

So watch for expecting some kind of particular result from your own actions. Our work in this world really is, in some ways, to put goodness into the world. And that goodness is amazing. It really does impact the world. And yet we have to put that goodness into the world without expectation of any particular result. It's hard. And so sometimes we have to just watch the contraction, the disappointment—and recognize, okay, there was some expectation there. We see it after the fact because we feel that contraction happening.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 213

Mindfulness in Close Relationships

Andrea Fella · 43 min

In this profound talk, Andrea Fella addresses what she calls 'the last frontier of Dharma practice' — bringing mindfulness into our closest relationships. She explores how our relational bonds serve as the most fertile ground for spiritual development, revealing mental patterns and kilesas (defilements) that remain dormant in solitude. Drawing on her teacher Shinzen's teaching that spiritual practice involves 'not fighting with yourself' and 'taking feedback,' Fella examines how relationships offer continuous opportunities for self-understanding.

The talk weaves together the three traditional baskets of practice — sīla (ethical conduct), samādhi (concentration), and paññā (wisdom) — showing their relevance in relational contexts. Fella emphasizes wise speech as a cornerstone practice, citing Joseph Goldstein's commitment to this often-overlooked aspect of the path. She offers practical guidance on listening as a form of meditation for others, staying attuned to bodily feedback during communication, and the courage to stop mid-sentence when we notice unskillful speech arising.

Perhaps most powerfully, Fella explores the distinction between love and attachment (upādāna), suggesting that much suffering in relationships stems from our attempts to create false security against the inherent vulnerability of deep connection. She invites practitioners to consider becoming 'unoffendable' — not through suppression but through working with self-clinging (attavādupādāna). The talk concludes with Ajahn Sumedho's teaching on 'not creating' others, pointing toward how insight into not-self paradoxically deepens our capacity to love while making hatred increasingly difficult.

This talk was recorded by Insight Meditation South Bay in Mountain View, California. For more talks and information, visit www.imsb.org.

It's sweet that sometimes when you teach at a place for the first time, there's a little thawing out process that happens, but I'm not feeling that so much. I actually feel like I've been here a little bit. So thank you.

The series title is "Where the Rubber Meets the Road," and I've seen the topics for a number of the talks. But tonight—mindfulness and dharma in relationships—this is really where the rubber meets the road. This is the last frontier of dharma practice.

It's not always clear what the meaning of our meditative experiences are. Different meditative traditions make sense of concentration, of samadhi, or insight in different ways, and sometimes it's hard to know how much to make of those kinds of experiences. But a real place for us to check our practice is in relationship—how our practice shows up in the relational field.

This is so fundamental because we could say that the basic flavor of the dharma is something like non-harming. And harm is, by definition, relational. So this is not some casual aspect of our practice. Our whole practice operates in the relational field. This is a worthy subject for us to reflect on, and a source of incredible delight—and I'll speak personally—humility too.

One of my main teachers, Shinzen, once characterized two maxims for our spiritual practice. He said the first was: don't fight with yourself at any level. And the second was: take feedback. He just left it there. I appreciate how central he made that relational component in our spiritual life. We can learn a lot about our minds based on how we show up in relationships.

When I first started practicing, somehow I heard—I think it was a monastic—say that their aspiration for their practice was to be safe for others. That was a kind of organizing principle. Even though I was quite early in practice, there was something that really cut to the bone for me: to become safe for others. And so naturally we turn to the relational field in seeing how we are safe for others and how we're not.

All of our practice is relevant here. The three baskets of sīla, samādhi, and paññā—conduct, concentration, and wisdom—all have a place in making relationship a part of practice.

Perhaps we can begin by acknowledging that we are deeply relational beings. We're born way too early to live on our own. Sometimes I've had the thought that our gestation period should be like twenty-five years. Sorry, moms—that's not realistic. But the truth is, this is our condition.

I heard this story of the pediatrician and psychoanalytic thinker Winnicott, who started a big conference by saying—he's known as a developmental theorist—"There's no such thing as a baby." And then went on to say, "There's no such thing as a baby without their mother." That's how fundamental the relational world is for us.

Much later theorizing and empirical data have confirmed just how deep the roots of connection and attachment are in us. The psychologist Baumeister writes: "It seems fair to conclude that human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need

to belong and seem to need frequent, affectively pleasant or positive interactions with the same individuals. And they need these interactions to occur in a framework of long-term, stable caring and concern."

It makes sense, then, that this would be a very fertile garden for our practice, given how deeply we depend on the relational field. Even in monastic communities, where there's a model of leaving one's family, of going forth, there are no communities more deeply relational than a monastic community.

The opportunity here is that our deepest grooves—the most established patterns in our minds—are evident in relationships. Sometimes these grooves are only stimulated in relationship. There are many positive, helpful grooves, but also the grooves of greed, hatred, and delusion. Those get stimulated in relationship.

When I'm single, I feel generally pretty sane. Maybe other people have this experience. Left to my own devices, without having my habits disrupted much, I think, "Oh yeah, I've really got it together." And then being in relationship reveals, "Whoa, I've got issues." The forces, the *kilesas*, the defilements arise in ways that they simply don't in other situations.

Steven Levine said the reason your family pushes your buttons is because they installed them. Maybe that's not a completely fair characterization, but these grooves are deep, and they're to be honored in a way. We could say that the forces of suffering latent in other situations can arise in the context of close relationship. I'm not speaking only about romantic relationship, but about any deep affective bonds.

The classical language speaks of latent defilements—different strands of suffering that get stimulated. And this is really, in a lot of ways, not bad news but actually our opportunity to practice, to see ourselves more clearly, to become more free, to cook our life, as one Zen teacher says. To see those pieces of our mind that are undigested, where we just default into suffering of one kind or another. It's beautiful work, and it is humbling.

Sometimes in the relational field, I feel powerless against the force of habit. Not frequently, but there are times when I feel completely propelled by habit, even though there's some clarity of mind and I know this is happening. The inertia is too strong. In those moments of feeling propelled by forces bigger than our mindfulness, these can be powerful moments of deepening our commitment to practice—to practice in a way that we don't get backed into that kind of karmic corner where the forces of craving and aversion are stronger than the mindfulness.

So, some practices—and then looking at purifying the nature of our relationships.

It seems mundane, but I'm very inspired by the fact that Joseph Goldstein, the insight teacher, has said that he makes wise speech a cornerstone of his practice. It's definitely not the sexiest aspect of the Dharma. There are flashier ways of practicing, and maybe wise speech seems mundane. But it's helpful for me to hear that he makes it a cornerstone of his practice.

The people I spend time with, myself included, are pretty careful with speech. But there's one friend, a teaching colleague, who is unwaveringly careful with his speech. Over the years of knowing him, in intense situations, at times when it would have been very natural to devolve into harsh or divisive speech, I've just never heard him do it. The feeling this engenders in me—I didn't even realize it could be like this—but there's this deep trust in him. It's not that I was worried about him talking behind my back or anything, but seeing how unwavering he's been inspires a kind of trust. It's that safety of offering oneself as safe, offering safety to another.

Some of our practice is about getting really sensitive to the karmic feedback loop in wrong speech, in unskillful speech. Sometimes it's very obvious, sometimes more subtle, but the body will be impacted when we deviate from our own deepest intentions. It's like this in the whole of our ethical life, but specifically in our speech. We're learning to be really alive to that feedback loop.

I asked a teacher early in my practice, "How do you possibly be mindful while speaking?" And he just gave one of those Buddhist answers we don't like that much: "Keep practicing."

But I think over time, especially as we are less stimulated by the fluctuations of egoic clinging, we actually can listen more deeply to our bodies. Sylvia Boorstein says that sometimes she'll stop mid-sentence when she starts to deviate into unwise speech. It's actually a good practice. I've done this sometimes—I'll just stop. There's a little shame that comes up, because you're trying to make your point, maybe there's some anger in it. But to actually just stop, dead stop, when we become aware: "Oh, you know what? There is delusion in the view right now."

I can feel it. I don't even have to finish this sentence.

Speaking is one dimension, but then there's also listening. We all perhaps know that experience where somebody comes to us with a problem to be solved, and they become very involved in the actual content of the problem. This happened, and now this, and then we could do this, or I could do this, or I can't believe that—and we get seduced into the mode of problem solving. But sometimes, if we just stay really steady and listen in a very open way, that's actually all that's needed.

Sometimes I have to trust this, to have some confidence. The problem being described—I am not going to solve that. But sometimes that's not even actually the problem. Our capacity to listen with a mind that's very open, where we're essentially meditating for the other person—it becomes a kind of co-meditation where we're actually helping to regulate them, to support them. A very beautiful gesture to offer to people.

As we do this, as we listen, it's like listening with the body—just very sensitive to the impact of the words on our bodies. Sometimes what responds is our emotional body, the body that moves easily with all of our environment and internal landscape. We can learn so much about what's happening between two people by listening deeply. It even feels to me like the heart of intuition is that listening. We're listening to the other, and we're listening to our bodies. There are possibilities, I think, of deeper layers of wisdom that arise from that kind of listening.

Now, usually when we think about love, we think of love somewhat tangled up with attachment—not in the psychological sense, but in the traditional Buddhist sense. These things actually get tangled up, and some of what we're doing in bringing our dharma practice to close relationship is beginning to untangle the love from the clinging.

It's tricky, right? There's a lot at stake in our relationships. We depend so deeply on others, and yet the very nature of our existence, of relationship, is that we're vulnerable. There's nothing like absolute security.

This is from a book by Stephen Mitchell, the psychologist, titled *Can Love Last? The Fate of Romance Over Time*:

"We learn to love in the context of the contrived and necessary safety of early childhood, and love seeks perpetually a kind of safety that screens out the unknown. The need to feel one knows both oneself and the other person, the need for a wholly secure attachment, is powerful for children and for adults. But in human relationships, safety and predictability are difficult to come by. We endlessly strive to reestablish that illusory sense of permanence and predictability. When patients complain of lifeless relationships, it's often possible to show them how precious the deadness is to them, how it is carefully maintained and insisted upon. Love by its very nature is not secure. We keep wanting to make it so."

I don't want to give the impression that we're supposed to continually open to impermanence, open to impermanence, open to impermanence. That's not always the right medicine. But I do think some of the suffering that arises in relationship arises as a kind of defense against the increasing risk and vulnerability of depending on another. One of

the theses of this book is that boredom, in a certain way, is orchestrated to create the veneer of predictability. Some of our problems arise out of this—he doesn't use this language at all, but for me it's clinging.

In my own relationships, this arises in the form of wanting to control the views, preferences, and desires of the other. Not in overt ways, but in subtle ways of trying to enforce a certain set of views and preferences—molding the other into some image, feeling perhaps challenged by the otherness of the other.

And maybe most deeply, what I find most disorienting, is not being able to control the suffering of loved ones. We can do something, sometimes a lot, to serve compassion, to ease suffering. But ultimately that suffering—we can't govern it. For me, a lot of suffering and a lot of clinging arises in the face of the suffering of the other.

There's something desperate that gets triggered in me in seeing that—something that is definitely not compassion.

So we're learning how this clinging makes its way in, how it gets tangled up with love. Joseph Goldstein asks us to reflect: In this tangle of love, which is like giving, and clinging, which is like holding, does the clinging in any way enhance the love?

If the Dharma had—I don't like to be reductionistic about the Dharma; it has so many different aspects, and if you just march to one drumbeat, practice gets unbalanced. But if we had to take any mantra to summarize the Dharma, it would probably be *let go*.

And so letting go in this context means, in my experience, opening to the radical otherness of the partner, the parent, the child, the friend. In that there's a gesture of not knowing them, of opening to not knowing. Part of how we make things feel more secure is to know them inside out. But there's some value in that sense—maybe you know that sense of looking at somebody, maybe somebody you've known for decades, and you can still look at them and say, "I know you, and I don't know you." Or "I don't know you completely." And in that not knowing, there's a kind of openness that arises. We can meet people in a different way, appreciate their otherness, even as we feel deeply connected.

Now, you may be familiar with how the Buddha described clinging: we cling to sense pleasures, we cling to conventions, cling to views, and we cling to self-view. And at the heart of any Dharma subject, it usually brings us back to the themes of self-clinging. Nowhere is this more apparent than in relationship, where we can get a sense of how our own rigid self-definitions—all the yeses, "I am this," and all the nos, "I am not

that"—impair our capacity to love and be open. Because we are all of a sudden protecting something. We are standing guard at the gates of self. And so our attention is directed towards bracing rather than opening.

Sometimes I think about Dharma practice as becoming unoffendable. That doesn't mean at all condoning harm, or delighting in insults or something. But maybe you have a sense of what it would mean to become unoffendable—to work through all of the pressure points within the self-clinging, to digest those, to let go, so that there's no longer an emotional charge with any claim about the self. And maybe you can even get a sense of how open that way of being would be. How open to another we could be, the kind of safety we could offer another. Because in that way we wouldn't be—you know, we're always exerting a certain level of egoic pressure on others. And it feels to me like weather systems of high pressure and low pressure—egoic pressure. You can feel that pushing against your being. And when we don't feel that, we're actually invited to be in a different way.

This is Chuang Tzu: "If a man is crossing a river and an empty boat collides with his skiff, even though he be a bad-tempered man, he will not become very angry. But if he sees a man in the boat, he will shout at him to steer clear. If the shout's not heard, he'll shout again and yet again and begin cursing. And all because there is somebody in the boat. Yet if the boat were empty, he would not be shouting and not be angry. If you can empty your boat crossing the river of the world, no one will oppose you or seek to harm you."

So one last thing. The other side of the coin of the teachings on not-self are the teachings, we could say, of not-other.

Somebody asked Ajahn Sumedho—I think it was a young monastic, asking a senior abbot while preparing to go home for a holiday break. They were clearly a little freaked out about going home for the holidays as a monastic and reintegrating with their family. And so the person asked Sumedho, "How can I do this? How can I be kind to them?"

And he said, "Don't create them. Don't create them. You can be kind by not creating them."

Meaning that you don't fixate their being.

You don't pin all of their actions, beliefs, preferences, views on them. You don't hang all of that on the coat hook of their self. Because that coat hook doesn't exist.

I do find that it's possible to love people—it's still possible to love people, even in knowing this. And it's complicated. It's definitely not resolved in my own heart. There is something that wants to love their self, that wants to feel in relationship, one self to another self. But it's possible to still love even with the insight of not-self, not-other. And then our relationships really feel like Dharma. It's possible to still love, but it's increasingly difficult to hate.

Let's just sit for a moment.

Whatever feels useful, please pick up. And leave all the rest behind.

Whatever goodness arises from our efforts together tonight, may this be of benefit. May that goodness be a cause of less suffering, more joy in our lives, in the lives of all we encounter.

Thank you. Nice to be with you.

CHAPTER 214

Thus Have I Heard

Andrea Fella · 44 min

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella unpacks a teaching many practitioners have heard but perhaps not fully understood: the Buddha's declaration to Ānanda that good spiritual friends (kalyāṇamittas) constitute the entire holy life, not merely half of it. Drawing from the Meghiya Sutta and related discourses, Fella explains how having virtuous companions naturally leads to the other factors that ripen the mind for liberation—ethical conduct (sīla), hearing the Dhamma, arousing energy for practice, and developing wisdom.

Fella presents seven qualities of being a good spiritual friend: not despising your friend, not forsaking them in difficulties, patiently enduring what is hard to endure, preserving their secrets, giving what is difficult to give, doing what is difficult to do, and revealing helpful knowledge. She then explores four means of sustaining relationships found in the Pāli Canon: generosity (dāna), endearing speech, beneficial actions, and treating others as oneself (samānattatā)—seeing our common humanity.

This teaching offers practical wisdom for both formal practitioners and anyone seeking to cultivate meaningful connections. Fella emphasizes that without community (saṅgha), there would be no Buddhism—it is the community that preserves and transmits the teachings across generations. The talk invites reflection on how our relationships can serve as vehicles for mutual awakening and the relief of suffering.

This talk was given at Insight Meditation South Bay.

This is part of a series on some of the lesser known teachings, but I thought I would start with a teaching that I've heard quite a few times—maybe some of you have heard it quite a few times too—that I didn't really understand or didn't really pay much attention to. I'd like to tie it together and flesh it out, including some things that are lesser known teachings.

Perhaps you've heard this part where Ananda, who is the Buddha's attendant, goes to the Buddha and says, "Venerable sir, I've heard that half of the holy life is good spiritual friends." And the Buddha corrects him and says, "Ananda, don't say that. The whole of the holy life is good spiritual friends."

I've heard this teaching quite a few times, and I always liked it. It made me feel good—this importance of relationships. But I'm not sure that I understood it. Why would I go on retreat? Why would I meditate? Why would I listen to dharma talks if the whole of

the holy life is good spiritual friends? I felt like there's got to be more to this teaching. Or maybe it's not a real teaching. Maybe it's not really in there, just something that dharma teachers were saying.

So it's in there. When I say "in there," I mean the suttas, the Pali Canon—it's in there. This conversation is recorded. But there's more to it. There's more to that particular conversation, and there are other conversations about the role of spiritual friends and how they can support our practice.

One story is with Meghiya, who was the Buddha's attendant before Ananda. Ananda wasn't the Buddha's attendant for the Buddha's entire teaching career. Before that was Meghiya.

Meghiya, on his way to alms round one morning, saw that there was this mango grove that looked like the perfect place to meditate. So he goes on his alms round, comes back, and says to the Buddha, "I saw this mango grove. I think it would be really great. I would like to go there and meditate for the whole day." And the Buddha says, "No, don't go because there's nobody else here." Apparently the Buddha didn't want to be left alone; he needed to have an attendant with him.

Meghiya responds and says, "Venerable sir, you've done the work that needs to be done. I have not. I still have work that needs to be done. I would like to go spend the day meditating in the mango grove." For the second time, the Buddha says, "No, don't go because there's only the two of us here."

For a third time, Meghiya asks the Buddha. At this time in ancient India, it was the tradition that if somebody asked a question three times, the other had to acquiesce on the third time. We see this in the suttas repeatedly, where people ask the Buddha three times, and he says no, no, and then yes. So when Meghiya asks this third time, the Buddha says yes.

Meghiya goes to the mango grove to meditate. While he's there, he's assaulted by all these unwholesome thoughts. He can't get settled down, and he spends the whole day with thoughts of sensual desire and lust and greed, and thoughts of harming other people. He says, "It's amazing, it's astounding. Even after all these years of practice, I still have these types of thoughts that arise in my mind when I'm going to meditate."

At the end of the day, he goes to the Buddha and says, "I can't believe what happened. I had all these terrible thoughts of lust and harming other people." And I imagine that the Buddha is kind of thinking, "Well, I told you." Instead, what he says is, "Meghiya, when the mind is not ripe for liberation, there are things to do to help make

the mind ripe for liberation. There are five things to help make the mind ripe for liberation, ready for awakening, ready for deliverance, ready for liberation from thoughts of lust and harming other people."

In this list of five things to help make the mind ready, number one is good spiritual friends—to help make the mind ready. The second is to be virtuous, to behave in a particular way that supports practice.

Virtuous is kind of a strange word—it may feel a little heavy. I'll talk about it a bit more in a moment.

Three is to hear the teachings, to hear the Dharma. Either to learn about the practice, or to be inspired, or simply to have an opportunity to understand what direction to go and where not to go if you're serious about this practice.

The fourth is: after you've heard about the practice and perhaps been inspired, the fourth quality to help make the mind ready for liberation is to arouse energy for practice. It's one thing to hear about practice. It's another thing to actually do something about it. So the fourth one is to arouse energy.

And the fifth is to have a certain amount of wisdom. You don't have to know everything, you don't have to be completely knowledgeable, and you don't have to already be awakened—but there needs to be a certain amount of wisdom.

So these five things: have good spiritual friends, be virtuous, hear the Dharma, arouse energy for practice, and be wise.

Perhaps it's not surprising that elsewhere in the suttas we read that if you have good spiritual friends—and this phrase "good spiritual friend" is a translation of the Pali expression kalyāṇamitta—then everything else follows. Maybe you've heard that sometimes meditation groups will have kalyāṇamitta groups, where peers get together and talk about the Dharma and share their practice and what's happening with them.

Elsewhere in the discourses we find that if a person has kalyāṇamittas, good spiritual friends, it turns out that they will be virtuous—the second thing on this list. They will hear the Dharma, they will arouse energy, and they will be wise. So having good spiritual friends helps you do all these other things on the path.

Let me spend a little time fleshing some of these out.

This idea of being virtuous—it's not only about how we behave. It's also the attitudes we have. Are we compassionate? Are we caring? For both ourselves and for others. Are we doing the things that need to be done and not doing the things that shouldn't be done?

Implied in this is also the idea of right conduct, appropriate behavior for the context. I can imagine that if you're going to give a presentation to the Supreme Court of the United States, you behave in a particular manner, which is probably different than if you're picking your kids up from daycare. There's this sense that virtue includes having the right conduct for the right setting, behaving in a particular way. It helps support your practice and helps support other people's practice too.

A big part of virtue—ethics, morality, maybe those are better words—is about supporting other people. We don't harm them, we don't steal from them, we don't lie to them. Having good spiritual friends can help us with that.

I know I've had this experience. Early in my practice, I wanted to share a story with some of my Dharma friends. I started to tell this story and I realized, oh, this is actually about somebody else. It's not my story to tell. It was going to be: did you hear what happened to so-and-so? And I thought, that's actually not really supportive. But one of my friends said, "Diane, are you sure you want to go down this path with what you're about to say?" I was so appreciative, because it was just helpful. Yeah, I don't have to be gossiping. I don't have to be telling stories about other people. That's not particularly helpful. It may have entertainment value, but it's not a kind thing to do. That's part of having friends in the Dharma who support you to be the best version of yourself, and who remind you of what you often already know—but sometimes we forget, or we get lost in the moment, disconnected from ourselves. In this way, having good spiritual friends can help us come to the best behavior.

The second area: good spiritual friends can help us hear the Dharma. In very simple ways—"Okay, I'll see you at IMC next Tuesday." Just that type of thing. Certainly this has been helpful for me, having friends that I knew I was going to see here, or saying to somebody, "I'll see you then." It helps support showing up even when you don't feel like going to the meditation center.

And maybe you've had this too, where somebody says, "I read this great book. Have you read this? Here's an interesting podcast. Have you heard of this person? It's really great. There's this article..." Things that get forwarded or shared—an opportunity to hear the Dharma.

And then in the Pali Canon, when they talk about good spiritual friends supporting other people to hear the Dharma, they speak of Dharma that includes talk on solitude. This recognition that even though you have friends and you practice with friends and they encourage you to practice together, it still includes an appreciation of solitude.

Sometimes if we want to meditate, we can meditate with others. Sometimes we meditate by ourselves. But we recognize that it's not all about being with other people. Sometimes we have to really be with ourselves and be with what's happening within ourselves, checking in about what's arising.

And some of this Dharma talk, when you're hearing the Dharma, is also about liberation—hearing things that are inspiring or meaningful or that make us want to engage, whatever that may be for each of us. Perhaps at different times in our lives and different times in our practice, it's different things. But it's not only how to practice, what to do, but things that are inspiring and that encourage us.

The other quality is that good spiritual friends help arouse energy for practice. Specifically, this means the energy to abandon what is unwholesome and to cultivate what is wholesome. That's such a big part of the practice—learning what is wholesome and what isn't wholesome.

Most of us have a general idea, but the more we practice, the more we discover. Just like for me, being about to tell a story about somebody else, realizing there was a time in my life where that seemed perfectly harmless and a normal thing to do. But as I started to practice and become more sensitive to other people's needs and how they were in the world, what made me feel like I had some real integrity was to not start talking about other people. So part of the Dharma is to learn that for ourselves through practice, as well as to have some pointers, some people to point out: here's a direction to go, here's a direction not to go.

And then the last quality is to be wise. What's pointed out specifically is this idea of certain wisdom about seeing the arising and passing of phenomena—pointing towards impermanence.

There are so many different levels of this. We know impermanence, right? We know that the weather today is not exactly the same as it was yesterday and it will be a little bit different tomorrow. But this really deep insight into impermanence is also one of the key insights in this tradition that leads to liberation. A very thorough understanding or knowing of impermanence is one of the gateways into awakening.

It's also a way to just have a better life, if we can appreciate that things change, that they're not always the same. Then we're less likely to hold on to those things that are going to be slipping away, or to imagine things into the future that perhaps won't be that way because things change.

So this insight into impermanence is really key both in the big Buddhist endeavor of awakening as well as just having a better life. We're going to age, we're going to get sick. Things change. People we love are going to age and get sick and die.

With all of this idea of perhaps it is a good idea to have good spiritual friends, what does it mean? What is a good spiritual friend? In addition to these qualities—helping you hear the Dharma, arousing energy, being virtuous, and having a certain amount of wisdom—would you be surprised if I said there's yet another Buddhist list about how to be a good spiritual friend?

It's amazing, all of these lists. I actually love these lists. I'm one of those people for whom they help me remember. Like, oh yeah, there's seven, and I can only remember four—what are the other three? So I actually like having all these lists.

There are seven qualities of a good spiritual friend. Most of these lists, for those of you who are familiar with them, are given in a particular order. Usually when we know the five faculties or the seven factors of awakening, for example, there's a usual order: number one is usually this, number two is usually that. But for these seven qualities of a good spiritual friend, I'm going to mix up the list in a way that feels right, in a way that I think is a nicer way to talk about it.

Number one, in Diana's version: How to be a good spiritual friend? Don't despise your friend.

It seems obvious. I'm a little bit curious why it's in there. But then I started to think about how sometimes maybe you get angry at people.

Or get fed up. Or maybe you're friends from historical reasons—you've been friends for a long time, but you've started to really dislike the person. I don't know. But this is, for me, number one: don't despise your friends.

The rest form a little cluster that I'm interpreting as standing by your friend. Stand by them. So number two is to not forsake them when they're having difficulties, to still stand by them. I think all of us would recognize that's a good quality of a friend. And maybe related to that is to patiently endure what is difficult to endure. There are no details about this, but maybe your friend is going through a really difficult thing, and that

is all your friend can talk about—a big event that's happening in his or her life, or a big decision he or she has to make, and that's maybe all that they talk about. But to be a good friend is to patiently endure what needs to be endured.

And the third one is to preserve their secrets. If they share things with you, don't share them with others. I think this is interesting—that this is on a Buddhist list, to preserve people's secrets. It encourages some confidentiality, encourages some intimacy. You can share things with others when you know that they're not going to be sharing them with other people.

Then the next little cluster of qualities for how to be a good spiritual friend is to support your friend. So don't despise them, stand by them in these three different ways, and this third grouping is to support them. What's listed here is to give what is difficult to give and to do what is difficult to do. I think that's right—that's what kind of distinguishes a friend from maybe just an acquaintance. I don't know exactly what "give" might mean, but you can imagine maybe to give some feedback, but in a kind, gentle way that's appropriate. Or to do what is difficult to do—maybe to help support your friend, help them move on a Saturday when you really don't want to. I don't know exactly, but I think all of us understand this is a friend that stands by.

And then here's number seven: a good friend reveals secrets. I'm understanding this two ways. One, maybe about themselves—if you're a good friend, you are sharing what your life is like, part of your inner life. But it could also be practical things, like the best way to get to IMC at 7:30 when there's traffic is don't take 101, go down this other route—some little secret, something that you've learned, some little trick, to freely share those.

So these are the seven ways to be a good friend: don't despise others, don't forsake them, patiently endure what is difficult to endure, and preserve their secrets. Give what is difficult to give, do what is difficult to do, and reveal secrets. I think all of these are something we would recognize. There's nothing here that is surprising or perhaps new.

So we've talked about how having good spiritual friends is really helpful. We've talked about how to be a good spiritual friend. And then also in the Buddhist literature, this earliest literature, the Pali Canon, there's teaching on how to sustain relationships once you have them.

When Shaila invited me to talk and to say something about teachings that aren't spoken of so often, this is one that I had in mind. We don't hear about this so much—how to sustain relationships. Obviously you continue being a good friend, but when the Buddha was teaching, he was teaching from his perspective of ending suffering. If

you're a good friend, you help people end their suffering. In his view, it's all about that. All the teachings, everything—the purpose for him was to help other people end their suffering. His idea was that if you're going to be a good friend, you're going to help them end their suffering. So these teachings are pointed in that direction.

The first thing to do to sustain relationships is to be generous.

In the suttas, it is said that among all gifts, the best gift is the gift of the Dharma, the gift of the teachings. This is very consistent with the idea of relieving suffering—if you want to relieve suffering, you give the Dharma. But we can expand this understanding of generosity. It includes giving people the benefit of the doubt. It includes letting them speak fully if something important is happening, generously letting them speak instead of holding to the idea that we must speak. It includes supporting them in other ways, whether with material goods or with time. So the first way to maintain relationships is to be generous, and there are so many different ways to be generous.

The second is to have endearing speech. This phrase, "endearing speech," only occurs in the Pali canon in this particular list of four things for sustaining relationships, which I think is quite interesting. Perhaps not surprisingly, it says that among the types of endearing speech, the best is teaching the Dharma. But what I find particularly interesting here is the emphasis on teaching the Dharma to one who is interested in it and listens with eager ears. It's not about trying to convert people who don't want to hear about this. Instead, for those who have some sincerity and really want to hear about it, we teach the Dharma to them, share what we know. I appreciate this idea as a type of endearing speech—it is something they want to hear, not something they don't want to hear.

Along these lines, we can also understand endearing speech as verbal acts of loving-kindness, this expression of doing metta by saying kind things to other people. When I was looking at the list of speakers for this series on not-frequently-taught teachings, I saw that next week Tony Bernhard will talk more about this, about verbal acts of loving-kindness.

There is also this teaching that part of right speech is to not be divisive—that is, to not repeat elsewhere what you heard here with the purpose of dividing people, setting up an us-versus-them dichotomy. That's part of the ways of speech, like right speech, to not be divisive. Instead, we become promoters of friendships, using speech as a promoter of friendships that reunites those who are divided, that brings people together and supports relationships and community. We speak in a way that supports concord and helps people rejoice in concord and have delight in concord. The English is perhaps

a little unusual—it's not part of our active vocabulary to "rejoice in concord." But there is this idea of appreciating the friends we have and speaking in a way that lets them know, supporting the communities and relationships we have.

Another part of endearing speech as a way to maintain relationships is to not speak harshly. Instead, we speak words that are gentle, pleasing to the ear and lovable, that go to the heart and are courteous and agreeable. There is no need for us to use language that is harmful or hurtful. That's perhaps obvious, but what constitutes harsh speech requires sensitivity—there is a right time to say things and a way to say things. The guidelines for speech are, of course, that it be timely, beneficial, kind, and true. Here we add speaking about the Dharma if the person wants to hear about it, and speaking in a way that promotes community and promotes relationships.

The third way to sustain relationships is to do beneficial actions. In the suttas, this is described as performing actions that encourage, settle, and establish a person without confidence in the accomplishment of confidence; encourage, settle, and establish an immoral person in the accomplishment of virtuous behavior; encourage, settle, and establish a miserly person in the accomplishment of generosity; and encourage, settle, and establish an unwise person in the accomplishment of wisdom. I interpret this as a way to help people find their way. I don't think we're going to convert people if they are a certain way—that's not our job. We all have our own path and our own way of getting there.

But to encourage, settle, and establish—I feel like establishing is something a person has to do for themselves. But part of being a good spiritual friend is about creating the conditions in which others can be the best version of themselves, so that they can hear the teachings if that's what they're interested in, if that's what they want to do. And then helping them to practice. These are part of the beneficial actions.

As I mentioned earlier, a good spiritual friend also helps people be virtuous. And you help other people be virtuous by being virtuous yourself. Maybe I shouldn't use that word—it sounds funny to me. Ethical, having integrity. Those sound a little bit better to my ear.

The fourth means of sustaining relationships is this very interesting word in Pali. If we were to translate it directly into English, it would be "the same as myself." Some would translate that as being without bias, without prejudice, impartial—to view others, to see others the same as myself. This idea of common humanity. We all share certain things. We all have difficulties. We all have aspirations, though they may not be the same ones. But the idea that there are certain things we share. It's the opposite of being divisive. It's the opposite of having prejudice. The same as myself. *Samānattā*.

So I started by talking about the Buddha saying to Ananda, "Ananda, don't say that it's just half of the holy life. Good spiritual friends are the whole of the holy life." Then in other suttas we find this gets expanded—that if you have good spiritual friends, you'll be virtuous, hear the Dharma, have energy to practice, and have wisdom. And you can be a good spiritual friend through these seven qualities: don't despise your friend, stand by them, don't forsake them, patiently endure what needs to be endured, preserve their secrets, support them, give what is difficult to give, do what is difficult to do, and reveal secrets. Once you have relationships and good spiritual friends, it's important to sustain them. We do that with generosity, endearing speech, beneficial actions, and treating others the same as ourselves—seeing others the same as ourselves.

There's more I could say, but I'd like to open it up for questions or comments. But maybe before I do that, let me say one more thing.

Often when we think about the Buddhist teachings or the Buddha, we imagine this very powerful, amazing figure—the Buddha giving a talk, with people sitting around listening. For me, that's how I would visualize that time. And often, as practitioners or scholars, we give importance to that figure in the center, the Buddha. But it's the community that preserves the teachings. It's the community that teaches each other. The Buddha was not always there. He traveled around and wasn't always present for the monastics. This is true today in monasteries as well—very often the monks or nuns are teaching each other rather than the abbot or abbess.

I want to emphasize the importance of community, not only for our own spiritual practice, not only for our own lives—it's part of psychological well-being too, this sense of belonging to community. But also this recognition: without a community, there would be no Buddhism. We would have the Buddha, but there wouldn't be anything passed down through the generations, actively practiced, dispersed throughout the world.

So as a way to tie together this idea of good spiritual friends: there's having good spiritual friends for ourselves as individuals, being good spiritual friends to others, and being part of a community. And then how this community is part of something bigger—that's Buddhism too.

For the benefit of anyone who might not have heard, Sharon was speaking about the importance of trust in friendships, including specifically the importance of not revealing secrets, and also about right speech.

I was happy to find some of these teachings in the early Buddhist literature. I don't think anything I've shared here is new or something we don't already know. But sometimes, just like with so many things in the Dharma, it's helpful to be reminded of their importance.

Sharon also spoke briefly about restoring trust when it's been broken. I was thinking about the guiding principle underlying all these lists—seven ways to be a good friend, four ways to maintain a relationship, and so on. The guiding principle behind what the Buddha was teaching is to help relieve suffering. So if we want to restore trust, the question becomes: How can we support that other person? How can we relieve their suffering? At the same time, we acknowledge and honor what's happening for ourselves too. But if we can hold that bigger picture—for the benefit of others and ourselves, and to not harm either others or ourselves—that becomes our compass.

Elizabeth shared that our friends are aging. All of us are aging, of course. Some of her friends are perhaps becoming harder of hearing, maybe aren't the best drivers anymore, and have many issues arising in their lives. Perhaps they're sharing about these difficulties. In order to be a good friend during such times, these teachings serve as reminders: be generous, do what is difficult to do, patiently endure what needs to be endured, keep secrets.

Then the question arose: Is this teaching us to treat friends differently than random strangers? What do you think? Someone said the answer was no, but he wasn't sure why.

Sharon reminded us of a helpful teaching about how we are dependent on others—for growing our food, making our clothes, sometimes preparing our food as well. We are so profoundly dependent on other people, and recognizing this can influence how we relate to everyone.

But to return to the question about friends versus strangers: How many of you have had the experience that the more you practice, the less interesting it becomes to set up or maintain rivals and enemies and categories of people we don't like? It just starts to feel unnecessary—like we don't need to spend so much energy doing that anymore. So maybe not everybody becomes our best friend, but this idea of withholding generosity toward certain people becomes less compelling. There's simply not as much energy for whatever was preventing us from being friendly toward them. I'm not saying we're all going to become best friends with everyone soon.

Someone observed that friendship requires interacting, requires doing something. And I agree—this list of qualities does involve action. But at the same time, not all of them appear overtly active. Patiently enduring, for instance, sometimes doesn't look very active at all. And yet we also have friends we've known for a long time whom we haven't heard from in decades. Then we reconnect and feel that sense of connection again. So both are true: we have relationships that we actively cultivate as a big part of our current lives, and we have friends from another era, perhaps from when we lived in another place.

Someone else noted how the way we interact with strangers creates its own dynamic. If we act toward them with anger, we're likely to receive anger in return. If we treat them with respect, we'll likely receive respect back. This can be a significant part of our practice—simply acknowledging the person who checks us out at the grocery store, treating them with respect, looking them in the eye, saying hello and asking how they are. These simple gestures can make a real difference. The janitors, the people we often don't notice or pay attention to—extending our awareness and care to them matters.

Thank you.

Where do we go to find these virtuous friends? Do you have some ideas?

For me, I found a lot of people at meditation centers—people who came from different walks of life and had very different lives, but we shared something in common: this appreciation for the Dharma, this trying to find our way with it, to understand it, to discover what practice really is. Through becoming friends at meditation centers, I've made many truly wonderful connections.

So perhaps here, at the end of the sitting when you meet to say hello to somebody, that could be just the introduction of something. It could be the start of something.

Thank you. It's a pleasure being here and teaching with you.

CHAPTER 215

Sustaining Relationships

Andrea Fella · 44 min

In this talk, Andrea Fella examines the often-cited but rarely understood teaching where the Buddha tells Ānanda that good spiritual friends (kalyāṇamitta) constitute not just half, but the whole of the holy life. Drawing from the Meghiya Sutta and related texts, she explores how having virtuous companions helps practitioners develop the five qualities that ripen the mind for liberation: spiritual friendship, virtue (sīla), hearing the Dhamma, arousing energy for practice, and cultivating wisdom regarding impermanence.

Fella presents seven qualities of a good spiritual friend: not despising one's friend, not forsaking them during difficulties, patiently enduring what is hard to endure, preserving their secrets, giving what is difficult to give, doing what is difficult to do, and revealing helpful knowledge. She then outlines four means of sustaining relationships found in the Pāli Canon: generosity (dāna), endearing speech, beneficial actions, and treating others as oneself (samānattā)—viewing others without bias through our common humanity.

The talk emphasizes that while the Buddha is often visualized as the central figure, it is the sangha—the community of practitioners—that preserves and transmits the teachings. This recognition highlights how spiritual friendship is not merely beneficial for individual practice but essential for the continuation of the Dhamma itself. The practical wisdom shared offers guidance for both developing meaningful spiritual connections and maintaining them through life's inevitable changes.

This talk was given at Insight Meditation South Bay.

This is part of a series exploring some of the lesser known teachings. But I thought I would start with a teaching that I've heard quite a few times—maybe some of you have heard it quite a few times too—that I didn't really understand or didn't really pay much attention to. I'd like to tie it together and flesh it out, including some things that are lesser known teachings.

Perhaps you've heard this teaching where Ananda, who is the Buddha's attendant, goes to the Buddha and says, "Venerable sir, I've heard that half of the holy life is good spiritual friends." And the Buddha corrects him and says, "Ananda, don't say that. The whole of the holy life is good spiritual friends."

I've heard this teaching quite a few times and I always liked it. It made me feel good—this importance of relationships. But I'm not sure that I understood it. Why would I go on retreat? Why would I meditate? Why would I listen to Dharma talks if it's all about good spiritual friends? I felt like there's got to be more to this teaching. Or maybe it's not a real teaching. Maybe it's not really in there, just something that Dharma teachers were saying.

It's in there. When I say "in there," I mean the suttas, the Pali Canon—it's in there. This conversation is recorded. But there's more to it. There's more to that particular conversation, and there are other conversations about the role of spiritual friends and how they can support our practice.

One story is with Meghiya, who was the Buddha's attendant before Ananda. Ananda wasn't the Buddha's attendant for the Buddha's entire teaching career. Before that was Meghiya.

Meghiya, on his way to alms round one morning, saw a mango grove that looked like the perfect place to meditate. So he goes to his alms round, comes back, and says to the Buddha, "I saw this mango grove. I think it would be really great. I would like to go there and meditate for the whole day."

The Buddha says, "Don't go, because there's nobody else here." Apparently the Buddha didn't want to be left alone; he needed to have an attendant with him.

Meghiya responds, "Venerable sir, you've done the work that needs to be done. I have not. I still have work that needs to be done. I would like to go spend the day meditating in the mango grove."

For the second time, the Buddha says, "No, don't go, because there's only the two of us here."

For a third time, Meghiya makes his request. At this time in ancient India, it was the tradition that if somebody asked a question three times, the other person had to acquiesce on the third time. We see this in the suttas repeatedly, where people ask the Buddha three times, and he says no, no, and then yes. So when Meghiya asks this third time, the Buddha says yes.

Meghiya goes to the mango grove to meditate. While he's there, he's assaulted by all these unwholesome thoughts. He can't get settled down. He spends the whole day with thoughts of sensual desire and lust and greed, and thoughts of harming other people. He reflects, "It's amazing, it's astounding. Even after all these years of practice, I still have these types of thoughts that arise in my mind when I'm going to meditate."

At the end of the day, he goes to the Buddha and says, "I can't believe what happened. I had all these terrible thoughts of lust and harming other people."

I imagine the Buddha is kind of thinking, "Well, I told you." Instead, what he says is, "Meghiya, when the mind is not ripe for liberation, there are things to do to help make the mind ripe for liberation. There are five things to help make the mind ready for awakening, ready for deliverance, ready for liberation from thoughts of lust and harming other people."

In this list of five things to help make the mind ready, number one is good spiritual friends. The second is to be virtuous—to behave in a way that supports practice.

The word "virtuous" is perhaps a bit of heavy or awkward language. I'll talk about it a little more in a moment.

Third is to hear the teachings, to hear the Dharma—either to learn about the practice or to be inspired, an opportunity to understand what direction to go and where not to go if you're serious about this practice.

Fourth, after you've heard about the practice and perhaps are inspired, the fourth quality to help make the mind ready for liberation is to arouse energy for practice. It's one thing to hear about practice; it's another thing to actually do something about it. So the fourth is to arouse energy.

And the fifth is to have a certain amount of wisdom. You don't have to know everything, you don't have to be completely knowledgeable, and you don't have to already be awakened, but there needs to be a certain amount of wisdom.

So these five things: have good spiritual friends, be virtuous, hear the Dharma, arouse energy for practice, and be wise.

Perhaps it's not surprising that elsewhere in the suttas we read that if you have good spiritual friends—and this term "good spiritual friend" is a translation of the expression *kalyāṇamitta*. Maybe you've heard that sometimes meditation groups will have Kalyāṇamitta groups, where peers get together to talk about the Dharma, share their practice and what's happening with them.

Elsewhere in the discourses we find that if a person has good spiritual friends, kalyāṇamittas, it turns out they will be virtuous—the second thing on this list. They will hear the Dharma, they will arouse energy, and they will be wise. Having good spiritual friends helps you do all these other things on the path.

Let me flesh some of these out.

This idea of being virtuous—it's not only about how we behave. It's also about the attitudes we have. Are we compassionate? Are we caring? For both ourselves and for others. Are we doing the things that need to be done and not doing the things that shouldn't be done?

Implied in this is right conduct, and sometimes in English we use the somewhat awkward term "resort"—the right behavior for the right setting. I can imagine that if you're going to give a presentation to the Supreme Court of the United States, you behave in a particular manner, which is probably different than if you're picking your kids up from daycare. Virtue also means having the right conduct for the right setting, behaving in a particular way that supports your practice and supports other people's practice too.

A big part of virtue, ethics, morality—maybe those are better words—is about supporting other people. We don't harm them, we don't steal from them, we don't lie to them. Having good spiritual friends can help us with that.

I know I have this experience. Early in my practice I wanted to share a story with some Dharma friends, and as I started, I realized this story was actually about somebody else. It wasn't my story to tell. It was going to be, "Did you hear what happened to so-and-so?" And I thought, that's actually not really supportive. But one of my friends said, "Diana, are you sure you want to go down this path with what you're about to say?"

I was so appreciative, because it was just helpful. I don't have to be gossiping. I don't have to be telling stories about other people. That's not particularly helpful. It may have entertainment value, but it's not a kind thing to do. That's part of having friends in the Dharma—they support you to be the best version of yourself and remind you of what you often already know but sometimes forget, or when you get lost in the moment and disconnected from yourself. In this way, having good spiritual friends can help us come to our best behavior.

The second way good spiritual friends help is by helping us hear the Dharma. In very simple ways—"Okay, I'll see you at IMC next Tuesday." Having friends I knew I would see here, or even saying to somebody, "I'll see you then"—it helps support going even when you don't feel like you want to go to the meditation center.

And maybe you've had this experience too, where somebody says, "I read this great book. Have you read this?" Or "Here's an interesting podcast. Have you heard of this person? It's really great." Or an article gets forwarded—an opportunity to hear the Dharma.

And then in the Pali Canon, when they talk about good spiritual friends supporting others to hear the Dharma, they speak of Dharma that includes talk on solitude. There's this recognition that even though you have friends and you practice with friends and they encourage you to practice together, it still includes an appreciation of solitude. Sometimes if we want to meditate, we can meditate with others. Sometimes we meditate by ourselves. But to recognize that it's not all about being with other people—sometimes we have to really be with ourselves and be with what's happening with ourselves, to kind of check in about what's going on.

And some of the Dharma talk, when you're hearing the Dharma, is also about liberation—hearing things that are inspiring or meaningful or that make us want to engage, whatever that may be for each of us. Maybe at different times in our lives and different times in our practice, it's different things. But it's not only how to practice, what to do, but things that are inspiring and that encourage us.

Then the other thing is that good spiritual friends help arouse energy for practice—specifically, the energy to abandon what is unwholesome and to cultivate what is wholesome. That's such a big part of the practice, learning what is wholesome and what isn't wholesome. Most of us have a general idea, but the more we practice, the more we discover. Just like for me, being about to tell a story about somebody else and realizing—there was a time in my life where that seemed perfectly harmless and a normal thing to do. But as I started to practice and become more sensitive to other people's needs and how they were in the world, what made me feel like I had some real integrity was to not start talking about other people. So part of the Dharma is to learn that for ourselves through practice, as well as to have some pointers, some people to point out: here's a direction to go, here's a direction not to go.

And then the last one is to be wise. What's pointed out specifically is this idea of certain wisdom about seeing the arising and passing of phenomena—pointing towards impermanence. There are so many different levels of this. We know impermanence, right? We know that the weather today is not exactly the same as it was yesterday, and it will be a little bit different tomorrow, I hear anyway. But also this really deep insight into impermanence is one of the key insights in this tradition that leads to liberation. A very thorough understanding or knowing of impermanence is one of the gateways into awakening.

It's also a way to just have a better life too, if we can appreciate that things change. They're not always the same. Then we're less likely to hold on to those things that are going to be slipping away, or to imagine things into the future that perhaps won't be that way, because things change. So this insight into impermanence is really key both in

the big Buddhist endeavor of awakening as well as just having a better life. We're going to age, we're going to get sick. Things change. People we love are going to age and get sick and die.

So with all of this idea of—okay, so maybe it is a good idea to have good spiritual friends—what does it mean? What is a good spiritual friend? How is that? In addition to these types of things—help you see the Dharma, arouse energy, be virtuous, and have a certain amount of wisdom—would you be surprised if I said there's yet another Buddhist list about how to be a good spiritual friend? It's amazing, right? All of these lists. I actually love these lists. I'm one of those people that it helps me remember. Like, oh yeah, there's seven, and I can only remember four—what are the other three? So I actually like having all these lists.

There are seven qualities of a good spiritual friend. Most of these lists, for those of you who are familiar with them, are given in a particular order. Usually when we know the five faculties or the seven factors of awakening, for example, number one is usually this, number two is usually that. But for these seven qualities of a good spiritual friend, I'm going to mix up the list a little, in a way that feels right, in a way that I think is a nicer way to just talk about it.

Number one, in Diana's version: How to be a good spiritual friend? Don't despise your friend. It seems obvious. I'm a little bit curious why it's in there. But then I started to think about, you know, sometimes maybe you get angry at people.

Or get fed up. Or maybe you're friends for historical reasons—you've been together for a long time, but you've started to really dislike the person. I don't know. This is, for me, number one: Don't despise your friends.

The rest form a little cluster that I'm interpreting as standing by your friend. Stand by them.

So number two is to not forsake them when they're having difficulties, to still stand by them. I think all of us would recognize that as a good quality of a friend.

And maybe related to that is to patiently endure what is difficult to endure. There's no details about this, but maybe your friend is going through a really difficult time, and that is all your friend can talk about. A big event that's happening in his or her life, or a big decision he or she has to make, and that's maybe all that they talk about. But to be a good friend is to patiently endure what needs to be endured.

And the third one is to preserve their secrets. If they share things with you, to not share them with others. I think this is interesting—this is on a Buddhist list, to preserve people's secrets. It kind of encourages some confidentiality, encourages some intimacy. To share things. So you can share things with others when you know that they're not going to be sharing them with other people.

And then the next little cluster of how to be a good spiritual friend is to support your friend. So don't despise them, stand by them in these three different ways, and this third grouping is to support them.

What's listed here is to give what is difficult to give and to do what is difficult to do. I think that's right—that's what kind of distinguishes a friend from maybe just an acquaintance. I don't know exactly what "give" means—you can imagine maybe to give some feedback, but in a kind, gentle way that's appropriate. Or to do what is difficult to do—maybe to help support your friend, help them move on a Saturday when you really don't want to. Or something. I don't know exactly, but I think all of us understand. This is a friend that stands by.

And then here's number seven: A good friend reveals secrets. I'm understanding this two ways. One, maybe about themselves—if you're a good friend, you are sharing kind of what your life is like, part of your inner life. But it could also be, you know, the best way to get to IMC at 7:30 when there's traffic is don't take 101, go down this road—some little secret, something that you've learned, some little trick, to freely share those.

So these are the seven ways to be a good friend: Don't despise others. Don't forsake them. Patiently endure what is difficult to endure, and preserve their secrets. Give what is difficult to give, do what is difficult to do, and reveal secrets. I think all of these are something that we would recognize. There's nothing here that is surprising or perhaps new.

So we've talked about how having good spiritual friends is really helpful. We've talked about how to be a good spiritual friend. And then also in the Buddhist literature, this earliest literature, the Pali Canon, there are teachings about how to sustain relationships once you have them.

When Shaila invited me to talk and to say something about teachings that aren't so often discussed, this is one that I had in mind. This is something that we don't hear about so much—how to sustain relationships. Obviously you continue being a good friend, but when the Buddha was teaching, he was teaching from his perspective of ending suffering. If you're a good friend, you help people end their suffering. In his view, it's all about that. All the teachings, everything—the purpose for him was to help

other people end their suffering. His idea was that if you're going to be a good friend, you're going to help them end their suffering. So these teachings are pointed in that direction, to help end suffering.

The first thing to do to sustain relationships is to be generous.

In the suttas, it says that among all gifts, the best gift is the gift of the Dharma, the gift of the teachings. This is very consistent with this idea—if you want to relieve suffering, you would give them the Dharma.

But we can expand that understanding of generosity. It includes giving people the benefit of the doubt. It includes letting them speak at length if there's really something happening, generously allowing them space to express themselves instead of feeling that we have to speak. It also means supporting them in other ways, whether with material goods or with our time. So the first way to maintain relationships is to be generous, and there are so many different ways to be generous.

The second is to have endearing speech. This phrase, "endearing speech," only occurs in the Pali Canon in this particular list of four things for sustaining relationships, which I think is interesting. Perhaps not surprisingly, it says that among the types of endearing speech, the best is teaching the Dharma—but specifically teaching the Dharma to one who is interested in it and listens with eager ears. It's not about trying to convert people who don't want to hear about this. Instead, for those who have some sincerity and really want to hear about it, teach the Dharma to them, share what you know. I rather like that idea as a type of endearing speech—it's something that they want to hear, not something that they don't.

Along these lines, we can also understand endearing speech as verbal acts of loving-kindness, this expression of doing metta by saying kind things to other people. When I was looking at the list of speakers for this series on teachings that aren't frequently taught, I noticed that next week is Tony Bernhard. When I saw what he's going to be talking about—these verbal acts of loving-kindness—I realized he'll explore this more deeply.

There's also this teaching that part of right speech is to not be divisive. That is, to not repeat elsewhere what you heard here with the purpose of dividing people, of setting up an us-versus-them dichotomy. Instead, speech should be a promoter of friendships, speech that reunites those who are divided. We use our speech to bring people together, to support relationships and community. We speak in a way that supports concord and helps people rejoice in concord and have delight in concord. The English is perhaps a

bit formal—"rejoice in concord" may not be part of our active vocabulary. But this idea of appreciating the friends we have and speaking in a way that lets them know, that supports the communities and relationships we have, is valuable.

Another part of endearing speech as a way to maintain relationships is to not speak harshly. Instead, we speak words that are gentle, pleasing to the ear and lovable, words that go to the heart and are courteous and agreeable. There's no need for us to use language that is harmful or hurtful. That's perhaps obvious, but sometimes what constitutes harshness requires sensitivity. There's a right time to say things and a skillful way to say them. Of course, speech should be timely, beneficial, kind, and true—these are the guidelines for what to say. Here we're adding speaking about the Dharma if the person wants to hear about it, and speaking in a way that promotes community and relationships.

The third way to sustain relationships is to do beneficial actions. In the suttas, this is described as doing actions that encourage, settle, and establish a person without confidence in the accomplishment of confidence. Actions that encourage, settle, and establish an immoral person in the accomplishment of virtuous behavior. Actions that encourage, settle, and establish a miserly person in the accomplishment of generosity. Actions that encourage, settle, and establish an unwise person in the accomplishment of wisdom.

I'm interpreting this as a way to help people find their way. I don't think we're going to convert people—if they're a certain way, it's not our job to transform them into something else. We all have our own path and our own way of getting there.

But to encourage, settle, and establish—I feel like that's something somebody has to do for themselves. Yet part of being a good spiritual friend is about creating the conditions in which others can be the best version of themselves, so that they can hear the teachings if that's what they're interested in, if that's what they want to do. And then helping them to practice. These are part of the beneficial actions.

And then, of course, I talked earlier about why a good spiritual friend also helps people be virtuous. You help other people be virtuous by being virtuous yourself. Maybe I shouldn't use that word—it sounds a bit funny to me. Ethical. Having integrity. Those sound a little better to my ear.

The fourth means of sustaining relationships is this very interesting word in Pali. If we were to translate it directly into English, it would be "the same as myself." Some translate this as being without bias, without prejudice, being impartial—to view others, to see others as the same as myself. This idea of common humanity. We all share certain

experiences. We all have difficulties. We all have aspirations—they may not be the same ones, but the idea is that there are certain things we share. And it's the opposite of being divisive. It's the opposite of having prejudice. The same as myself. *Samānattā*.

So I started by talking about the Buddha saying to Ānanda, "Ānanda, don't say that it's just half of the holy life. Good spiritual friends are the whole of the holy life." Then in other suttas we find this gets expanded—that if you have good spiritual friends, then you'll be virtuous, hear the Dhamma, have energy to practice, and have wisdom. And you can be a good spiritual friend through these seven qualities: don't despise your friend, stand by them, don't forsake them, patiently endure what needs to be endured, preserve their secrets and support them, give what is difficult to give and do what is difficult to do, and reveal secrets. And then this idea that once you have relationships and good spiritual friends, it's important to sustain them. We do that with generosity, endearing speech, beneficial actions, and treating others as ourselves—seeing others as ourselves.

There's more I could say, but I feel I'd like to open it up for questions now, or comments. But maybe before I do that, I'll say one more thing.

Often when we think about the Buddhist teachings or the Buddha, we imagine this very powerful, amazing figure—the Buddha—giving a talk. And maybe there are people sitting around listening. For me, if I were to visualize that time, that's what I would see. And often, as practitioners or scholars, we give importance to that figure in the center, the Buddha. But it's the community that preserves the teachings. It's the community that teaches each other. The Buddha was not always there. He traveled around; he wasn't always present for the monastics. And this is true today in monasteries as well—very often the monks or the nuns are teaching each other rather than the abbot or the abbess.

So I want to emphasize the importance of community, not only for our own spiritual practice, not only for our own lives—it's part of psychological well-being too, this sense of belonging to community. But also this recognition: without a community, there would be no Buddhism. We would have the Buddha, but there wouldn't be anything passed down through the generations, actively practiced, dispersed throughout the world as it is now.

This is a way to tie in this idea of good spiritual friends: for us as individuals to have good spiritual friends, for us to be good spiritual friends, and for us to be part of a community. And how this community is also part of something bigger—this is part of Buddhism itself.

So now I'll open it up to see if people have questions or comments.

So Sharon was talking about the importance of trust in friendships, including specifically not revealing secrets, and right speech. I was happy to find some of these teachings in the early Buddhist literature. I don't think anything I said here is new—nothing we don't already know. But sometimes, just like so many things in the Dharma, it's helpful to be reminded of their importance.

She also spoke briefly about restoring trust when it's been broken. I was thinking about the guiding principle for all these lists—seven ways to be a good friend, four ways to maintain a relationship, and so on. The guiding principle is what the Buddha was teaching: to help relieve suffering. So if we want to restore trust, how can we support that other person? How can we relieve their suffering? At the same time, we acknowledge and honor what's happening for ourselves too. But if we can hold that big picture—for the benefit of others and ourselves, to not harm either others or ourselves—that becomes our guide.

Elizabeth was saying that our friends are aging. All of us are aging, right? And some of our friends are perhaps getting difficult to hear, maybe aren't the best drivers, and have a lot going on in their lives. So perhaps in order to be a good friend, these teachings serve as reminders of how to be one: be generous, do what is difficult to do, patiently endure what needs to be endured, keep secrets.

The question arose: is this teaching us to treat friends differently than random strangers? What do you think? One person said no, but wasn't sure why. Sharon reminded us of a helpful teaching—how we are dependent on others for growing food, making clothes, sometimes making food too. We are so dependent on other people. This recognition can influence us.

But to return to the question: how many of you have had this experience, that the more you practice, the less interesting it becomes to set up or maintain rivals and enemies and people we don't like? It just feels like we don't need to spend so much energy on that type of thing anymore. So maybe not everybody becomes our best friend, but this idea of not behaving in a generous manner toward someone becomes less interesting. There's just not as much energy for whatever was preventing us from being friendly toward them. I'm not saying we're all going to be best friends soon, but something shifts.

Someone observed that friendship requires interacting, requires doing something. I agree. This list of things to do—not all of them are really active. Patiently enduring sometimes doesn't look so active. But at the same time, we do have friends we've had

for a long time, friends we maybe haven't heard from for decades. Then we hear from them and feel a connection again. So there's both: the relationships we actively cultivate as a big part of our lives, and friends from another era, when we lived in another place or were in a different chapter of life.

Someone noted that with strangers, if you act toward them with anger, you'll likely get anger back. If you treat them with respect, you'll get respect back. This can be a big part of our practice—just acknowledging the person who checks us out at the grocery store, treating them with respect, looking them in the eye: "Hi, how are you?" These simple things can make a big difference. The janitors, the people we often aren't paying attention to—they matter too.

Thank you.

Yes, where do we go to find these virtuous friends? Do you have some ideas?

I would say, for me, I found a lot of people at meditation centers. We came from different walks of life and had very different lives, but we shared something in common—this appreciation for the Dharma, this trying to find our way with it, to understand it, to discover what practice is and how to practice. Through that shared exploration, becoming friends happened naturally. In my own experience at meditation centers, I've made a lot of really wonderful friends.

So perhaps here, at the end of the sit, when you meet to say hello to somebody, that could be just the introduction of something. It could be the start of something.

It's a pleasure being here and teaching with you tonight. I'll stay up here if anyone has more comments or questions they'd like to share.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 216

Thus Have I Heard: Fear and Dread (MN 4)

Andrea Fella · 46 min

In this illuminating exploration of the Bhayabherava Sutta (MN 4), Andrea Fella unpacks a lesser-known discourse that traces the Buddha's journey from experiencing fear in remote forest dwellings to attaining full enlightenment. The sutta begins with the Brahmin Jānussoṇi questioning whether practice in isolated jungle thickets is simply too difficult—a concern that resonates with modern practitioners who face skepticism about meditation and retreat practice.

Fella highlights the Buddha's preparatory practice of reflecting on his own wholesome qualities—ethical conduct, mindfulness, generosity, and freedom from ill will—as the foundation for facing fear. This recollection of one's positive qualities, far from being egotistical, provides the inner strength needed when fear arises. The Buddha's method of meeting fear was remarkably simple: he maintained whatever posture he was in when fear arose, neither moving nor reacting until the fear subsided. This approach embodies what Ajahn Sumedho calls 'replacing fear with awareness.'

The talk traces how this capacity to be with difficult experience leads progressively through the development of the five spiritual faculties (saddhā, vīriya, sati, samādhi, and paññā), the four jhānas, and ultimately the three knowledges that constitute awakening: recollection of past lives, understanding of kamma, and comprehension of the Four Noble Truths. Fella notes that even after enlightenment, the Buddha continued practicing in seclusion—both for the pleasant abiding it offered and out of compassion, to model the path for future generations. The teaching offers profound encouragement: every moment of mindfulness accumulates, building the capacity to meet whatever fear and dread life presents.

This talk was given at Insight Meditation South Bay.

This series focuses on lesser-known teachings, and I was delighted to be invited to speak because there is so much in the suttas. The Middle-Length Discourses alone form one of four books of this size, with fifteen additional smaller collections comprising just the sutta collection. How many of these do we really receive teachings from? There are popular ones we hear frequently, and then there are many others. Some are fairly repetitive or cover the same themes, but there are also distinct ideas worth considering as part of the whole.

What I'd like to discuss tonight is a sutta called "Fear and Dread"—that's the English translation of the title. It's the fourth discourse in this collection, and my summary of it is: from scared in the woods to enlightenment. That's a process a person goes through.

To set the framework: a sutta is simply the name for a discourse that the Buddha was said to have spoken, recorded in these texts. They were first written down over 150 years after he died, so there was considerable verbal transmission. But these represent what we have as potentially closest to his teachings.

There are a number of suttas where the Buddha describes his own enlightenment in his own words. The most famous is the Noble Search, the twenty-sixth discourse in this collection. That's where he talks about studying with two different teachers, practicing concentration, and then realizing that wasn't the pathway to liberation, leading him to strike out on his own in pursuit of full enlightenment. But there's another sutta in this same collection that includes the Buddha's own description of his awakening process—this one called "Fear and Dread." It paints a rather human picture of the Buddha, which is something I appreciate about it. Both human and superhuman. There's an evolution he goes through that I think is relatable for us.

It may help to know that some discourses are organized as what's called a story within a story. They have the main teaching in the middle, and then there's a wrapper on the outside that usually provides context and perhaps some dramatic elements. We'll include that as we examine MN4. MN stands for Majjhima Nikāya, the name of this collection—the Middle-Length Discourses.

The setup for this sutta begins with a Brahmin named Jāṇussoṇi, who appears in several discourses. He comes to the Buddha and essentially complains that practice is hard. But first, he asks if people take the Buddha as a model. He says, "When people go forth out of faith, do they take Master Gotama as their leader, their helper, and their guide? Do they follow the example of Master Gotama?" The Buddha replies with a hearty yes: "That is so, Brahman, that is so."

Why is this at the front of the sutta? Because it indicates that in some way the Buddha can be imitated or followed. The sutta will tell us something we can imitate, something where we can take the Buddha as a guide in our own practice, using him as a model.

It may also help to know that this collection, the Middle-Length Discourses, is now considered by scholars to be a kind of manual for new monastics—people who had gone forth as followers of the Buddha but needed to learn the basic teachings. It's an amazing collection covering all the key teachings, from faith and ethics to concentra-

tion and mindfulness, how to live the ascetic life, and a little about lay life. Mostly it's for new monastics: people who want to walk this path and need to know what's essential.

This is the fourth sutta in the collection, so you encounter it quite early. This context can help us understand the teaching. The exchange continues with Jāṇussoṇi, who says: "But Master Gotama, remote jungle thicket resting places in the forest are hard to endure. Seclusion is hard to practice and it is hard to enjoy solitude. One would think the jungles must rob a practitioner of his mind if he has no concentration."

So the Buddha also agrees heartily with this, and he says, "That is so, Brahman, that is so."

What's this here for? My guess is that some young monks had some doubt about practicing in jungle thickets. I mean, you come from a householder life. Some were rich, some were poor, but they were living as regular lay people. And then to come in to be one of the Buddha's followers, you let go of all that. You let go of your social station. Remember that was very important in ancient India—still important now, but even more so then. You put on the robe and you only have the bowl. And then you're going to be told to go practice by yourself. These people didn't live by themselves. They didn't have this individualistic concept that we do here. You're going to practice by yourself in the jungle.

So kind of encapsulated in this Brahman's question is: isn't that kind of hard to go out in the forest? This is my speculation, but I think this is speaking to people who are just learning how to practice. And the Buddha agrees and says, yeah, actually, that is hard.

Or maybe a more modern equivalent is that people—this is still relevant for us—we may have people in our lives who say, "Why do you want to sit on a cushion and do nothing for half an hour? Why is that so important to you? Why do you want to go on retreat where you can't read or write and you only eat a little bit and you get up at six in the morning? Why would you want to do that? Wouldn't it be better to go to the beach?" There's this sense of: isn't that hard? Why be silent?

So then it sort of legitimizes these concerns that we have, either internally or externally. And now the Buddha's going to offer his response. And we know from the first exchange that we can take this as a guide, as a model.

Interestingly, the way the Buddha responds is not to just directly answer, but to talk about how he considers this notion. Isn't it hard to go out in the forest and practice all by yourself in a lonely, scary place and just live by yourself and develop concentration? He talks about how he reflected on his own good qualities.

He says some people have poor ethics and they've lived a kind of unethical life. And not surprisingly, when they go out in the forest, they encounter fear and dread. Some people have lived unmindfully, or they have a lot of greed, or they earn their livelihood in an unjust way. And in that case, they might go out and have a lot of difficulty in the forest.

But he notes that for himself, he doesn't have as many of those things. He says, "I have mindfulness. I have ethics. I have purified mental conduct. I have purified livelihood. I am uncovetous. I don't have a mind overcome by sloth and torpor or ill will or doubt. I am not given to self-praise and disparagement of others. I am not desirous of gain, honor, and renown. I am not lazy and wanting in energy. I am energetic."

He goes through this reflection. And then he decides, well, because of that, it's going to be okay for me to go practice out in the woods.

What does this tell us? There are difficulties in practice, yes, but it's actually a basis of practice to reflect on our own good qualities. This is not a problem. Do you ever reflect in this same way? Do you sit down and go over the ways in which you're generous, the ways in which you have good virtue? It's actually no small thing that your mind is interested in meditation. Everyone in this room is somewhat interested in meditation or you wouldn't be here. Think about how few people in the world have that. Not very many.

So, in fact, if you could sit through this evening's meditation—if you could sit through half an hour of meditation—that's really good. There are a lot of people who would find it very difficult to sit with themselves for half an hour. A lot of people in the world would find that very hard. You're interested in Dharma talks. So for sure, you have a lot of good heart and mind qualities just to be here. And it's worth reflecting on this.

In fact, there is another sutta that talks specifically about beneficial reflections that the Buddha encourages. There was a whole series at IMC not so long ago—six talks about these six recollections, one for each recollection. Two of the six are recollecting one's own generosity and one's own virtue, one's own ethical conduct.

Now you can say, "Well, we're kind of trained in our culture that this might be egotistical—to think about our good qualities and to really celebrate the good things about ourselves." But that's not part of this way of thinking. It's not part of this religious tradition, of the Buddhist tradition. I think this is not egotistical because these qualities—like generosity, like loving-kindness, like virtue—they're not really personal qualities. The more you develop them, the more you understand: these are transpersonal, if you could call it that. These are not qualities that we can own, that we can measure, that we can possess. We might use language—I think this sutta translates this as "I am possessed of," and so forth. But really, these are qualities that exist in relationship and that are bigger than our individual story. They are more part of our common humanity, our common heart, that we can develop.

So I think genuine reflection on these, genuine recollection of these, is really not egotistical at all. And in fact, according to this sutta, it's the basis of being able to overcome fear and dread.

There's more in the rest of the sutta, so let's continue. What happens next, after the Buddha says he recollected all of his good qualities and then decided it was actually going to be fine? He's talking about before he was enlightened. Before he was enlightened, he realized he had these good qualities and decided he was going to go out in the woods and practice. And then he considered that there are particular times of the month—now this is going into specifics of what they believed at that time—certain times of the month and also certain places that are listed as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines, which are supposed to be especially scary, apparently. And he deliberately sought these out. He went there to practice in order to encounter his own fear and dread. He thought, "If I go to these places on these particularly awesome, scary nights, then I might encounter this in my heart."

There are two things to observe about this. First of all, even for the Buddha—or even for the Bodhisattva, I should say, before he was enlightened—there was fear and dread. He was human. He was scared out in the woods when there were wild animals and branches. A peacock breaks off a branch—there are various specifics given here. And he would feel this because it's... I don't know if any of you have actually been out in the deep woods late at night. Maybe you've got your nice tent with the kerosene burner and all that, but if you go out to the bathroom or something, it's like—whoa—it's a pretty wild place. So it's natural.

Along his path, it wasn't just all bliss, sitting down with everything falling into place. He had to deal with his fear and dread. Gil Fronsdal says any spiritual practice worth its salt will eventually bring up fear.

Why is that? Because to mature on the spiritual path, we have to let go of a lot of unhelpful ideas about ourselves, about our lives, about our way of doing things. The way we're doing things now might be okay, but we have a sense that there could be something else—that's kind of why we're pursuing practice. Or we may even have a sense that it's completely not working, that it's a disaster and we need something different. Whatever it is, we're going to have to let go of something about the way we're doing things. And why are we doing things that way?

Because we believe that is safe and helpful for us. That's why we're doing what we're doing. We have needs and desires and a sense of what we want to be, and so we do things in accordance with that. And practice is going to turn that completely upside down at some point. The process of letting go of our views of how things should be and what things are is challenging, because we've put them in place because we think that's what's going to make us safe. That's how it goes.

So we're going to have to dismantle some kind of deep stuff to let go of all that.

The second point about this seeking out of places in order to encounter his own fear and dread—well, that's pretty interesting. He turned toward and actually sought out something that was going to be difficult for him. Should we be seeking out dukkha? It's an interesting question. Teachers in the West often say things like, "You don't have to seek it out. It's going to come find you anyway. Don't make it hard for yourself." And I think there's a place for that. It's a good general instruction because we have pretty stressful lives, and aging, illness, and death are coming anyway. So it's true—we don't need to create it.

But there can be times in practice where certain conditions have come together, we're ripe, we're ready, and we know this is the time to go. I got the sword. This is the time to go find the thing that needs to be cut.

So you might check internally. To what degree do you take on challenges in practice? To what degree are you willing to try something that you know is going to be a little bit hard, like doing a daylong if you've never sat for that long? What would that be like to come and be silent for a whole day, sitting and walking, not just for an evening? Or if you've done that, what would it be like to go on a retreat and stay overnight for a couple of nights and just do that—just be silent, be with my own mind and heart for two days? Wow, what would that be like? There can be times where that feels like the natural next step. Are you interested in finding and meeting the dark corners of your mind where clinging is hanging on? This sutta starts to give some instruction about that, if we're motivated to look into it.

So what happened when the Buddha went to these orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines on awesome, auspicious nights of the month and encountered his own fear and dread? He's very explicit. He says that the fear and dread came upon him as he did this, and his approach was simply to not change what he was doing.

He talks about the postures actually—the four postures of meditation, which are sitting, walking, standing, and lying down. Those are the four basic postures. And he says, "While I walked, the fear and dread came upon me. I neither stood nor sat nor lay down till I had subdued that fear and dread. While I stood, the fear and dread came upon me. I neither walked nor sat nor lay down till I had subdued that fear and dread"—and so forth for the other two postures. He just maintained the posture that he had when the fear and dread arose.

This is a very interesting instruction, isn't it? I mean, it's kind of bare bones. But to me, it seems like an enactment of not getting pulled in. Because fear and dread have a sort of urgency to them that says, "You got to do something different. You got to do something about this." They would incite us to move or to stop or to change position in some way. And very calmly, he doesn't comply. He just keeps at it.

Just last week I was on a retreat with Ajahn Sumedho, who was the abbot of Chithurst Monastery, a Thai forest monastery located in England. He was the abbot there for twenty-two years. He himself is English, and he talked about

He used the lovely phrase "replacing fear with awareness," which I thought was just fantastic, just delicious, actually. And I thought of this sutta immediately. How perfect—I'm going to be talking about this next week.

So slowly, over time, what we do in meditation is gain greater and greater capacity of mind to be with challenging feelings and impulses. And fear and dread is surely a challenging one that really pushes at us. There are other challenging ones, of course—anger, for example, is also quite inciting to us. But there comes the ability, the capacity, of not needing to react.

And why do we react? Because these are very unpleasant feelings. We don't want to feel that anymore. We don't want to feel fear—it's actually not that pleasant of a feeling. And so we do something to stop it. That's a lot of what reaction is about: stopping a feeling that we don't have capacity to handle anymore. But as the mind gets stronger, has greater ballast—there are all kinds of analogies you can use—then we can stand firm in the face of a wavering heart and just have awareness. We replace fear with awareness, put the energy into the awareness, not into the reactivity.

So this sutta is giving a possible method for this. You have to tease it out a little bit, but the enactment of it is that you don't move, that you keep the intention to just keep doing what you're doing. And the prior preparation for that is understanding your own good qualities. It's nice, isn't it? It's not that you bear down and say, "I'm going to beat this fear, I'm not afraid"—big boys don't cry, whatever story comes up like that. It's grounded instead in: I've led an ethical life. I have a loving heart. I have some wisdom. I've developed some ability not to have greed in my life. I don't need more and more things. Knowing that about ourselves is what's going to give us the strength that when fear comes and says, "Run!" we say, "No, no, I'm okay."

There are other methods, of course. This is one that's described in this sutta, but as long as we're on the topic—there are methods like grounding in the body when we feel strong emotions. Feeling our feet on the ground is another common instruction for handling powerful surges of energy through the body. But the basic idea is the same: don't get pulled away. Have some kind of inner strength on which we're relying to stand firm.

I recently watched a video by a Dharma teacher who's been practicing for more than forty years, who has recently been diagnosed with multiple myeloma. He has cancer, and he's making his journey through it a teaching for his community. He made this video where he talked about his encounter with the first round of chemotherapy, which didn't go very well. They did their best, guessed what drugs he needed, what dose to give them in, and so they started. And his body just couldn't take that drug at all. He had kidney failure, he had to go into the ICU, they flushed his body, and luckily it worked and he survived. But it was a little close.

Because of the strength of his practice, he was able to actually observe the body falling completely out of balance and struggling to pull the systems back together, which were not working at all with this drug introduced that wasn't working for him. He actually had the wherewithal—the capacity of mind from all that practice—to observe the body flailing like a fish out of water. And he noted that actually there was no suffering, even though it was a horrible experience. He said that directly: it was a horrible experience. But much of the time there was no suffering through it.

So this is the promise of developing the capacity of mind. This is a taste of moving toward freedom that we're offered. Not that your life gets perfect, not that everything works, not that your body doesn't hurt or die, but that there's a way to be with that which has so much strength of attention and awareness and capacity that it's not a problem at that moment. I don't think it was easy for him. He doesn't say it was easy. But I was impressed. It reminded me and inspired me that every moment of mindful-

ness is one more drop in that bucket. You don't lose the drops. Every moment of mindfulness counts. And if you miss another ten minutes during meditation, don't worry about it. As soon as you start again, the bucket continues to fill. It's fine.

And it accumulates over time.

As I thought more about this, I realized that at first we are developing the capacity to be with strong experience—to be with things that are happening, like body sensations or emotions or thoughts, fear and dread, for example. We're developing the capacity to be with experience.

But there's also, at some point, a shift where we start developing the capacity to be with space, to be with emptiness, to be with not knowing, to be with groundlessness. This too is actually a skill that we need to have some capacity for.

We're so focused in our lives on what is—the things that we have and the things that we are, the existent things, getting the things and keeping the things and maintaining the things. And at some point the mind starts to notice the space around the things also. That can be a little scary when we start realizing there's not a lot of basis for all these things. They're coming and going and changing. We start noticing that our body is not like it was ten years ago and is never going to be like it was ten years ago. It's going that way. And then it starts being like, what is this about?

More possibilities start to open when we're less driven with the things. And that too can be scary, actually. There's a certain fear in the openness that we live in, the actuality of the openness that we're living in. There's a lot of possibilities, and there's a lot of groundlessness. There's some need to develop capacity to be with that also—to tolerate space, if you will. It's not discussed in this sutta, but the same principle applies: replace fear with awareness, whether it's fear of something or fear of nothingness.

Georgia O'Keeffe said, "I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life, and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do." I don't know if that's literal, but it's a nice image—that there's the fear and the dread and the terror, and you just keep doing what you're needing to do.

So back to the sutta. What happens after that? He's able to be with the fear and dread. He just keeps walking or sitting or standing or lying down when the fear and dread comes upon him, and he just waits. It says, you know, I just waited until it went away. I just kept doing the same thing.

What happens after that is that it arouses in him energy and mindfulness and concentration. It brings about the development of these spiritual faculties.

For those of you who know the list of the five spiritual faculties, it begins with faith or confidence, which is pretty much what this whole fear thing is pointing toward. Developing the capacity to be with the fear and dread, to be in scary places, to develop seclusion—that's really an act of faith. You have to decide: this practice is so important, I'm willing to be in the woods by myself on scary nights. There's a lot of faith involved in practicing that way. And so that's developed—the faith to just keep walking even when you're afraid, to just keep sitting even when you're afraid.

The result of that is the second spiritual faculty: energy. And then it says unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was tranquil and untroubled, and my mind concentrated and unified. So after the faith comes the energy, the mindfulness, and the concentration, which are the next three faculties. And the fifth faculty, the last one, is wisdom, which is what comes after that.

There's a description then of how he reaches enlightenment. He starts with, "I was afraid to meditate." And it goes all the way to the four jhānas—the four deep concentration states are established in him after he's gotten through the fear and dread. There's a stock description of those. And then it talks about the insight that comes from concentration, the arising of wisdom from a concentrated mind in the form of these insights.

I won't go into a huge amount of detail on these, but these are called the three knowledges that a Buddha attains upon enlightenment. And actually I believe arahants see them also.

The three knowledges are: the first is that one sees all of one's past lives. Remember, there's an understanding in this culture that we've been at this for a while. There's rebirth, there's living lives again and again in different places. It says, "I recollected manifold past lives—one birth, two births, three births, four births, up through a hundred thousand births, many eons of world contraction, many eons of world expansion. There I had such and such a name, of such a clan, with such an appearance. Such was my nutriment, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such my life term, and such my death. And when I passed away from there, I reappeared over there, and there I had such and such a name and such and such a clan."

You can imagine this is a pretty exhausting thing to see. Can you imagine seeing hundreds of thousands of prior lives, none of which resulted in enlightenment? And here you are in the woods reviewing all of this. This is just left as the first knowledge: I understood everything I've been through to get to here.

We can put this in more psychological terms. We're going to have to open everything in our mind to be completely free. We can gain freedom from certain things in certain ways along the path. But at some point, you've got to include everything. And perhaps our past lives are our past days and years and seconds, if you want to think of it in that way. But basically, all of experience has to be seen and held. We need the capacity to hold anything in our lives.

And we have things in our lives that we don't really want to include. "I'm going to forget that moment five years ago, really." Or "I'm going to forget my whole childhood." But we have dents, we have bumps, we have wounds. It's part of the mind. And this teaching is encouraging us to turn toward all of that, to open to all of that—developing the strength of mind to do so.

The second of the three knowledges is understanding of karma. That's the usual summary of it. What the text actually says is "understanding of how beings pass away and reappear." So first, we simply saw the process—there I was there, then I was there, then I did that. And then comes the understanding that there's a logic to that process.

We understand that if we live a life of greed, we're going to pass away and have not as good a life the next time, because we didn't make very much merit doing that. This is a karmic understanding of cause and effect. It basically says that the mind, by what it's doing now, creates the home it's going to have in the future. And we understand how that process happens. If I do something harmful, it's going to have painful results. If I do something meritorious and helpful, it's going to have good results. If I do something like meditation, it can result in freedom. We understand the different kinds of karma and how things unfold.

This is sort of the ultimate wave function of the universe—you know, how things really work. What physicists are looking for is the grand equation for everything. So you get to see that in meditation. But it's not for the physical universe; it's for the unfolding of the heart. A slightly different process.

So this is the second knowledge. It's interesting, right? We understand completely how things unfold. This is complete wisdom about how to live well, which you can understand is important if you're going to be enlightened. You're going to be able to live always making skillful choices. So you have to understand these things.

It's kind of a nice phrase, actually. Let me read what it says about when he gains these knowledges: "This was the second true knowledge attained by me in the middle watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose. Darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute."

This arising of understanding from concentration—it's quite beautiful. But he's not free yet, actually. It's only two out of three.

The third knowledge is understanding of the Four Noble Truths, the understanding of the destruction of the taints. I'm using technical language, so what are these so-called taints? They are the tendency of the mind to seek out sense pleasure, the tendency of the mind to want to be something—to want a certain kind of identity, basically—and the tendency of the mind to not want to see everything, to ignore certain things. In more technical language: the taint of sensuality, the taint of being, and the taint of ignorance.

These are banished once one has seen everything and once one understands how things unfold. You understand that it's not worth it to chase after sense pleasure. It's not worth it to chase after identity. These things are not—you've done it for so many lifetimes, going up and down and around. You see that that's not the path. It's not what ultimately gets you there.

And so from that unfolds the understanding of the Four Noble Truths. This is what suffering really is. This is what dissatisfaction is, and why we feel it. And then the cause of that—the arising of clinging or craving is why that happens. And then letting go, opening, not seeking after such things—that is freedom. And there's a path to do so.

Some of this path is laid out in the sutta itself, and the rest is laid out in the broader teachings. But there's a way to get from here to there. It's a very hopeful message.

The Buddha has seen hundreds and thousands of past lives. So he's been everyone, he's been everything—that's the implication. He's been a murderer, he's been a courtesan, he's been a king, a queen, a computer programmer maybe. Somehow there was a path from those to this night of sitting under the tree.

I don't think you need to buy into this literally. I don't think it's meant to be literal. The point is that we live in a lawful universe, and it's possible to navigate through that and get the mind into a state where it can let go of everything that's binding it to its own discomfort.

But the sutta's not over. The Buddha basically says, "That's what happened. I got scared. I didn't buy into it. I got concentrated. I had these three amazing insights and my mind was freed." It's pretty compressed—from regular ordinary scared person in the woods to enlightened.

But remember, this is a story within a story. That whole account about the woods was the teaching, the main teaching. But it started out with the Brahmin Jānussoṇi saying, "Isn't practice hard?" And the Buddha agreeing.

Interestingly, the scene pulls back and the Buddha is talking again to Jānussoṇi. He says, "You might think that I still go out and practice in the woods, that I still go on retreat because I still have stuff to work on in my mind. But that would not be correct."

He says, "I do still go on retreat. I do still resort to remote jungle thicket resting places for two reasons. One, I see a pleasant abiding for myself here and now. And two, I have compassion for future generations."

This is interesting. We learn that the Buddha still goes on retreat, even after he's enlightened. He still practices, he still meditates every day, even after he's enlightened. Why would he need to? He doesn't have to clean out anything else in his heart. Why would you still meditate?

And he gives two reasons. One is it's a pleasant abiding. It's okay—you can enjoy your life. Just like enjoying your good qualities. If you have the ability to have a pleasant abiding sitting in meditation, great. You can enjoy that. The Buddha was not all about the pain and all about the asceticism.

And the second reason: "I have compassion for future generations." What's that about? I think he's setting an example. It's said at the very beginning, do people take you as their guide, as their model? The Buddha says, yes, they do. When they practice, they look to me as an example of what to do. So of course he's going to go out and meditate in the woods, because that's what he wants people to do. He wants them to see him doing that. So it's not about him. Yes, he has the pleasant abiding, but his life is about helping other people. He's free. He doesn't need anything more.

But he has so much compassion. He uses his very behavior, his whole way of being, as an example for us to do the same. Wisdom and compassion—that is all that was left.

And so the Brahman Jānussoṇī becomes a lay follower of the Buddha and declares refuge in him for life.

So whatever fear and dread there is in your heart, don't be afraid of it. There is a path—a step-by-step training of the mind to hold each thing in our life tenderly, not giving in to its urgency. Out of compassion. Out of the possibility that we can overcome that and see for ourselves how to live skillfully, how to live with wisdom, and how to offer compassion to the world.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 217

Becoming Freedom

Andrea Fella · 48 min

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella introduces the Aṭṭhakavagga (Chapter of the Eights) from the Sutta Nipāta, considered by scholars to be among the earliest recorded teachings of the Buddha. This ancient collection of poems predates the codification of the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, offering a remarkably direct teaching focused on two primary sources of suffering: clinging to sense pleasure and clinging to views.

Fella highlights how these poems describe three perspectives: the ordinary person caught in clinging, the liberated being who is free, and the path between them. The text's description of liberation is notably practical and non-metaphysical—depicting freedom not as an abstract spiritual state but as qualities visible in how one walks through the world: calm, wise, gentle, alert, without anger, fear, or pride. The Buddha's teaching on views is particularly relevant today, showing how attachment to opinions creates conflict and division, illustrated by the classic parable of the blind people and the elephant.

The practice instructions encourage us to model the behavior of those who are free—not by repressing difficult mind states, but by fully acknowledging them while choosing not to let them leak into our actions. This "fake it till you make it" approach, combined with deep honesty about our inner experience, creates a powerful feedback loop that can transform the mind. Fella connects this to the simile of the raft, emphasizing that we use the Dhamma as a tool without clinging to it.

When Shaila invited me to this series, I jumped at it. One of my favorite things is to talk about some of these teachings that are not so common or lesser known. The teaching I picked is from a lesser known book in the Pali Canon called the Sutta Nipata. It's a set of poems sometimes called the Chapter of the Eights. The Pali name for this teaching is the Atthakavagga, which basically means the Chapter of the Eights. It's not really clear why it's called that, because there's not much eight about it. There are sixteen poems, and some of them have eight sections or couplets, but most of them don't. Nevertheless, that's what it's called.

There are a couple of reasons I like this text. One is that historically, most scholars agree this is probably one of the earliest recorded teachings of the Buddha—not only early in its compilation, but also early in his time as a teacher. The way this is recognized is that the Pali itself, the language, is a little more archaic than in some of the other suttas. Thanissaro Bhikkhu points out that for poems that's not so unusual. But the

real giveaway is that this is one of the few suttas which is referenced in other teachings. There are texts where people are saying, "Have you memorized that set of poems? Do you know that set of poems?" The Buddha is also talking about memorizing these teachings as a useful teaching tool. From that standpoint, it is somewhat of an earlier teaching.

One of the interesting things I find about this text is that it seems to be from before some of the standard ways that the teachings were codified. There's no mention of the Four Noble Truths in these teachings. There's no mention of the Eightfold Path. The picture you get of the Buddha in these teachings is of a solitary teacher wandering around and talking to people. What he chose to talk to them about in this collection of poems was suffering, and that suffering is created by clinging—clinging to sense pleasure and clinging to views being the two main areas addressed.

So it's a very direct teaching. In some ways it's simple because it's focused around this very basic inquiry: How do we cling? What do we cling to? And what are ways that support letting go of clinging?

There are three different types of verses in these poems. All sixteen chapters contain verses with one of three flavors. They are either describing what it's like to be an ordinary person caught up in clinging and the suffering that comes from that. Or they describe the perspective, the state of mind, the experience of a person who is free. Or they describe how one moves from being a person who's caught to being one that's free.

In this way, the text has a very simple structure. I credit Thanissaro Bhikkhu a lot for my study of this text because he pointed out this structure and said, when you read these poems, look for which kind of verse you're reading—that will help you to understand what's happening. I used that in my own study.

Given that there are sixteen poems and about 210 verses, I'm not going to go through the entire thing. I'm going to pick out a few themes, read a few sections, and highlight pieces that I find interesting about this teaching—a few of the key aspects that I find inspiring about this text.

The two kinds of clinging—clinging to sense pleasure and clinging to views—are central. The first thing I'd like to explore are some of the poems that talk about what it's like to be an ordinary person clinging to sense pleasure.

This is from the very first poem, and I'm using excerpts here rather than reading entire poems. I took the liberty, with all of the translations, of drawing from several sources—Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Bhikkhu Virado, and Sadatissa. Another way I studied

this text was to read as many different translations as I could find. In general, if you're studying something in this way, it's often useful to read different translations because they give you different flavors.

To start looking at the perspective of clinging, how an ordinary person relates to their life, here is the first poem in Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation. I also took the liberty of editing these for gender neutrality:

If one longing for sense pleasure achieves it, yes, they're enraptured at heart. The mortal gets what they want. But if for that person, longing, desiring, the pleasures diminish, they're shattered as if shot with an arrow. One who is greedy is overpowered with weakness and trampled by trouble, for pain invades them as water a cracked boat.

This pointing to the way that as we go through our lives, if we're orienting our experience toward trying to hold on to sense pleasure, hold on to pleasant experience, and get rid of unpleasant experience—this incredibly natural and human way of orienting to the world, which we all do—if that's our way of thinking we'll find happiness, we are destined to experience suffering in this life because things are impermanent. We are bound to be confronted by pleasant things going away and unpleasant things being here. And so the Buddha describes this as "pain invading them as water a cracked boat."

Another verse on this, from the second poem: "Longing for what's over or what's to come, yearning for pleasures in the present and pleasures in the past, those who are greedy for pleasure, hunting for it, deranged, selfish, have entered the wrong road. Look at them, floundering amidst their cherished possessions like fish in a dwindling stream."

That image of fish in a dwindling stream—that one is very evocative to me. At one point during a long retreat, I was experiencing the mind just flopping around, trying to find some pleasure somewhere. And it had that feeling. It felt like a fish. This image from the poem came to me, and I laughed. It brought some amusement to just watch the mind flopping around: "Isn't there some pleasure somewhere?"

These teachings point to the way it is for an ordinary human being clinging to pleasure. And that clinging to pleasure does include clinging to getting rid of displeasure, clinging to getting rid of the unpleasant. But then another major area of teaching in this text is around clinging to views.

Clinging to sense pleasure is something we all do. It's often how we orient, the way we live our lives. It's very natural. We learn from the moment we're born that if we get something we like, something pleasant, it feels good. We get a little bit of a feedback hit:

"Oh, that feels good." Or if we manage to get rid of something we don't like, again there's a little bit of a feedback hit that feels good. So it's very natural that we orient around that. And yet as we begin to practice, as we begin to explore our experience, we see the pain of it—the pain of holding onto pleasure and trying to get rid of pain. We begin to recognize that this may not be so helpful, and so we may begin to have a way to let go of some of our holdings around sense pleasure.

A deeper level, a deeper layer of holding, is around views—clinging to views. Views about who we are, what we're capable of. Views about other people. Views about what's good, what's bad, what's right, what's wrong. So many of our views are absorbed through our upbringing, through our culture, through our families.

We have views about how close you should stand to somebody when you're talking to them. Whether and how much you look them in the eye. Whether you shake hands when you meet somebody you don't know. These are just things that come in through our culture. They're views. They're not the right way—these are simply examples of how views get absorbed.

But when you meet somebody from a different culture and they stand at a different distance, or look you in the eye a little longer, or don't look you in the eye, or perhaps hold your hand while they're talking to you, there can be discomfort because it's not familiar. The holding to views is around believing or having the perspective that this is the right way to do it.

Now these are simple examples I'm giving here—very simple examples. But we hold to views, and in the Buddhist teaching, views are actually some of the main reasons why there's conflict in the world. People holding to views. In our country at this point, views around race are a huge source of conflict. Different perspectives, different beliefs, different views. The Buddha pointed to clinging to views as being one of the main reasons there's conflict in the world. Holding to fixed opinions creates a sense of self and other—this perspective of view.

Some of the teachings from the Aṭṭhakavagga on the drawbacks of clinging to views: "Abiding by fixed opinions and pleased with themselves, they say, 'My opponent's a fool, they're no expert.'"

Upon whatever basis they regard their opponent a fool is the same opinion upon which they regard themselves as an expert. To the extent to which they rate themselves expert, they despise anyone else who makes the same claim.

And my favorite—one of my favorite verses from the entire teaching: "Those attached to perception and views roam the world offending people."

There's another verse where someone asks a question and the Buddha responds. The questioner says, "Those who maintain a view and dispute about the view, saying 'this alone is true'—is criticism all they receive, all they experience? Don't they also receive praise?" This person is pointing to something the Buddha has apparently been talking about—that when you express these opinions, you may be criticized. And he asks, "But don't you also get praised?" As if that makes it better.

And the Buddha says, "Whatever they receive is trifling, not enough to bring them any peace of mind. I say there are only two consequences of dispute: praise and criticism. Seeing this, you should not dispute. Regard instead non-dispute the grounds for peace."

There's so much to explore around views. To begin to recognize that we hold views, to begin to see that if there's conflict, there is a view being held somewhere. And so, curiosity about that. If there's conflict in yourself, sometimes there's a view being held about yourself. This can be something we explore in our experience: if there's some kind of conflict, curiosity—what view am I holding? Just hold that question for yourself.

I gave a teaching this morning around perception and concepts and how these lead to views. There's a classic teaching around this—the blind people and the elephant. I'm sure many of you have heard this teaching story. It's actually a teaching story from the Pali Canon, found in the suttas.

The story goes that a king asks his ministers to bring both an elephant and blind people, and to show the blind people the elephant by having them touch it. Some touched the legs, some touched the side of the elephant, some the tail, some the tuft of the tail. When asked, "What is an elephant like?" they each responded with a different analogy. Some said an elephant's like a post—those who touched the leg. An elephant's like a wall—those who touched the side. An elephant's like a broom—those who touched the tuft of the tail.

And then, hearing each other's responses, the teaching story goes on, they started arguing. "An elephant is like this—you're wrong." "No, an elephant is like that—you're wrong." The view, based on their own experience, became hardened. "This is what an elephant is." And the story goes on that they actually came to blows over this. Rather than being curious—"That's interesting. You think it's like a broom? It sure felt like a wall to me. Let's see if we can figure out what's going on here"—rather than doing that, people tend to solidify around their views.

This particular story is really a teaching for us because it's pointing to views that are created based on our own experience. These are some of the most tenacious views we have. We experience something; we think we know from our direct experience. But maybe we've only got a piece of the picture. Maybe we've only seen a little bit of it. When we come up against conflict in this way, perhaps we can think: maybe there's a bigger picture in which we can explore how these parts connect.

This morning, talking about this, the question came up about political views. Some people are saying it's like a post, and some people are saying the tuft of the tail is like a broom. We are entrenched in our opinions. Is there a way? It seems imperative to me at this point in our country that we find a way to step back and talk about the elephant. Or the donkey—either one. Let's see if we can find a way to the bigger picture. This is creating so much suffering and division and pain in our world. And the Buddha pointed to this 2,600 years ago: views are going to create suffering.

Views are going to create conflict. And so the Buddha spoke directly to this.

The next thing I'd like to share are some verses in this text that describe somebody who is free—somebody who has freed their mind from clinging. Really, these poems are directly pointing to one of the most pithy teachings of the Buddha. When the Buddha was asked at one point, "Could you describe your teaching in a short phrase?" he said, "Nothing should be clung to as I or me or mine."

I think this whole text might be considered a commentary on that one phrase: Nothing should be clung to as I or me or mine.

Those who have released that clinging to I or me or mine—that person is understood in this context to be free of the suffering that comes from such clinging. And that, in the Buddha's understanding, was everything we actually call suffering. We think what we call suffering is something that's unpleasant. But pleasant, unpleasant, neutral experience will come and go through our lives. That's just flowing through. What's really going on is that we react—we become averse to the unpleasant, we hold on to the pleasant. And so it's something happening in our own minds that is creating this struggle, this suffering. This is what the Buddha is pointing to: the release of that clinging.

Some of the poems describe liberated people—people who are free from this clinging. There are different ways they're described, and this is one of the most interesting aspects of this particular text. The way that people who are free are described is primarily in terms of how they are in the world—how they act, how they walk in this world, what they do. Sometimes it talks a little bit about their state of mind, but mostly it's this very ordinary description of somebody living in the world.

Here's a description of somebody who is liberated. A questioner asks the Buddha: "I want to ask you about the perfect person. There are those people we call those who are calmed. Can you tell me how they see things and how they behave?"

"One who has calmed, who has extinguished all craving before the time the body disintegrates, who has no concern over how things began or with how they will end, and no fixation with what happens in between—such a one has no preferences. They have no anger, no fear, and no pride. Nothing disturbs their composure and nothing gives them cause for regret. The wise person is restrained in speech. They have no longing for the future and no grief for the past. There are no views or opinions that lead them. They can see detachment from the entangled world of sense impressions. They do not conceal anything and there's nothing they hold on to. Without acquisitiveness or envy, they remain unobtrusive. They have no disdain or insult for anyone. They are not full of themselves or addicted to pleasure. They are gentle and alert with no blind faith. They show no aversion to anything. They are not people who work because they want something. If they get nothing at all, they remain unperturbed. There is no craving to build up the passion to taste new pleasures. The sage, freed from greed and selfishness, does not speak of themselves as among those who are superior, equal, or inferior. The sage regards nothing in the world as one's own and does not grieve because of what does not exist. Not blindly following religious teachings, such a one is truly called peaceful."

Mostly the description here is in terms of what they don't do. They're not angry, not fearful, not proud; they don't have fixation, no preferences, no blind faith, no aversion. A lot of things have been let go.

This is an interesting aspect of the Buddhist teaching. In general, the Buddha doesn't talk so much about what we can get, but what can be released. Clinging can be released. All of these areas are areas of clinging released. There are a few positive descriptions here: calm, wise, gentle, alert, even-minded. Elsewhere in this text there are some other descriptions of qualities of a liberated person.

Serene, wise, calm. They're mindful. They see, they know. And they're equanimous. These are beautiful qualities of mind that result from this letting go.

So this is a picture of someone who's free in this teaching—someone walking around the world, engaged in the world. It's a picture that may not be very close to where we are, you know: not averse, not frustrated, no preferences. But we're working on that. It's a picture of a person that I can imagine myself to possibly be someday.

This description, this way of describing the liberated state, doesn't present some abstract idea of liberation apart from the qualities of someone who is free. This is in contrast with the standard Theravada description of someone who's liberated—being someone who is free from the round of the cycle of rebirth, someone who on their final passing at death is no longer born again into this world. A metaphysical difference, some fundamental shift of being that changes the metaphysical state of a being. This is a piece of the Theravada tradition that can be found throughout the Pali Canon, but it's not found in this teaching. This teaching really emphasizes this-worldly freedom. I find that to be very inspiring, personally.

There are some quotes from my research around this text. One person who wrote a scholarly text on this, Grace Burford—I believe it might have been her doctoral thesis—gives this quote: "The Atthakavagga is exceptional within even the earliest Buddhist literature in its non-metaphysical presentation of the highest good achievable by humans." Metaphysical presentation is often something that is beyond what can actually be known in this life. "It is significant as an example of how the Buddhist ideal goal can be presented without all of the usual cosmological and metaphysical accessories that accompany it in its traditional Theravada doctrine."

So there's a lot in the Theravada that brings in different realms of existence, things that some Westerners have difficulty connecting with. And this particular teaching is a coherent teaching in which that is not brought in.

Another quote from another scholar: "The Atthakavagga sets out to describe a practical solution to human sorrow—not merely the abstract sorrow of rebirth, but the everyday sorrow of strife and aggression." Again, this is one of the reasons I find this particular teaching so inspiring. It speaks to me here and now, in this very life.

The next set of verses relates to the path of practice—how to get from being the ordinary person to being the liberated person. The training is described in quite a bit of detail in the last three poems. I'll read some of this and see what you might notice about it.

A questioner asks, "Venerable sir, speak about the path of practice."

The Buddha says: "A person should not have covetous eyes. One should close one's ears to ordinary chatter. One should not be greedy for flavors. One should not cherish anything in the world. One should be meditative, not footloose. One should desist from worry, should not be indolent, should live in lodgings where there is little noise. One should not sleep too much. One should be devoted to wakefulness and keen endeavor. One should abandon laziness, deception, merriment, various kinds of amusement. One

should not fear blame nor be conceited when praised. One should drive out greed, selfishness, anger, and malicious speech. One should not be a boaster. One should not speak scheming words. One should not cultivate impudence nor utter quarrelsome speech. One should not be drawn into telling lies nor be deliberately treacherous. One should not despise others for their lowly way of life or wisdom or precepts and practices."

If ascetics or ordinary people irritate one with their talkativeness, one should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate.

If you want to cultivate peace, act peacefully.

We sometimes think—I know you know there's this really strong feedback loop between our mind and our bodies. What's going on in our mind will filter out into our bodies, as that example around impatience shows. But this feedback loop goes both ways. As we engage in the world, not repressing that we don't feel patient or peaceful, not pretending we're not anxious, but fully acknowledging what's present while choosing how we act—something interesting begins to happen.

Basically, in this teaching, the Buddha is encouraging us to behave as though we were free.

When I read these kinds of paired texts—the description of somebody who is free and the description of somebody who is in training—the difference is the word "should" versus "is." Very much the person who is free *is* meditative, not footloose, *is* desisting, *is* not worrying, *is* not indolent. So the word "should" here—this isn't, to me, "stop your mind from doing what it's doing." Because we can't do that. Good luck with that.

Rather, in some ways the path of practice he's recommending is to try to model the behavior of those who are free. In my own experience, this is a very valuable practice, but only when I am willing and very honest with myself about what's actually going on in my mind.

Here's one example around patience and impatience: Cultivate patience by acting patiently. That could be something expressed here. Cultivate patience by acting patiently. If you're experiencing impatience, it may be tempting to repress that impatience in order to act patiently. But in my experience, this is not what the Buddha is teaching, and it is not actually effective.

What is very effective is to fully recognize: "Yep, wow, there's a lot of impatience happening here."

I'll give you an example. I was in a Long's drugstore, before it became something else, shopping. I was very impatient, kind of in a hurry to get through the store. And I noticed that this impatience was being expressed through my body. We see this often—our mind states are expressed through our body, even in subtle ways. Through expressions on our face. Through the way we engage with the world. And so this impatience was coming out of me by picking up things off the shelf and throwing them into my basket.

I noticed this and decided, okay, I'm going to practice patience here. I'm noticing the impatience. I'm going to see—not repressing this impatience—but I'm going to see if I can act as though I were patient.

So I slowed down my movements. I fully acknowledged, "Yep, there's impatience here." This was not about repressing. Not about repressing the impatience. This was an act of deep honesty, really acknowledging, "Yep, there's impatience here." The way I explored it was like, "Okay, I'm going to see—can I fully know this impatience but not let it leak out of my skin? Can I not let it leak out of my behavior?"

I began picking up things more carefully and placing them in my basket. Within about thirty to forty seconds, the impatience had fallen away and the mind was quite calm.

This kind of practice, I think, is some of what the Buddha is suggesting here. He encourages us to model the behavior of wise beings—but watch our minds. Not repress. Worry is arising? Notice how worry leaks out into your actions and see: can I really know this worry but behave as though I was not worried? See what might happen there. It's an interesting dance to play with.

Not repressing anxiety in order to act peacefully, but just watching and seeing that movement of rebound on the mind.

In some ways we trust, and we're a culture of "let it out." What's going on in our minds we have to be fully honest about and let it out. This may not be the best approach all the time, especially with something like anger. I'm not suggesting that you repress anger, but expressing it and letting it out tends to reinforce that pattern. And so what might it mean to fully know, "Yep, there's anger here," and what might it mean to act as though I were not angry? It's kind of a fake-it-till-you-make-it teaching. But again, we have to be really honest with ourselves about what's actually going on in our minds.

One thing I'll mention briefly: there's a huge other part of the teaching of this text that relates to views and not clinging to views—not clinging to any views, including the Dharma. This is a somewhat paradoxical teaching in some ways. There are people who believe that the teaching of the Aṭṭhakavagga encourages us to not hold any view at all. I don't get that sense from the texts and from this teaching.

To me, the way in which the teaching of "don't cling to views" is expressed makes it really clear that clinging to views will create suffering. If we're clinging, even clinging to the Dharma—"This Dharma, what the Buddha teaches, this is right. I'm willing to kill for this"—this is going to lead to suffering in the world. Even the Buddha's teaching would lead to that if we're holding it in that way. "You don't believe in this teaching, you're wrong. You're bad." If that's how the Dharma is held, the Buddha said, that's not the way. That's not going to lead to the lessening of suffering. And so even the Dharma, he says, should not be clung to. And yet I don't believe he's saying the Dharma should not be used, should not be valued.

I see this exploration on letting go of clinging to views expressed beautifully by another sutta. This one is very famous, so it doesn't really fit in the category of lesser-known teachings. This is the simile of the raft, where the Buddha talks about the Eightfold Path as being like a raft. We make a raft to cross over our suffering. The suffering is described as the near shore where we are standing. We see the far shore where there's peace. And there's this flood of water in the middle that needs to be crossed over to get there. All you see on this side of the shore are sticks and mud and maybe some vines. And so gathering those together, he uses this analogy, we make a raft to cross over the water, to get to the other side.

There are a number of things I like about this analogy. The first one: we make the raft out of what's available, what's right here. We don't have to build this amazing luxury liner to cross the stream. We can build this raft out of what's available, out of our direct experience and the teachings. The Buddha says that the raft is the Eightfold Path, put together with our sights and sounds and smells and tastes and such—knowing our experience through the Eightfold Path. And so we build our raft.

You can envision a raft made out of sticks and mud and vines. It's going to have a lot of holes in it. You're crossing over this flood—the flood is said to represent the suffering of greed, aversion, and delusion—and you're going to get wet. When you're crossing over this stream, you're going to be in contact with the pain. The raft is keeping you afloat on top of it, not sucked under, not swept away. You're making effort with your

hands and your feet to get across. But you're going to get wet. You are going to experience suffering. And yet the raft is giving us a new perspective. The Eightfold Path is giving us a new perspective.

Now, if the teaching is "don't cling to anything," well, if you let go of the raft when you're in the middle of the stream, you are going to drown.

So use the raft. Cross over the stream with the raft.

And then the last part of this teaching is that the Buddha says: suppose somebody, having made use of this raft to cross over the stream, once they're on the other side, thinks, "Wow, this raft has been really useful to me. Maybe I should put it on my head and carry it around with me wherever I go." Would that be useful? No. Instead, let the raft drift away and go about your business.

So in that way is my understanding of not clinging to the Dharma. At the very end of that teaching, the Buddha even says that even the Dharma and wholesome states should not be clung to—how much more so unwholesome states should not be clung to. And yet that analogy has described making use of the Dharma to free ourselves, to be in contact with suffering in a way that helps us move from being pulled under and sunk by it to being able to meet it in a new way, to transform our suffering. We do that by being in contact with it, not by somehow magically transcending it and floating above to land on the other side.

I hope this has given you some sense of appreciation for this early teaching of the Buddha. There are a few translations out there if you're interested in this text and want to read it. I will warn you, it's hard to read—a little dense, with some archaic ways of expressing things. Thanissaro Bhikkhu has a full translation of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* on Access to Insight, with helpful notes, but again, it's challenging to read. My understanding is he does a fairly accurate, literal translation, but that creates some challenges in English. There are other translations available online—"Chapter of the Octads" or "Chapter of the Eights" are good search terms.

Gil Fronsdal has also written a book that will be coming out with a publication date of October 27th this year, called *The Buddha Before Buddhism: Wisdom of the Early Teachings*, from Wisdom Publications. He's writing commentaries to each of the poems, so that may be of interest to you. There aren't many English language translations of this poem out there—Bhikkhu Bodhi, as far as I know, has not done one yet.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 218

Becoming Freedom

Andrea Fella · 48 min

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella delves into the Aṭṭhakavagga (Chapter of the Eights) from the Sutta Nipāta, considered by scholars to be among the earliest recorded teachings of the Buddha. This ancient collection of poems predates the formal codification of the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, offering a remarkably direct teaching focused on two primary sources of suffering: clinging to sense pleasure and clinging to views.

Fella highlights how these poems describe three perspectives: the ordinary person caught in clinging, the liberated person who is free, and the path between them. She emphasizes the text's unique presentation of liberation not as a metaphysical state but as a way of being in the world—the freed person described through qualities like calmness, gentleness, alertness, and equanimity rather than abstract transcendence. The teaching on views is particularly relevant today, showing how fixed opinions create conflict and division, illustrated through the classic parable of the blind people and the elephant.

Practically, Fella explores how we can model the behavior of those who are free while remaining deeply honest about our actual mental states—not repressing difficult emotions but choosing not to let them 'leak out' into our actions. She connects this to the simile of the raft, teaching us to use the Dhamma skillfully without clinging to it. This talk offers both scholarly insight and practical wisdom for transforming suffering in everyday life.

When Shaila invited me to this series, I jumped at it. One of my favorite things is to talk about some of these teachings that are not so common or lesser known. The teaching I picked is from a lesser known book in the Pali Canon called the Sutta Nipata. It's a set of poems sometimes called the Chapter of the Eights. The Pali name for this teaching is the Atakavaga, which basically means the Chapter of the Eights. It's not really clear why it's called the Chapter of the Eights, because there's not much eight about it. There are sixteen poems, and some of them have eight sections or couplets, but most of them don't. But that's what it's called, the Chapter of the Eights.

There are a couple of reasons I like this text. One is that it seems to be, and historically most scholars agree, probably one of the earliest recorded teachings of the Buddha—not only early in its compilation, but also early in his time as a teacher. The way this is recognized in this particular text is that, first of all, the Pali, the language itself, is a little more archaic than in some of the other suttas. Thanissaro Bhikkhu points out that for poems that's not so unusual. But the real giveaway is that it is one of the few suttas

which is referenced in other teachings. There are texts where people are saying, "Hey, have you memorized that set of poems? Do you know that set of poems?" The Buddha is also talking about memorizing these teachings as being a useful teaching tool. So these poems are at least referred to in other texts, and from that standpoint, it is somewhat of an earlier teaching.

One of the interesting things I find about this text is that it seems to be from before some of the standard ways the teachings were codified happened. There's no mention of the Four Noble Truths in these teachings. There's no mention of the Eightfold Path. The picture you get of the Buddha in these teachings is of a solitary teacher wandering around and talking to people. What he chose to talk to them about in this collection of poems was suffering, and that suffering is created by clinging—clinging to sense pleasure and clinging to views being the two main areas discussed in this text.

So it's a very direct teaching. In some ways it's simple because it's focused around this very simple place of looking at how do we cling, what do we cling to, and what are ways that support letting go of clinging.

There are three different types of verses in the sixteen poems. Most of the verses have one of three flavors to them. They are either describing what it's like to be an ordinary person caught up in clinging and the suffering that comes from that. Or they're describing the perspective or the state of mind or the experience of a person who is free. Or they're describing how one moves from being a person who's caught to being one that's free.

In this way, it's got a very simple structure. I credit Thanissaro Bhikkhu a lot for my study of this text because he pointed out this structure and said, when you read these poems, look for which kind of verse you're reading—that will help you to understand what's happening. I used that in my own study of these poems.

Given that there are sixteen poems with about 210 verses, I'm not going to go through the entire thing. I'm going to pick out a few themes, read a few sections, and highlight a few pieces that I find interesting about this teaching, a few of the key aspects that I find inspiring about this text.

The two kinds of clinging—the clinging to sense pleasure and the clinging to views—the first thing I'd like to explore with you are some of the poems that talk about what it's like to be an ordinary person clinging to sense pleasure. This is from the very first poem, and I'm using excerpts here, not reading entire poems. I took the liberty, with all of the translations—I'm using some translations from Thanissaro Bhikkhu, some from Bhikkhu Virado, some from Sadatissa—of editing them for gender neutrality. Another

way I studied this text was to read as many different translations as I could find. In general, if you're studying something in this way, it's often useful to read different translations, because the different translations give you different flavors.

So, to start looking at the perspective of clinging, the perspective of how an ordinary person relates to their life, here is the first poem in Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation:

If one longing for sense pleasure achieves it, yes, they're enraptured at heart. The mortal gets what they want. But if for that person, longing, desiring, the pleasures diminish, they're shattered as if shot with an arrow. One who is greedy is overpowered with weakness and trampled by trouble, for pain invades them as water a cracked boat.

So this points to the way that as we go through our lives, if we're orienting our experience towards trying to hold on to sense pleasure, hold on to pleasant experience, and get rid of unpleasant experience—this incredibly natural and human way of orienting to the world, something we all do—if that's our way of thinking we'll find happiness, we are destined to experience suffering in this life, because things are impermanent. We are bound to be confronted by pleasant things going away and unpleasant things being here. And so the Buddha describes this as "pain invading them as water a cracked boat."

Another verse on this, from the second poem: "Longing for what's over or what's to come, yearning for pleasures in the present and pleasures in the past. Those who are greedy for pleasure, hunting for it, deranged, selfish, have entered the wrong road. Look at them, floundering amidst their cherished possessions like fish in a dwindling stream."

That image of fish in a dwindling stream—that one is very evocative to me. At one point during a long retreat, I was experiencing the mind just flopping around, trying to find some pleasure somewhere. And it had that feeling. It felt like a fish. This image from the poem came to me, and I laughed. It brought some amusement to just watch the mind flopping around. Isn't there some pleasure somewhere?

These teachings point to the way it is for an ordinary human being clinging to pleasure. And that clinging to pleasure does include clinging to getting rid of displeasure, clinging to getting rid of the unpleasant. But another major area of teaching in this text is around clinging to views.

Clinging to sense pleasure is something we all do. It's kind of how we orient, the way we live our lives often. It's very natural. We learn from the moment we're born that if we get something we like, something pleasant, it feels good. We get a little bit of a feedback hit—oh, that feels good. Or if we manage to get rid of something we don't like,

again there's a little bit of feedback hit that feels good. So it's very natural that we orient around that. And yet as we begin to practice, as we begin to explore our experience, we see the pain of it—the pain of holding onto pleasure and trying to get rid of pain. We begin to recognize that this may not be so helpful, and so we may begin to have a way to let go of some of our holdings around sense pleasure.

A deeper level, a deeper layer of holding, is around views—clinging to views. Views about who we are, what we're capable of, views about other people, views about what's good, what's bad, what's right, what's wrong. So many of our views come in, are absorbed through our upbringing, through our culture, through our families.

We have views about how close you should stand to somebody when you're talking to them. Whether and how much you look them in the eye. Whether you shake hands when you meet somebody that you don't know. These are just things that come in through our culture. They're views. They're not the right way—just examples of how views get absorbed. But when you meet somebody from a different culture and they stand a different distance, or look at you in the eye a little longer, or don't look at you in the eye, or perhaps hold your hand while they're talking to you, there can be discomfort because it's not familiar. The holding to views is around believing or having the perspective that this is the right way to do it.

Now these are simple examples I'm giving here—very simple examples. But we hold to views that are actually, in the Buddhist teaching, some of the main reasons why there's conflict in the world. People holding to views. In our country at this point, views around race are a huge source of conflict. Different perspectives, different beliefs, different views. The Buddha pointed to clinging to views as being one of the main reasons there's conflict in the world. And holding to fixed opinions creates a sense of self and other—this perspective of view.

Some of the teachings from the Aṭṭhakavagga on the drawbacks of clinging to views: "Abiding by fixed opinions and pleased with themselves, they say, 'My opponent's a fool, they're no expert.'"

Upon whatever basis they regard their opponent a fool is the same opinion upon which they regard themselves as an expert. To the extent to which they rate themselves expert, they despise anyone else who makes the same claim. And one of my favorite verses from the entire teaching: "Those attached to perception and views roam the world offending people."

There's a passage where someone asks the Buddha a question. The questioner says, "Those who maintain a view and dispute, saying 'this alone is true'—is criticism all they receive? Don't they also receive praise?" This person is pointing to something the Buddha has apparently been discussing with him about how when you express these opinions, you may be criticized. And he says, "But don't you also get praised?" As if that makes it better.

And the Buddha says, "Whatever they receive is trifling—not enough to bring them any peace of mind. I say there are only two consequences of dispute: praise and criticism. Seeing this, you should not dispute. Regard instead non-dispute the grounds for peace."

There's so much to explore around views. To begin to recognize that we hold views, to begin to see that if there's conflict, there is a view being held somewhere. And so curiosity about that. If there's conflict in yourself, sometimes there's a view being held about yourself. This can be something we explore in our experience. If there's some kind of conflict, curiosity: what view am I holding? Just hold that question for yourself.

I gave a teaching this morning around perception and concepts, and how these lead to views. There's a classic teaching around this—the blind people and the elephant. I'm sure many of you have heard this story. It's actually found in the Pali Canon, in the suttas.

The story goes that a king asks his ministers to bring both an elephant and blind people, and to show the blind people the elephant by having them touch it. Some touched the legs, some touched the side of the elephant, some the tail, some the tuft of the tail. And when asked, "What is an elephant like?" they each responded with a different analogy. Some said an elephant is like a post—those who touched the leg. An elephant is like a wall—those who touched the side. An elephant is like a broom—those who touched the tuft of the tail.

Then, hearing each other's responses, the story continues, they started arguing. "An elephant is like this—you're wrong!" "No, an elephant is like that—you're wrong!" The view, based on their own experience, became hardened: *this* is what an elephant is. And the story goes on that they actually came to blows over this.

Rather than being curious—"Oh, that's interesting. You think it's like a broom? It sure felt like a wall to me. Let's see if we can figure out what's going on here"—rather than doing that, people tend to solidify around their views.

This particular story, I think, is really instructive because it's pointing to views that are created based on our own experience. These are some of the most tenacious views we have. We experience something; we think we know from our direct experience. But maybe we've only got a piece of the picture. Maybe we've only seen a small part of it.

When we come up against conflict in this way, maybe we can think: perhaps there's a bigger picture in which we can explore how these parts connect.

This morning, the question came up about political views. Some people are saying it's like a post, some people are saying the tuft of the tail is like a broom. We are entrenched in our opinions. Is there a way forward? It seems imperative to me at this point in our country that we find a way to step back and talk about the elephant. Or the donkey—either one.

Let's see if we can find a way to the bigger picture. This is creating so much suffering and division and pain in our world. And the Buddha pointed to this 2,600 years ago: views are going to create suffering.

Views are going to create conflict. And so the Buddha spoke to this.

The next thing I'd like to share are some verses in this text that describe somebody who's free—somebody who has freed their mind from clinging. Really, these poems are directly pointing to the teaching. One of the pithy teachings of the Buddha, when he was asked at one point if he could describe his teaching in a short phrase, was this: "Nothing should be clung to as I or me or mine." And really, I think this whole text might be considered a commentary on that one phrase. Nothing should be clung to as I or me or mine.

Those who have released that clinging to I or me or mine—that person is understood in this context to be free of the suffering that comes from clinging. And that, in the Buddha's understanding, was everything we actually call suffering. We think what we call suffering is something unpleasant. But pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences will come and go through our lives. That's just flowing through. What's really going on is that we react—we get averse to the unpleasant, we hold on to the pleasant. And so it's something in our own minds that is creating this struggle, this suffering. This is what the Buddha is pointing to: the release of that clinging.

Some of the poems describe liberated people, those who are free from this clinging. There are different ways they're described, and this is one of the most interesting aspects of this particular text. The way that people who are free are described is primar-

ily in terms of how they are in the world—how they act, how they walk in this world, what they do. Sometimes it talks a little bit about their state of mind, but mostly it's just this very ordinary description of somebody living in the world.

So here's a description of somebody who is liberated. A questioner asks the Buddha:

I want to ask you about the perfect person. There are those people we call those who are calmed. Can you tell me how they see things and how they behave?

One who has calmed, who has extinguished all craving before the time the body disintegrates, who has no concern over how things began or with how they will end, and no fixation with what happens in between—such a one has no preferences. They have no anger, no fear, and no pride. Nothing disturbs their composure and nothing gives them cause for regret.

The wise person is restrained in speech. They have no longing for the future and no grief for the past. There are no views or opinions that lead them. They can see detachment from the entangled world of sense impressions. They do not conceal anything and there's nothing they hold on to. Without acquisitiveness or envy, they remain unobtrusive. They have no disdain or insult for anyone.

They are not full of themselves or addicted to pleasure. They are gentle and alert with no blind faith. They show no aversion to anything. They are not people who work because they want something. If they get nothing at all, they remain unperturbed. There is no craving to build up the passion to taste new pleasures.

The sage, freed from greed and selfishness, does not speak of themselves as among those who are superior, equal, or inferior. The sage regards nothing in the world as one's own and does not grieve because of what does not exist. Not blindly following religious teachings, such a one is truly called peaceful.

Mostly the description here is in terms of what they don't do. They're not angry, not fearful, not full of pride. They don't have fixation, no preferences, no blind faith, no aversion. So a lot of things have been let go.

This is an interesting aspect of the Buddhist teaching. In general, the Buddha doesn't talk so much about what we can get, but what can be released. Clinging can be released. All of these areas are areas of clinging released. There are a few positive descriptions here: calm, wise, gentle, alert, even-minded. Elsewhere in this text there are some other descriptions of qualities of a liberated person.

Serene, wise, calm. They're mindful. They see, they know. And they're equanimous. Such beautiful qualities of mind that result from this letting go.

This is a picture of someone who's free in this teaching—someone walking around the world, engaged in the world. It's a picture that may not be very close to where we are: not averse, not frustrated, no preferences. But we're working on that. It's a picture of a person that I can imagine myself to possibly be someday.

This description, this way of presenting the liberated state, doesn't offer some abstract idea of liberation apart from the qualities of someone who is free. This is in contrast with the standard Theravada description of someone who's liberated being someone who is free from the round of the cycle of rebirth—someone who, on their final passing at death, is no longer born again into this world. A metaphysical difference, some fundamental shift of being that changes the metaphysical state of a being. This is a piece of the Theravada tradition that can be found throughout the Pali Canon, but it's not found in this teaching. This teaching really emphasizes this-worldly freedom. I find that to be very inspiring, personally.

There are some quotes from my research around this text. One person who wrote a scholarly text on this teaching was Grace Burford. I read what I believe was her doctoral thesis, and she offers this quote: "The Aṭṭhakavagga is exceptional within even the earliest Buddhist literature in its non-metaphysical presentation of the highest good achievable by humans." Metaphysical presentation often involves something that is beyond what can actually be known in this life. "The Aṭṭhakavagga is exceptional within even the earliest Buddhist literature in its non-metaphysical presentation of the highest good achievable by humans. It is significant as an example of how the Buddhist ideal goal can be presented without all of the usual cosmological and metaphysical accessories that accompany it in traditional Theravada doctrine."

There's a lot in the Theravada that brings in different realms of existence—things that some Westerners have difficulty connecting with. This particular teaching is a coherent teaching in which those elements are not brought in.

Another quote from another scholar: "The Aṭṭhakavagga sets out to describe a practical solution to human sorrow, not merely the abstract sorrow of rebirth, but the everyday sorrow of strife and aggression." Again, this is one of the reasons I find this particular teaching so inspiring. It speaks to me here and now, in this very life.

The next set of verses relates to the path of practice—how to get from being the ordinary person to being the liberated person. The training is described in quite a bit of detail in the last three poems. I'll read some of this, and you might notice certain things about it.

A questioner asks, "Venerable sir, speak about the path of practice."

The Buddha says: "A person should not have covetous eyes. One should close one's ears to ordinary chatter. One should not be greedy for flavors. One should not cherish anything in the world. One should be meditative, not footloose. One should desist from worry, should not be indolent, should live in lodgings where there is little noise. One should not sleep too much. One should be devoted to wakefulness and keen endeavor. One should abandon laziness, deception, merriment, various kinds of amusement. One should not fear blame nor be conceited when praised. One should drive out greed, selfishness, anger, and malicious speech. One should not be a boaster. One should not speak scheming words. One should not cultivate impudence nor utter quarrelsome speech. One should not be drawn into telling lies nor be deliberately treacherous. One should not despise others for their lowly way of life or wisdom or precepts and practices."

Basically, in this teaching, the Buddha is encouraging us to behave as though we were free.

When I read these kinds of paired texts—the description of somebody who is free and the description of somebody who is in training—the difference is the word "should" versus "is." Very much the person who is free *is* meditative, not footloose, *is* desisting, *is* not worrying, *is* not indolent.

So the word "should" here—to me this isn't about stopping your mind from doing what it's doing. Because we can't do that. Good luck with that. But in some ways the path of practice the Buddha is recommending is to try to model the behavior of those who are free. In my own experience, this is a very valuable practice, but only when I am willing and very honest with myself about what's actually going on in my mind.

In one example around patience and impatience: cultivate patience by acting patiently. That could be something expressed here. Cultivate patience by acting patiently. If you're experiencing impatience, it may be tempting to repress that impatience in order to act patiently. But in my experience, this is not what the Buddha is teaching, and it is not actually effective.

What is very effective is to fully recognize: yep, wow, there's a lot of impatience happening here. I'll give you an example of this. I was in a Long's—this was before it became something else—shopping in a Long's, and I was very impatient. I was kind of in a hurry to get through the store. And what I noticed was that it was being expressed through my body. We see this often—our mind states are expressed through our body, even in subtle ways. It's expressed through the expressions on our face. It's expressed through the way we engage in the world. And so this impatience was coming out of me by picking up things off the shelf and throwing them into my basket. Just this kind of grabbing and tossing.

I noticed this and decided, okay, I'm going to practice patience here. I'm noticing the impatience, and I'm going to see—not repressing this impatience—but I'm going to see if I can act as though I were patient. So I slowed down my movements. I fully acknowledged, yep, there's impatience here. This was not about repressing the impatience. This is an act of deep honesty, really acknowledging, yep, there's impatience here. The way I explored it was like, okay, I'm going to see—can I fully know this impatience but not let it leak out of my skin? Can I not let it leak out into my behavior?

And so I began picking up things more carefully and placing them in my basket. Within about thirty or forty seconds, the impatience had fallen away and the mind was quite calm.

This kind of practice, I think, is some of what the Buddha is suggesting here. He encourages us to model the behavior of wise beings, but watch our minds. Not repress. Worry is arising? Notice how worry leaks out into your actions and see, okay, can I really know this worry but behave as though I was not worried? See what might happen there. It's kind of an interesting dance to play with.

So this to me is really beautifully spoken here in this next verse: "If ascetics or ordinary people irritate one with their talkativeness, one should not respond harshly, for the peaceful do not retaliate."

If you want to cultivate peace, act peacefully.

We sometimes think—and I know you know—there's this really strong feedback loop between our mind and our bodies. What's going on in our mind will filter out into our bodies, as that example around the impatience shows. But this feedback loop does go both ways. So as we engage in the world, not repressing that we don't feel patient or peaceful, not repressing our anxiety—

Not repressing anxiety in order to act peacefully, but just watching and seeing that movement of rebound on the mind.

In some ways we trust—and we're a culture of "let it out." What's going on in our minds, we believe we have to be fully honest about and let it out. This may not be the best approach all the time, especially with something like anger. I'm not suggesting that you repress anger, but expressing it and letting it out in some ways tends to reinforce that pattern. And so what might it mean to fully know—yep, there's anger here—and what might it mean to act as though I were not angry? It's kind of a fake-it-till-you-make-it teaching. But again, we have to be really honest with ourselves about what's actually going on in our minds.

There's a huge other part of the teaching of this text that relates to views and not clinging to views—not clinging to any views, including the Dharma. This is somewhat paradoxical teaching in some ways. There are people who believe that the teaching of the Aṭṭhakavagga encourages us to not hold any view at all, and I don't get that sense from the texts and from this teaching.

To me, the way in which the teaching of don't cling to views is really clearly described: clinging to views will create suffering. If we're clinging, even clinging to the Dharma—you know, this Dharma, what the Buddha teaches, this is right, I'm willing to kill for this—this is going to lead to suffering in the world. Even the Buddha's teaching would lead to that if we're holding it in that way. "You don't believe in this teaching, you're wrong. You're bad." If that's how the Dharma is held, the Buddha said that's not the way. That's not going to lead to the lessening of suffering. And so even the Dharma, he says, should not be clung to.

And yet I don't believe he's saying the Dharma should not be used, should not be valued. I see this exploration on letting go of clinging to views to be expressed by another sutta—this one very famous, so it doesn't really fit in the category of lesser-known teachings. This is the simile of the raft, where the Buddha talks about the Eightfold Path being like a raft.

We make a raft to cross over our suffering. The suffering is described as the near shore where we are standing. We see the far shore where there's peace. And there's this flood of water in the middle that needs to be crossed over to get there. All you see on this side of the shore are sticks and mud and maybe some vines. And so gathering those together, he uses this analogy of making a raft to cross over the water, to get to the other side.

There's a number of things I like about this analogy. First, we make the raft out of what's available, what's right here. We don't have to build this amazing luxury liner to cross the stream. We can build this raft out of what's available, out of our direct experi-

ence and the teachings. The Buddha says that the raft is the Eightfold Path, put together with our sights and sounds and smells and tastes and touch—knowing our experience through the Eightfold Path. And so we build our raft.

You can envision a raft made out of sticks and mud and vines. It's going to have a lot of holes in it. You're crossing over this flood—the flood is said to represent the suffering of greed, aversion, and delusion—and you're going to get wet. When you're crossing over this stream, you're going to be in contact with the pain. The raft is keeping you afloat on top of it, not sucked under, not swept away. You're making effort with your hands and your feet to get across. But you're going to get wet. You are going to experience suffering. And yet the raft is giving us a new perspective. The Eightfold Path is giving us a new perspective.

Now, if the teaching is simply don't cling to anything—well, if you let go of the raft when you're in the middle of the stream, you are going to drown.

So use the raft. Cross over the stream with it.

And then the last part of the teaching is this: the Buddha says that someone having made use of this raft to cross over the stream, once they're on the other side, suppose they think, "Wow, this raft has been really useful to me. Maybe I should put it on my head and carry it around with me wherever I go." Would that be useful?

No.

Instead, set the raft adrift and go about your business.

So in that way is my understanding of not clinging to the Dharma. And at the very end of that teaching, the Buddha even says that even the Dharma and wholesome states should not be clung to—how much more so unwholesome states should not be clung to.

And yet that analogy has described making use of the Dharma to free ourselves, to be in contact with that suffering in a way that helps us move from being pulled under and sunk by it to being able to meet it in a new way, to transform our suffering. And we do that by being in contact with it, not by somehow magically transcending it and floating above and landing on the other side.

I hope this has given you some sense of appreciation for this early teaching of the Buddha. There are a few translations out there if you're interested in this text and want to read it. I will warn you, it's hard to read—a little dense, with some archaic ways that things are expressed. Thanissaro Bhikkhu has a full translation of the Aṭṭhakavagga on Access to Insight, and he has some good notes with it that are helpful, but again, it's

challenging. My understanding is he does a fairly accurate, literal translation, but that creates some difficulties reading it in English. There are other translations out there on the internet that you can search for—"Chapter of the Octads" or "Chapter of the Eights" are good things to search for.

And Gil Fronsdal has written a book that will be coming out—I think the publication date is October 27th this year. The book will be called *The Buddha Before Buddhism: Wisdom of the Early Teachings*. It will be available from Wisdom Publications. He's writing commentaries to each of the poems, so that may be of interest to you. There's not a lot of English-language translations of these poems out there; Bhikkhu Bodhi, as far as I know, has not done one yet.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 219

Buddha's Practical Advice for Maintaining Material Gains and Wealth

Andrea Fella · 27 min

In this illuminating talk, Shaila Catherine presents a rarely discussed discourse from the Aṅguttara Nikāya that reveals the Buddha's practical wisdom for lay practitioners regarding material well-being. The sutta identifies four factors that determine whether families can maintain their wealth: looking for things that are lost, repairing things that have gotten old, being moderate in consuming food and drink, and placing virtuous people in positions of authority.

Catherine skillfully connects these seemingly mundane instructions to deeper practice principles. The advice to look for lost items and repair belongings becomes an invitation to cultivate mindfulness in our relationship with material things—extending sati beyond the meditation cushion into daily interactions with our possessions. She reads from the Majjhima Nikāya's description of how the Buddha ate with complete presence, using it to explore moderation not as austerity but as conscious, purposeful engagement with the requisites of life.

The teaching on virtue in leadership opens into a profound reflection on sīla as the foundation for all wholesome states. Catherine cites the suttas describing how satipaṭṭhāna practice, the seven factors of awakening, and the Noble Eightfold Path are all developed "based upon virtue, established upon virtue." She extends this to show how trust—grounded in ethical conduct—enables society and commerce to function. For contemporary practitioners, this discourse offers a framework for bringing mindful attention, contentment, and integrity to our material responsibilities without either grasping or negligent disregard.

I'm the last of a series of speakers in what we've called "The Lesser Known Teachings of the Buddha." I put together this series because I was very intrigued as I read the discourses. We've been reading the numerical discourses of the Buddha, the Aṅguttara Nikāya, this year in our monthly study group, and I became aware that there were many discourses, especially in that collection, that are not often heard about. There are lots of surprises here—even after years and years of studying the suttas, there are just lots of surprises in the Aṅguttara Nikāya. So I wanted to devote a series to looking at the things that are just not so commonly talked about.

I knew I was going to be jet-lagged for this talk, so I picked a very simple one. I wanted to speak about how we maintain wealth and material gains. How many people think of the Buddha as teaching that? No, we think of the Buddha as being all about renunciation, about letting go, about giving up the home life and going into homelessness. We don't think about him as giving advice about how to keep your wealth. But there actually are discourses where he was speaking to lay people and giving them advice as to how to protect their family's wealth.

Just knowing this opens up the discourses a little bit, moving us beyond some idea that these are spiritual words that are all very elevated and otherworldly. Instead, the discourses of the Buddha are conversations that he had with real people, and he dealt with whatever their situation was.

The discourse is from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Book of the Fours, and I'll just read it. It's two paragraphs:

"In every case where a family cannot hold onto its great wealth for long, it is for one or another of these four reasons. Which four? They don't look for things that are lost. They don't repair things that have gotten old. They are immoderate in consuming food and drink. They place a woman or man of no virtue or principles in the position of authority. In every case where a family cannot hold on to its great wealth for long, it is for one or another of these four reasons.

In every case where a family can hold on to its great wealth for long, it is for one or another of these four reasons. Which four? They look for things that are lost. They repair things that have gotten old. They are moderate in consuming food and drink. They place a virtuous, principled woman or man in the position of authority. In every case where a family can hold on to its great wealth for long, it is for one or another of these four reasons."

So I want to look at these four reasons together tonight.

"They look for things that are lost." It's really practical—really, really practical. I understand this to be encouraging us to be mindful of our interaction with the material world so that we don't engage with things in a careless manner. We bring attention to the most ordinary of daily activities, which is our relationship to the various things that we touch, that we work with, that we have, that we hold.

We're not only mindful of how we place our bodies in the sitting posture, but we're also mindful of the things that we touch, what we hold, what we're responsible for, what we use, what we protect, what we own, what we possess. What we wash, what we clean, what we move, what we do, the stuff that we do stuff with. We're mindful of our hands.

Some people have habits. Do you have a habit of losing your glasses? Or a habit of losing your keys? Or a habit of wondering where you put that ring or that watch or that book? Have you lost your phone? What do you lose? Sometimes the things that we lose repeatedly—and often find—we lose them because we weren't mindful of our relationship to them.

We weren't aware and attentive of how we were using it and what we did with it.

And so a simple instruction like this—to look for things that are lost—I think helps us to start to bring attention to how it is we lose something in the first place, and to practice mindfulness then with touch, with holding, with the things that we're responsible for. And when we lose them, then we look for them. We don't have to get all worried and anxious that we've lost it. It's probably in our pockets. It's probably in whatever jacket we were wearing yesterday. Because often when we think we've lost something, we've really just misplaced it. So by looking for things that are lost, it helps us to bring attention to that arena of our relationship to things.

And I think this connects again with the next point, which was that they repair things that have gotten old. Whether this is about fixing a vacuum cleaner or being attentive to the state of your toaster or taking the time to actually stitch and patch up a hole in clothing rather than just throw it away as soon as it starts to wear a little bit—I think this item encourages us to respect our possessions and respect the work that went into acquiring them.

Because everything that we have was gained through effort. It was gained through labor. It was gained through time. We invested in it and other people invested in it. So by repairing things, we give respect to things so that we don't just toss everything away as soon as there's some little waver of "whatever, it's not working." We consider: can we fix it up? Can we repair it? Can we make the effort to keep them in good condition, to keep them operating? It's just a basic respect for the effort and the time and the labor that goes into producing things.

Now, things are a little bit different these days with the consumer economy. In the Buddha's time, not much was really tossed away. Almost everything was either repurposed or repaired. I think the disposable society that we live in today would have been

unimaginable 2,600 years ago. Many of our electronics, our appliances, our products are difficult, if not impossible, to repair because they're designed to stop working or to break down after a certain period of time. Or companies stop producing the parts that would enable somebody who even had the skills or the interest to repair them, because they want to force new purchases.

I can't tell you how many times—you've probably all had this experience yourself—where something breaks down, some appliance or something, and you call the repair person, and they look at the date you bought it, and they say, "Oh yes, this was designed to last for six years. Be lucky, be happy—it's only seven years old. We don't repair it after five years." I mean, that happens very frequently, whether we're talking about water heaters. Why do water heaters have to break down after ten years? They're nevertheless designed to.

So we have a different society and expectations and economy that we're working within. We have to adjust our understanding of what the Buddha was saying. And we don't also want to just hang on to things because they're broken and we don't want to throw them away, and then we just live with piles of clutter. That would be even worse.

But since there are lots of situations where we might not be able to take this quite literally, I think we can still consider this an invitation to be mindful of the maintenance that's required for daily life and to consider again: how do we tend to, how do we care for our material responsibilities? Are we lazy and just let things fall apart around us because we don't bother to maintain them, we don't bother to keep them up? Or are we flagrantly wasteful, just throwing things away at the slightest sign of wear and just buying new instead of even attempting a minor repair? Or are we paralyzed—neither repairing them nor throwing them away—and then just living with useless clutter around?

We can develop an appropriate, moderate, non-wasteful, and wise relationship to our stuff. I think that's what this is pointing to. It's encouraging us to develop contentment, right effort, and a practical relationship with material things.

The third item is that they are moderate in consuming food and drink. I'd like to read a verse from the Middling Discourses about how the Buddha eats. It says: "When he receives rice, he does not raise or lower the bowl or tip it forward or backwards. He receives neither too little rice nor too much rice. He adds sauces in the right proportion. He does not exceed the right amount of sauce in the mouthful. He turns the mouthful over two or three times in his mouth and then swallows it. And no rice kernel enters his

body unchewed and no rice kernel remains in his mouth. Then he takes another mouthful. He takes his food experiencing the taste, though not experiencing greed for the taste. The food he takes has eight factors."

It is neither for amusement nor for intoxication, nor for the sake of physical beauty and attractiveness, but only for the endurance and continuance of this body, for the ending of discomfort, and for the assisting of the holy life. He considers, "I shall terminate old feelings without arousing new feelings, and I shall be healthy and blameless and shall live in comfort."

So that's how the Buddha eats.

Now, this might seem a little bit extreme, perhaps a little bit controlled. But I think it certainly demonstrates some composure in action and a non-indulgence in the most ordinary of activities—eating—and a sense of simplicity, an awareness of what is enough. It encourages us to reflect on how we engage with food.

Often when food is mentioned in the discourses, it isn't just about food. Food is an example of a requisite. It's an example of something that we need to live but can overindulge in or can use for the wrong reasons. So I extend this to consider: How do we engage with our food and our clothing and our housing and our entertainment and our vehicles? How do we engage with things? Is there moderation? Do we use enough, but maybe not excess?

Is our interaction appropriate, moderate, enough to provide the sufficient conditions for our health, for our safety, for our well-being, for our growth, and for our pleasure, joy, and happiness? There's nothing wrong with that either. Or do the excesses in our lives dominate even the very ordinary activities related to our food, our shelter, our clothing, and our social activities? Because after a while, excesses become burdens.

Now, I don't take this to be a literal instruction that we should obsessively chew our rice. I read it instead as an encouragement to relate consciously and moderately and purposefully to the ordinary activities, the necessary activities of living. So just reflect for a moment: Are there ways in which you feel the unsatisfactoriness, the burden, the pangs of excessiveness in any area of your ordinary life? And how might it be possible to bring greater simplicity—not austerity, but simplicity—to your living?

I'd like to say a few words about the fourth item: placing a virtuous, principled woman or man in the position of authority. The texts actually do say "woman or man," by the way. Sometimes I shift the genders around, but this was actually in the text. So it was clear that in some situations, women certainly did have authority in certain arenas and under different conditions.

Virtue is the basis not only for developing meditation—virtue is actually the basis for developing all wholesome states. It's the foundation of our practice. In satipatthana practice, the development of mindfulness—sati means mindfulness—we find satipatthana is developed based upon virtue. Similarly, the factors of awakening are developed based upon virtue, and the Eightfold Path is developed based upon virtue. In fact, all wholesome states are explicitly described as being based upon virtue.

Just to give you a sense of this, there's a discourse about a monk named Bahiya. For those of you familiar with the suttas, this is not Bahiya of the Bark Cloth, who got enlightened quickly and then was killed by a cow. This is a different Bahiya, who lived a nice long life as a monk.

The discourse says: "Bahiya, purify the very starting point of wholesome states. And what is the starting point of wholesome states? Virtue that is well purified and a view that is straight. When your virtue is well purified and your view straight, based upon virtue, established upon virtue, you should develop the four establishments of mindfulness, the satipatthanas."

In another discourse: "Bhikkhus, just as whatever kinds of seeds and plant life attain to growth, increase, and expansion, all do so based upon the earth, established upon the earth, so too, based upon virtue, established upon virtue, a bhikkhu develops and cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path, and thereby attains to growth, increase, and expansion in wholesome states." There's very similar phrasing where, based upon virtue, established upon virtue, one cultivates the seven factors of awakening. Basically, it's describing that virtue is clearly a necessary foundation for success in meditation.

But virtue also plays a very important role for maintaining our material wealth and our material gains. We need to trust the people that we work with, the people that we work for, and the people in positions of authority. We can probably imagine the myriad ways that corruption and deception and lies, slander, theft, and greed can destroy wealth.

When you go into a bank, you have to trust the teller. There has to be a certain degree of trust to give over our money to these institutions. We have to trust our financial advisors and our accountants to conduct themselves rightly. We may double-count the change when we get our money at the grocery store or at a shop, but nevertheless, each time we swipe our credit card, there is trust involved in this exchange. We have to trust our employers to be fair and trust the virtue of friends and family whom we allow to enter our homes.

As a society, we need the people we put into authority to have virtue. Without virtue, corruption will increase and the sense of security will diminish. We need trust for society to function.

I'm actually in quite a fortunate position to be associating and working with very virtuous people.

I mean, all the volunteers at IMSB—it's a very virtuous group of people, probably the best you can find anywhere. And it's especially important to me personally because my livelihood and my income is sitting in a basket by the door.

So I'm not only thankful for the virtue of this group—because the dana actually does go in the bowl instead of coming out of it—but also for the virtue of the volunteers who manage the dana, who take it to the bank, who process it, and who at the end of the month send me a check of the combined donations, which is the equivalent of my income, my salary. What's lovely about it is the environment of trust within which that occurs.

Not everybody is so fortunate to feel safety in their work environment. Some people go to work in an environment that has far more contention, backbiting, fear, competition, and other unwholesome, unpleasant qualities than we find here. So I'm very grateful for that.

But I do think this aspect of cultivating virtue is important to understand, not only in terms of our meditation practice, but also to realize that it gives us a strength in integrity—which is actually a strength in social environments too. Too often I hear people say that virtue is of no use in business, that it's a hindrance or a failing. I don't think it is. I believe it's actually a source of strength.

It would be ignorance to think that because we're virtuous, everybody else is. But we can be virtuous and also be intelligent in assessing the degree of virtue of others, so that we don't get used or abused or exploited or betrayed. We can bring intelligence to our practice of virtue and bring that virtue into many different businesses, into our relationship with the material things and the wealth that we have.

So I have a couple of reflective questions for this topic as well. First, consider if there are some situations in your life where somebody in a position of authority has actually had a very protective effect on your material well-being—where you've sensed that somebody's virtue has helped you, has protected your material wealth, whatever degree of wealth that might be.

And consider if you rely upon anybody—it could be businesses, professionals, friends, or family—to protect your assets, to look out for your home, to advise you about your investments, to watch out for your things. I think sometimes it's worth reflecting not only on their professionalism or effectiveness or knowledge, especially if it's a job, but also to realize that underlying all of that is virtue. To respect the virtue involved, the virtue that supports professionalism, the virtue that brings integrity into a transactional relationship.

CHAPTER 220

Goals in Meditation: Commitment to Enlightenment

Andrea Fella · 30 min

In this profound talk, Shaila Catherine addresses a delicate topic in meditation practice: how to maintain commitment to enlightenment without falling into counterproductive goal-seeking. She begins by acknowledging the common hesitation in insight meditation circles around goal-setting, as it can easily devolve into grasping, comparing, and self-judgment. Yet she argues that reflecting on our deepest aspirations—when done wisely—can fuel energetic inspiration rather than insecurity.

Drawing on the Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Heartwood (Mahāsāropama Sutta, MN 29), Catherine illustrates how practitioners can mistake preliminary attainments for the ultimate goal. Just as villagers seeking heartwood might settle for twigs, branches, or bark, meditators might become satisfied with fame, virtue, concentration, or even profound knowledge and vision—all valuable, but not the 'perpetual liberation that does not fall away.' She also references the Visuddhimagga's ten corruptions of insight, explaining how experiences like luminosity, rapture, tranquility, and equanimity become impediments only when we cling to them.

Catherine shares her own journey—from urgent, almost agitated commitment that led her to India on a one-way ticket, to periods of loving devotion and calm dedication. She emphasizes that commitment need not be attached to particular techniques, teachers, or institutions, but rather to something profound and ultimately indefinable: freedom, peace, the ending of greed, hatred, and delusion. The talk concludes with an invitation to contemplate what we are truly committed to in our spiritual lives.

Commitment to Enlightenment

I think it's important to consider what we want in our spiritual lives, because what we want is what we tend to move toward.

In insight meditation groups, we tend not to encourage a lot of specific goal setting because people can very easily slide into the more common worldly patterns of trying to envision what we want and making it happen—grasping after some kind of future experience that we've already imagined, already conceived of. We might expect some specific spiritual gain or then start to compare where we're at with where we think we

should be. And usually our timeline of development is rather unrealistic. It backfires. If we get involved in comparing, it backfires, and we end up discouraged, we end up judging ourselves, we end up doubting our practice.

But it is possible to reflect upon our commitments, to reflect upon our aspirations, without fueling insecurity, without it leading to doubt and comparing and conceit and envy. We can nurture instead an energetic inspiration by reflecting upon the noble aims—perhaps an aim of awakening, awakening from the patterns of ignorance, purifying the heart from greed, hate, and delusion, ending chronic misperceptions that create a kind of resistance to how things actually are in our lives. Or just having the inspiration to continue to learn, to continue to grow, to continue to improve our experience and ourselves and the way we meet life, so that we meet it with an increasing sense of virtue and clarity and mindfulness and wisdom.

The Buddha described the aim of practice in a number of different discourses and in a number of different ways of saying what the purpose of his teachings were. In one discourse, the Middle Length Discourse Sutta number 29, called the Simile of the Heartwood, he uses a simile that describes a story where somebody needs heartwood. They need that strong inner wood in order to make a chair or a table or a bench or a pillar or a post. And so this person who needs the heartwood goes into the forest in search of heartwood and comes to a tree that actually possesses heartwood. But that person really doesn't know what heartwood is. And so they get excited that they found this tree and they leave with the twigs and the leaves.

Another person comes, also seeking heartwood to do a building project, and they find a tree that has heartwood, but they also don't know what it is, so they leave carrying away only the branches. Another person looking for heartwood does the same thing but leaves carrying away the bark, and another one takes only the soft inner wood. Each of these people needs heartwood, and they feel pleased with what they've found because they believe that their purpose has been fulfilled. In fact, they praise themselves for their discoveries and for their attainments of these twigs and these branches and this bark. And then they disparage others. It is said they become intoxicated with their gains, their attainments, and grow negligent. But because they didn't know the aim, they didn't actually know what the heartwood was—though they're unaware of this—their purpose is not going to be fulfilled.

This simile is used to describe the many valuable things that happen in the course of our spiritual practice. In this discourse, the Buddha then goes on to describe four things that are gained in the course of our practice but should not be mistaken for the goal, and a fifth thing that is considered the noble aim and the heartwood of the path.

He considers first popularity, fame, a sense of gaining prestige or social respectability, and he does not praise this. Yes, it happens, but he does not praise it at all. Then there are three things that he praises: virtue, concentration, and knowledge and vision. These are attainments that develop in the course of our practice. They happen, and they're praiseworthy. And then there's the fifth, which is the final—what's called the perpetual liberation that does not fall away.

The simile of the heartwood reminds us to reflect upon what our aims for practice are and what is the highest aim, what is the heartwood of the path, so that we won't be satisfied with deceptive attainments, even praiseworthy accomplishments that develop in the course of our mindfulness training and our meditative development.

When we are engaged in a sincere and deep meditation practice, we're going to encounter periodically some very lovely experiences. We might experience some joy and bliss, some calmness and tranquility. Perhaps the mind might become luminous and bright, flexible and wieldy. We might experience very refined states of concentration or deep states of clarity and wisdom. These are great. Don't complain if they occur. You don't need to fear them. You don't need to avoid them. You don't need to resist them. But they're not the heartwood. They're not the aim. They're not the ultimate goal of this path.

In the Visuddhimagga, a fifth-century meditation manual, we find a very important list of ten corruptions of insight. These corruptions of insight occur very naturally in the course of our meditation practice and become impediments only if they are mistaken for the goal, only if we become attached to them and therefore stop short of the heartwood. These corruptions of insight include light and luminosity of the mind, a radiance of mind. The second is knowledge of matter and mind—to really have a very clear, vivid, and genuine understanding of the nature of body and mind. The third is rapturous bliss, happiness, joy. The fourth is tranquility.

The fifth is pleasure and happiness. The sixth is resolution or determination. The seventh is exertion—right striving, right effort. The eighth is mindfulness. And the ninth is equanimity.

They don't really sound like impediments to the path, do they? In a way, these are the things that we are cultivating. These are practices that we nurture—certainly mindfulness, equanimity, energy, resolution, joy, tranquility, and knowledge of matter and mind. What's corrupt about these?

Well, it's the tenth that tells us. The tenth item is attachment. And if we are attached to any of these, then it will become an impediment to the development of our practice. It will prevent us from reaching the ultimate goal of realization.

Not all of these experiences are going to occur for every meditator, but this list of nine items does describe the kind of positive experiences that can arise in our practice and have the potential to distort our perception of the path if we neglect to see them as conditioned, as impermanent, as not I, not me, and not mine.

Just as a villager who goes into the forest looking for heartwood would be more successful if that villager knew what heartwood was—at least knew some of the defining features of it, or what it wasn't—as we explore the depths of our minds, as we explore how we encounter experience, how perception operates, we could benefit by having a sense of what we're looking for. We could benefit from an understanding of what the Buddha was teaching, of what he was teaching for, of the purpose that motivated his ministry.

So we can first reflect individually: What are we seeking? What brought you here tonight? What brings you to your meditation seat? What inspires you to pick up a Dharma book instead of a comic book? What are you interested in developing? What are your goals?

Are you committed to enlightenment? To inner peace? To wisdom? To calmness? To living with greater love and compassion? To being more present for the encounters that you experience in a day? What motivates your practice? What do you want?

One of the classic definitions of enlightenment is the ending of greed, hate, and delusion. Does that motivate your practice? Is that something that you want? Are you committed to putting an end to the movements of greed and hate and delusion as they arise within your own mind and your own life? How strong is that commitment?

I think these are very noble goals. They require dedication, they require effort, they require earnestness. The Buddha urged his disciples to abandon the defilements of mind as earnestly as a man whose turban or hair was on fire would attempt to extinguish those flames. There's no complacency, thinking, "Ah, maybe I'll get around to it later. I've got other things to do." No, when your hair is on fire, you don't think about the long list of other possible distractions. You take care of it. It's the business at hand. It's what calls your attention.

If we're complacent, we might allow the fires of greed, hate, and delusion to smolder within our own minds. We might not bother to address them until they burst into flame, causing panic and suffering, until we act on them. And then, in a way, it's too late. It's caused a bit of harm.

So we need the effort to align our energies with our commitments, to maintain a steadiness of attention on our aim, and to do the work that develops wisdom and brings inner peace. Even just to sit every day in meditation. Even just to watch the mind and bring it back to the present moment as we're showering, brushing our teeth, as we're interacting, as we're driving, as we're doing all the various things that we do in a day. To watch the mind in those encounters and to see: is greed, hate, or delusion determining our engagement with activity? If so, can we find an option out? Can we shift to non-greed, non-hate, non-delusion?

Whether we're sitting in meditation or bringing mindfulness to daily life, each moment requires some degree of diligence, of non-complacency. Having a sense of an aim can bring inspiration and a sense of urgency to our practice.

But even if we have a sense of urgency, very often it might appear as though our practice doesn't develop very quickly. Suzuki Roshi said in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*: "After you have practiced for a while, you realize that it is not possible to make rapid, extraordinary progress. The progress you make is always little by little."

Not like going out in a downpour when you know you're getting wet, but rather like walking in fog when you do not know that you're getting wet. If your mind has ideas of progress, you will be disappointed by the pace. So we need patience. We need trust in the gradual unfolding of the path.

I like the term commitment, but sometimes it might sound forceful or too strong, perhaps even restrictive to some people. What is the emotional tone behind our commitments? I think that emotional quality, that feeling quality, the sense of the way we make a commitment varies at different times in our lives.

For me, sometimes my commitment to the spiritual life has felt like just a deep but kind of nagging curiosity—a sense of chewing on something, wanting to know something, not being satisfied with the current state of knowledge and understanding, a sense of having my interest piqued.

And sometimes my sense of commitment has felt so urgent that it was as though I would have sacrificed anything to pursue my practice, that nothing could stand in my way, that my very life depended upon it. It's probably not surprising that during that period of incredible, almost agitated urgency, I flew off to India on a one-way ticket and

spent the better part of a decade abroad. I left school, I left family, I left work, I left all my worldly aims behind. I even left my name behind and accepted a new one. I endured typhoid, dengue fever, giardia, hunger, and quite uncomfortable situations. But I didn't want to let anything stand in my way, and it didn't feel difficult because of the energy of that sense of urgency.

At other times, that sense of urgency didn't feel so agitating. In fact, it felt more like a loving devotion—a sense of being deeply devoted to the possibility of awakening, a kind of smooth, deep, but earnest commitment. I simply had the sense of loving the possibility of awakening more than I loved doing anything else. To love liberation and that potential with my whole heart, and to feel a deep caring and appreciation for the Dhamma path.

And sometimes this sense of commitment feels to me like just a deep calm—a gradual dedication, a gradual inclination, a very gradual training. I often say that the meditator's mascot is the tortoise, the tortoise that just plods along and keeps on going. Sometimes it retreats into its shell—goes on retreat, enters into silence for a few moments, sits in meditation—and then it stretches out into the world again, enduring whatever comes on its path, never giving up, continuing to plod along.

Whatever that energetic flavor is, whatever the emotional style might be, we still need perseverance. We need patience. We need commitment. We need dedication. Because our development takes time. This isn't about snapping our fingers and having instant enlightenment. We're cultivating profound qualities that lead to a potential transformation—a radical transformation, a deep transformation. But usually we must nurture conditions for a long time before those conditions ripen and we can taste the fruit of our practice.

So as you consider what you are committed to, please be careful that you're not committing to some kind of institutional form as your ultimate goal. I think it would be a mistake to place our commitments in social structures, thinking, "I have to attend long retreats to develop my practice," or "I have to ordain as a monk or nun in order to pursue this path." I don't think we need to make a commitment to a particular technique for the duration of our practice or our lives. And we don't need to identify with or become committed to particular teachers or communities. Yes, there's value in loyalty, in trust, in gratitude—those are virtues. And there's value in discipline and steadiness. If we shop around and are always changing our practices, going from this teacher to that teacher every two seconds, we're never going to gain real depth. But our deepest commitments, I think, need to be to something profound—the heartwood of the path.

Commitment is a movement of energy and intention, and it does not require any special costume, any special custom, or any special association, because it is broader than any particular method. At different times in our lives we might emphasize one meditation technique, and then at another time we might emphasize another. This doesn't make the second one better or more important than the first. There are times when we might work with mindfulness of feelings, other times when we might focus on mindfulness of breath. There are times when we might deepen our samādhi and strengthen our concentration, and other times when we might focus on enriching compassion and loving-kindness. Sometimes we'll focus on virtues—really work with the ethical precepts or cultivate our capacity to give, to let go. There are so many different dimensions of the Dhamma path, and at different times in the course of our practice, we may be involved to a greater or lesser extent with different modes of practice.

So perhaps what we dedicate ourselves to is something rather profound—perhaps something we can't even define or limit to a specific image or understanding. What is freedom, really? What is peace? What is the end of ignorance, craving, and hatred? We might have an inkling of it. We might have a sense of it.

But each of these ideas is worth spending a lifetime getting to know. What is the deepest meaning of freedom? Of peace? Can we have a goal that is worth exploring for a whole lifetime, so that the meaning of it becomes rich and profound?

The commitments that we make are powerful. They set a direction. They have an effect.

And so please reflect: What are you committed to? What are you committed to in your spiritual life?

I'd like to invite you to meditate for a few minutes and contemplate that question. What are we committed to?

CHAPTER 221

Goals in Meditation: Commitment to Enlightenment

Andrea Fella · 30 min

Drawing from the Mahāsāropama Sutta (MN 29), the Simile of the Heartwood, Shaila Catherine examines the delicate balance between having spiritual aspirations and avoiding the pitfalls of goal-oriented grasping. She explains how the Buddha distinguished between valuable attainments that arise in practice—virtue (sīla), concentration (samādhi), and knowledge and vision—and the ultimate aim of perpetual liberation that does not fall away.

The talk explores the ten corruptions of insight from the Visuddhimagga, including luminosity, rapture, tranquility, and even mindfulness itself—experiences that become impediments only when we become attached to them and mistake them for the final goal. Catherine emphasizes that the classic definition of enlightenment as the ending of greed, hate, and delusion (lobha, dosa, moha) requires earnest dedication, comparing the Buddha's instruction to extinguish mental defilements as urgently as one would put out flames on one's own head.

Catherine shares her personal journey, reflecting on how commitment manifests differently throughout one's practice life—sometimes as urgent intensity, sometimes as loving devotion, and sometimes as patient, tortoise-like perseverance. She encourages practitioners to commit to something profound beyond institutional forms or specific techniques: the heartwood itself, the deep transformation that unfolds gradually through sustained dedication to awakening.

Commitment to Enlightenment

I've titled this talk Commitment to Enlightenment. I think it's important to consider what we want in our spiritual lives, because what we want is what we tend to move toward.

In insight meditation groups, we tend not to encourage a lot of specific goal setting because people can very easily slide into the more common worldly patterns of trying to envision what we want and making it happen—grasping after some kind of future experience that we've already imagined, already conceived of. We might expect some specific spiritual gain and then start to compare where we're at with where we think

we should be. Usually our timeline of development is rather unrealistic, and it backfires. If we get involved in comparing, it backfires, and we end up discouraged, judging ourselves, doubting our practice.

But it is possible to reflect upon our commitments, to reflect upon our aspirations, without fueling insecurity, without it leading to doubt and comparing and conceit and envy. We can nurture instead an energetic inspiration by reflecting upon the noble aims—perhaps an aim of awakening from the patterns of ignorance, purifying the heart from greed, hate, and delusion, ending chronic misperceptions that create a kind of resistance to how things actually are in our lives. Or simply having the inspiration to continue to learn, to continue to grow, to continue to improve our experience and ourselves and the way we meet life, so that we meet it with an increasing sense of virtue and clarity and mindfulness and wisdom.

The Buddha described the aim of practice in a number of different discourses and in a number of different ways. In one discourse, the Middle Length Discourse Sutta number 29, called the Simile of the Heartwood, he uses a simile that describes a story where somebody needs heartwood—that strong inner wood—in order to make a chair or a table or a bench or a pillar or a post. This person who needs the heartwood goes into the forest in search of it and comes to a tree that actually possesses heartwood. But that person really doesn't know what heartwood is. So they get excited that they found this tree, and they leave with the twigs and the leaves.

Another person comes, also seeking heartwood to do a building project, and they find a tree that has heartwood, but they also don't know what it is, so they leave carrying away only the branches. Another person looking for heartwood does the same thing but leaves carrying away the bark, and another one takes only the soft inner wood. Each of these people needs heartwood, and they feel pleased with what they've found because they believe that their purpose has been fulfilled. In fact, they praise themselves for their discoveries and for their attainments of these twigs and these branches and this bark. And then they disparage others. It's said they become intoxicated with their gains, their attainments, and grow negligent. But because they didn't know the aim, they didn't actually know what the heartwood was, and though they're unaware of this, their purpose is not going to be fulfilled.

This simile is used to describe the many valuable things that happen in the course of our spiritual practice. In this discourse, the Buddha goes on to describe four things that are gained in the course of our practice but should not be mistaken for the goal, and a fifth thing that is considered the noble aim and the heartwood of the path.

He considers first popularity, fame, a sense of gaining prestige or social respectability, and he does not praise this. Yes, it happens, but he does not praise it at all. Then there are three things that he praises: virtue, concentration, and knowledge and vision. These are attainments that develop in the course of our practice. They happen, and they're praiseworthy. And then there's the fifth, which is the final—what's called the perpetual liberation that does not fall away.

The simile of the heartwood reminds us to reflect upon what our aims for practice are and what is the highest aim, what is the heartwood of the path, so that we won't be satisfied with deceptive attainments, even praiseworthy accomplishments that develop in the course of our mindfulness training and our meditative development.

When we are engaged in a sincere and deep meditation practice, we're going to encounter periodically some very lovely experiences. We might experience some joy and bliss, some calmness and tranquility. Perhaps the mind might become luminous and bright, flexible and wieldy. We might experience very refined states of concentration or deep states of clarity and wisdom. These are great. Don't complain if they occur. You don't need to fear them. You don't need to avoid them. You don't need to resist them. But they're not the heartwood. They're not the aim. They're not the ultimate goal of this path.

In the Visuddhimagga, a fifth century meditation manual, we find a very important list of ten corruptions of insight. These corruptions of insight occur very naturally in the course of our meditation practice and they become impediments only if they are mistaken for the goal, only if we become attached to them and therefore stop short of the aim. These corruptions of insight include light and luminosity of the mind, a radiance of mind. The second is knowledge of matter and mind—to really have a very clear, vivid, and genuine understanding of the nature of body and mind. The third is rapturous bliss, happiness, joy. The fourth is tranquility.

The fifth is pleasure and happiness. The sixth is resolution, determination. The seventh is exertion, right striving, right effort. The eighth is mindfulness. And the ninth is equanimity.

They don't really sound like impediments to the path, do they? In a way, these are the very things that we are cultivating. These are practices that we nurture—certainly mindfulness, equanimity, energy, resolution, joy, tranquility, and knowledge of matter and mind. What's corrupt about these?

Well, it's the tenth that tells us. The tenth item is attachment. If we are attached to any of these, then it becomes an impediment to the development of our practice. It will prevent us from reaching the ultimate goal of realization.

Not all of these experiences will occur for every meditator, but this list of nine items does describe the kinds of positive experiences that can arise in our practice and have the potential to distort our perception of the path—if we neglect to see them as conditioned, as impermanent, as not I, not me, and not mine.

Just as a villager who goes into the forest looking for heartwood would be more successful if that villager knew what heartwood was, knew some of its defining features, or at least knew what it wasn't—so too, as we explore the depths of our minds, as we explore how we encounter experience, how perception operates, we could benefit by having a sense of what we're looking for, having an understanding of what the Buddha was teaching, and of the purpose that motivated his ministry.

So we can first reflect individually: What are we seeking? What brought you here tonight? What brings you to your meditation seat? What inspires you to pick up a dharma book instead of a comic book? What are you interested in developing? What are your goals?

Are you committed to enlightenment? To inner peace? To wisdom? To calmness? To living with greater love and compassion? To being more present for the encounters that you experience in a day? What motivates your practice? What do you want?

One of the classic definitions of enlightenment is the ending of greed, hate, and delusion. Does that motivate your practice? Is that something that you want? Are you committed to putting an end to the movements of greed, hate, and delusion as they arise within your own mind and your own life? How strong is that commitment?

I think these are very noble goals. They require dedication, they require effort, they require earnestness. The Buddha urged his disciples to abandon the defilements of mind as earnestly as a man whose turban or hair was on fire would attempt to extinguish those flames. There's no complacency thinking, "Ah, maybe I'll get around to it later. I've got other things to do." No—when your hair is on fire, you don't think about the long list of other possible distractions. You take care of it. It's the business at hand. It's what calls your attention.

If we're complacent, we might allow the fires of greed, hate, and delusion to smolder within our own minds. We might not bother to address them until they burst into flame, causing panic and suffering, until we act on them. And then, in a way, it's too late—it's caused a bit of harm.

So we need the effort to align our energies with our commitments, to maintain a steadiness of attention on our aim, and to do the work that develops wisdom and brings inner peace. Even just to sit every day in meditation. Even just to watch the mind and bring it back to the present moment as we're showering, brushing our teeth, as we're interacting, as we're driving, as we're doing all the various things that we do in a day. To watch the mind in those encounters and to see: Is greed, hate, or delusion determining our engagement with activity? If so, can we find an option out? Can we shift to non-greed, non-hate, non-delusion?

Whether we're sitting in meditation or bringing mindfulness to daily life, each moment requires some degree of diligence, of non-complacency. Having a sense of an aim can bring the inspiration and the sense of urgency to our practice.

But even if we have a sense of urgency, very often it might appear as though our practice doesn't develop very quickly. Suzuki Roshi said in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, "After you have practiced for a while, you realize that it is not possible to make rapid, extraordinary progress. The progress you make is always little by little."

Not like going out in a downpour when you know you're getting wet, but rather like walking in fog when you do not know that you're getting wet. If your mind has ideas of progress, you will be disappointed by the pace. So we need patience. We need trust in the gradual unfolding of the path.

I like the term commitment, but sometimes it might sound forceful or too strong, perhaps even restrictive to some people. But what's the emotional tone behind our commitments? I think that emotional quality, that feeling quality, the sense of the way we make a commitment varies at different times in our lives.

For me, sometimes my commitment to the spiritual life has felt like just a deep but kind of niggly sort of curiosity—a sense of chewing on something, wanting to know something, not being satisfied with the current state of knowledge and understanding, a sense of having my interest perked. And sometimes my sense of commitment has felt so urgent that it felt as though I would have sacrificed anything to pursue my practice, that nothing could stand in my way, that my very life depended upon my practice.

And it's probably not surprising that it was during that sense of incredible, almost agitated urgency that I flew off to India on a one-way ticket and spent the better part of a decade abroad there. I left school, I left family, I left work, I left all my worldly aims behind. I even left my name behind and accepted a new name. I endured typhoid,

dengue fever, giardia, hunger, and quite uncomfortable situations. But I didn't want to let anything stand in my way. And it didn't feel difficult because of the energy of that sense of urgency.

There were other times, periods of my practice, when that sense of urgency didn't feel so agitating. In fact, it felt more like a loving devotion—a sense of being deeply devoted to the possibility of awakening, a kind of smooth, deep, but earnest commitment. I just had the sense of loving the possibility of awakening more than I loved doing anything else. To love liberation and that potential with my whole heart and to feel a deep caring and appreciation for the Dhamma path.

And sometimes this sense of commitment feels to me like just a deep calm, a gradual dedication, a gradual inclination, and a sense of a very gradual training. I often say that the meditator's mascot is the tortoise—the tortoise that just plods along and keeps on going. Sometimes it retreats into its shell, goes on retreat, enters into silence for a few moments, sits in meditation, and then it stretches out into the world again, enduring whatever comes on its path and just not giving up, continuing to plod along and continuing to go.

Whatever that sense of energetic flavor might be, whatever the emotional flavor, whatever the style, we still need perseverance. We need patience. We need commitment. We need dedication. Because our development takes time. This isn't about snapping our fingers and having instant enlightenment. We're cultivating profound qualities that lead to a potential transformation that is radical, that is deep. But usually we must nurture conditions for a long time before those conditions ripen and we can taste the fruit of our practice.

So as you consider what you are committed to, please be careful that you're not committing to some kind of institutional form as your ultimate goal. I think it would be a mistake to put our commitments into social structures—such as thinking, "I have to attend long retreats to develop my practice," or "I have to ordain as a monk or a nun in order to pursue this path." I don't think we need to make a commitment to a particular technique for the duration of our practice or our lives. And we don't need to identify with or become committed to particular teachers or communities.

Yes, there's value for loyalty, for trust, for gratitude. Those are virtues—discipline and steadiness. If we shop around and are always changing our practices and going from this teacher to that teacher every two seconds, we're never going to really get the depth in one. But our deepest commitments, I think, need to be to something profound—the heartwood of the path.

Commitment is a movement of energy and intention, and it does not require any special costume, any special custom, or any special association, because it's broader than any particular method. At different times in our lives we might emphasize one meditation technique, but then at another time we might emphasize another. It doesn't make the second one better than or more important than the first one. There are times when we might work with mindfulness of feelings. There are other times when we might focus on mindfulness with breath. There are other times when we might deepen our samādhi and try to strengthen our concentration, and other times we might be focused on deepening and enriching compassion and loving-kindness. Sometimes we'll focus on virtues and really work with the ethical precepts, or cultivate our capacity to give or to let go. There are so many different dimensions of the Dhamma path. And at different times in the course of our practice, we may be involved to a greater or lesser extent with different modes of practice.

So perhaps what we dedicate ourselves to is something rather profound—perhaps something we can't even define or limit to a specific image or understanding. What is freedom, really? What is peace? What is the end of ignorance, craving, and hatred? We might have an inkling of it. We might have a sense of it.

But each of these ideas is worth spending a lifetime getting to know what the deepest meaning truly is. Can we have a goal that is worth exploring for a whole lifetime, so that the meaning of it becomes rich and profound?

The commitments that we make are powerful. They set a direction. They have an effect. And so please reflect: What are you committed to? What are you committed to in your spiritual life?

I'd like to meditate for a few minutes and contemplate that question. What are we committed to?

CHAPTER 222

Nurturing the Process

Andrea Fella · 35 min

In this thoughtful exploration of goals in meditation practice, Andrea Fella draws from the Buddha's simile of the hen incubating her eggs to illuminate a profound teaching: what matters is not our wishes for awakening, but whether we properly nurture the conditions for it to unfold. Just as a hen who incubates her eggs rightly will see them hatch regardless of her wishes, practitioners who devote themselves to development will find liberation—while those who merely wish for it without practice will not.

Fella examines how our conceptual minds can actually hinder spiritual progress. We can only wish for what we can imagine, yet awakening transcends our ordinary understanding. Drawing on teachings and the story of Sukhasiddhi from the Tibetan tradition, she illustrates how following moment-to-moment wisdom rather than predetermined goals can lead to unexpected and profound transformation. The Eightfold Path itself is presented as a unique construction—one designed to undermine the mind's tendency to identify and control, ultimately undoing itself.

The talk offers practical wisdom for practitioners at all levels: rather than trying to engineer our own awakening through willpower and planning, we can learn to trust the inner voice of wisdom and compassion that naturally guides us. This requires faith—not blind faith, but confidence in the natural unfolding of the path when we practice with ardency, alertness, and the willingness to put aside greed and distress. The invitation is to relax, do the practices properly, and allow the path to unfold in ways we could never have imagined.

So this series that we're just really embarking on is about having goals in meditation practice or in life, I suppose. And I love this topic because we all have some relationship to the idea of goals in addition to the goals themselves, of course. Some people absolutely love having goals, and some people feel completely oppressed by goals. Some people think that goals are necessary, and they actually may end up limiting themselves by always working within set ideas. And other people may think that goals are totally pointless, but would probably do better if they were to stay on track and commit to an outcome. You can place yourself on this matrix somewhere.

Fortunately the Buddhist teachings are flexible enough to accommodate many different approaches, and I hope this series demonstrates that. You'll hear talks from many different perspectives and have a chance to reflect for yourself from that range how you relate to goals. I think that would be a good outcome.

So tonight I'm going to pull out a thread from the teachings that can be applied to this question of goals in practice. A goal is about the future. It's something that will be attained after some time and probably some effort. But practice asks us to focus on the present moment—what's happening now. So there is the future-oriented goal of aiming for awakening, and there's also the present moment intention to stay with experience without clinging, which is the instruction. Following this immediate intention can allow the path to unfold in ways that we couldn't even imagine. And it does rely on quite a bit of faith.

So let's talk through some of that. I want to start with a very simple case. There's a simile that's used several times in the suttas about a hen nurturing her eggs. It's pointed out that her future-oriented wishes for the chicks are not very important compared to whether or not she properly incubates the eggs.

Here's how it goes: Suppose a hen has eight, ten, or twelve eggs. If she doesn't cover them rightly, warm them rightly, or incubate them rightly, then even though this wish may occur to her—"Oh, that my chicks might break through the eggshells with their spiked claws or beaks and hatch out safely"—still it is not possible that the chicks will break through the eggshells and hatch out safely. Why is that? Because the hen has not covered them rightly, warmed them rightly, or incubated them rightly.

And then you get the positive side later in the sutta: Suppose a hen has eight, ten, or twelve eggs that she does cover rightly, warms rightly, and incubates rightly. Even though this wish may not occur to her—"Oh, that my chicks might break through the eggshells and hatch out safely"—still, it is possible that the chicks will do that. Why is that? Because the hen has covered them, warmed them, and incubated them rightly.

So what can we learn from this very simple idea? It's not really about what we want, but about what we do. Does this sound familiar in practice? Rather than having a future goal, we can nurture the process of the path. And by linking it to the life process of chickens and eggs, we get the sense that this is a natural process, actually. We will return to this later.

A little more about these suttas that talk about the hen. As often happens in suttas, after the image or simile is given, then the Buddha gives an application to how this would work in practice. So he has the thing about the hen not incubating her eggs properly, and then one of the suttas goes on this way: Even though this wish may occur to a practitioner who dwells without devoting themselves to development—"Oh, that my mind might be freed through non-clinging"—still, her mind is not released through non-clinging. Why is that? From lack of developing.

And then you get the positive side: Even though this wish may occur to a person who dwells devoting themselves to development—"Oh that my mind might be freed through non-clinging"—still her mind is freed from the effluents through lack of clinging. Why is that? From developing.

So in one case the person isn't doing any development but they wish that they will be awakened.

And it doesn't happen. In the other case, they are doing the development but they don't ever bother to have the wish to awaken, and still they awaken anyway. So this is something to consider.

The sutta says "from developing"—the dwelling with or without development, and then they get awakened from developing. So we could rightfully ask: developing what?

Different suttas give different answers. There are a few suttas that use this same analogy, but they all reiterate known lists of practices and mental qualities that relate basically to the Eightfold Path. So they're pretty clear. We're being told that the point is just to do the practices and not to spend a lot of time wishing for results.

I like this, actually. It's very simple.

But then there's also this word "rightly"—about the hen. She was warming them rightly, incubating them rightly. So there is also a little bit of nuance there: not everything will work. Only certain things will work if we do it rightly. The Buddha did give us very good instructions, and we do have to follow them.

Now I'll put a few caveats on this. First of all, one issue that Westerners have with their perfectionist mindsets is that everybody's worried about whether they're doing things right. I don't know how many questions I've had where people raise their hand and say, "Is it okay for me to do such and such?" This is a fine question because there are instructions. But for the most part, we can wrap ourselves up quite a lot in whether we're doing it right. So I don't want to be making that point exactly. Let me say that this realm of "rightly" has a little bit of width to it. It's not like a really narrow line. But nonetheless, there are things that will work better than others.

The texts are pretty clear. The instructions are right there. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta says you should sit ardent, mindful, and alert, putting aside greed and distress for the world. That's a clear instruction. But do we follow it? When we sit and practice mindfulness, do we sit ardent and alert and put aside greed and distress for the world? Or do we spend a lot of time thinking about all of our greed and distress about the world—which would not be mindfulness practice? So it's clear. But we have to do it.

The other issue I want to raise about this sense of rightly practicing is that it's both a blessing and a little bit of a disadvantage, depending how you look at it, that we have a huge amount of spiritual practice available to us in this area. For the most part this is wonderful—it's great. People come; look at all the people here tonight. It's wonderful. There are places where that just wouldn't happen. And of course there are centers that do Tibetan Buddhism and Zen, and we're sitting in a church, and there are many other spiritual paths available.

The challenge, though, is that for some people this richness somehow helps them find their way through. But for others it becomes an exercise in choosing what they want out of spirituality. "I like the Sufi dancing—that's really great, I go and do the dancing. But the part where I have to work with a stern teacher who's going to challenge my assumptions? I don't do that part." Or, "I come to the insight meditation, but I'm definitely not going on a retreat where I have to share a room with somebody else because I have my space issues." It becomes this exercise of choosing based mostly on what feels comfortable and pleasant to us.

I'm not saying that we should deliberately go for the stuff that's difficult. But any spiritual practice worth its salt had better bring some difficulty to our lives at some point. So I'll just insert that also—part of "rightly" does include reworking the way our mind works, which can be a little uncomfortable sometimes.

So that's kind of the simple warm-up image: this chicken, and the wishing versus the doing. Now I want to explore several dimensions that could be unpacked from this simple chicken lesson. It can actually get kind of subtle and deep.

First of all, wishes. This idea of wishes. Wishes themselves can be limiting because we can only wish within the realm that we can imagine. We may not know what to wish for, actually. People often want to work on particular problems that they have, problems they know are causing suffering. This is a fine approach, fair enough in some sense. But sometimes we don't want to take such a direct approach with our particular forms of suffering. It might be better just to follow the meditation instructions sometimes.

This is from Ram Dass, who is not a conventional teacher. But this is what he says: "Instead of trying so hard to get out of the shadow, the dark—which I think actually reinforces the shadow and its reality—just do your practices. If somebody says to me, 'I'm having these terrible thoughts and I don't know why, will you help me understand why?' I tell them that I'd rather sit with them and help them follow their breath. The

breath has no content to it at all. It's just breath. It's better to strengthen the centering, the quieting, the presence, than to keep strengthening the problem, which gets reinforced when you work on it directly."

So of course this is one quote given in one context. I'm not saying at all that we never work directly on difficulties or we never work directly on, say, particular urgent life issues that have come up. That can be very important. But the attitude of approaching them with the sense of "I am working on this in order that it will go away or be replaced by something that I prefer" can be a little controlling in some cases.

Just to give a personal example, I came to practice because of chronic pain and health problems that I had. And I found that I didn't have the capacity to work with those. I hadn't developed myself well enough to be able to meet that particular kind of dukkha. And so certainly one of my initial goals was "I want to be able to deal with this." And that was absolutely a compassionate approach and a fine intention to have.

But I can say in retrospect that it was fortunate for me that somehow I didn't get caught up in relating absolutely everything through the filter of my health. In fact, I did just listen to the instructions, and it was actually relieving to me not to think about that so much and just do the "ardent, alert, and putting aside greed and distress for the world." I think that really, frankly, sped up the process and also avoided reinforcing the aversion that can happen when we come in and say, "I want to deal with my anger. I want to deal with this because I don't like it."

We have to be so careful. Maybe you'll learn about this in the mindful self-compassion and self-esteem course, I'm not sure. But there's an art to being able to work with issues. And these practices, far from being cold and detached because they tell us not to get sucked into the content, are actually really compassionate because they help us to have a relationship to our experience that is healthy and that can allow our heart to grow and expand in a way that it just doesn't when we focus so hard on that one thing.

I also had no idea where meditation would take me, and that was good. It happens to have completely rearranged my life in ways that are wonderful, but I couldn't have anticipated that. So I certainly couldn't have had as a goal to do the various things I've done, like sit two years of retreat. If you'd told me that before I started practicing, I would have said, "Yeah, right, I have too much energy for that." But other things have just happened. I changed my career. I changed my lifestyle. Now I teach the Dharma. That wasn't my goal when I was twenty.

It unfolds differently for everyone, of course. This is not any kind of a thing to imitate. But it all just happened step by step. It wasn't a plan. It just unfolded step by step. So there's a process. We have to stay open to what can happen.

And at risk of offering a very hackneyed image, the caterpillar doesn't know what a butterfly is. It just doesn't have any concept of that. And then there's also maybe what Misha Merrill said in a little bit more down-to-earth way. She said, because her own life had a couple turns like this—she actually thought she was going to be an artist, and then it didn't happen, and she was devastated, but then something even better happened—so you never know. What she said is, "You may think you're going to be a chocolate cake, but then you discover yourself becoming a steak." This can be disturbing if you're vegetarian.

So we can't actually imagine in our unawakened mind what we're looking for. We don't know what we're looking for. We might think it's just a sort of better version of what we have. But I think the teachings ask us to be a little bit more creative and open than that, to go a little bit farther than that. Or maybe another example: if you're looking for the source of a river, you might discover that the source of the river is ice from a glacier, or it might be the sky that produces the rain. It might not look anything like a river.

So we can trace this idea a little bit farther in that the conceptual mind itself is actually a limitation. Another problem with a goal is that it's inevitably a concept of some kind. And the very structure of our ordinary mind is that it creates ideas and concepts and abstractions. We couldn't live if we didn't do that, of course. All the time we're doing that. But the teachings tell us that this can actually hinder the path in subtle ways. Even when we're not creating full-blown goals and aims, our very concepts along the path can be a hindrance. So we have to continually watch that. And I'll unpack this a little bit. The mind looks for known patterns.

It loves to have a template. "Oh, this is the meeting template that we're about to go into." And then you play out the meeting template, and afterwards you say, "Well, that was another unsatisfying meeting." Why? Because everybody played out the meeting template. It's just how it goes.

But this ability of our mind, when applied to spiritual practice, means that we will inevitably project some kind of idea about how the path is going to unfold. We've heard dharma talks, we've read dharma books, and then—subtly or even unsubtly sometimes, but especially subtly—we will try to recreate that. We'll try to replicate what we read in the book or what we heard in the talk, and this can actually hinder the process.

So what to do, though? Because we have to hear teachings. I don't think anybody—well, the Buddha was the one who could advance on the path without hearing teachings. But the rest of us, we need to hear teachings. So that means I am going to continue with this talk, even though I've now warned you that you shouldn't be listening to dharma talks because then you're going to try to apply and replicate everything I'm saying. So it's too late. The ideas are already coming. Let's just go with it.

Having an idea of the path in the background of our mind—what does that actually look like? It means that we will see certain things and not see other things. We will remember experiences that conform to what we had in mind, and we'll forget the ones that don't. As we're going along, we have this idea that we're following this path, and so we downplay or forget things that don't seem to match.

Now, when the mind gets concentrated—Shaila is a wonderful concentration teacher—the purpose of getting the mind settled and still is so that we can watch how it works. Then we see very clearly that there's a lot of manipulation in the mind. We are not just seeing experience as it is; we're actually putting our template on it all the time. It's really fascinating. Sometimes it's disturbing, but it's really fascinating to watch this happening in the mind. You don't have to say, "Oh, this is terrible, I need to throw out all my concepts." You can't, actually, and you couldn't live without them. It's enough to see them, and this helps to detach from them. But we really get a glimpse of how constructed our everyday world is and what a deep habit this is.

Awakening is the one thing that cannot be constructed.

So the Buddha was aware of these issues of construction, and he understood very well how the human mind works, including the ways that it tries to engineer its own awakening. And so he devised a template that's different than other templates. He devised a template called the Eightfold Path. The great thing about it is that it includes refining our conduct—there's an ethical section—developing our mind—there's a meditation section—and cultivating wisdom—there's a wisdom section of the path.

What you may not know about this brilliant Eightfold Path is that it is actually designed to undermine the mind's tendency to identify, including with the path itself. The Eightfold Path is a construction that will undo itself, unlike our usual constructions, which bind further. That's what makes it different.

This is not something you have to believe. This is something that, once again, we have to do. Remember the part about doing and not just sitting and wishing to be awakened.

The idea that we can somehow control our awakening is actually based in conceit. It's based in the same drivenness and striving that spiritual practice is designed to relieve us of. And what a relief it is when we realize that we're not in control of our awakening. Phew! I have no idea how to do that. Great. I'm just going to do the practices and let that take care of itself.

None of this is to say—to put a caveat in again—that we shouldn't reflect on our path, or that we shouldn't deliberately address particular issues when they come up in certain cases, or when we know that we have certain kinds of letting go to do. That is useful. It also doesn't say that we should blindly do practices and never think about whether they're actually helping us, or that we should blindly follow a teacher, or that we should blindly follow what a community is doing. There is still a need for discernment, of course. But there's this distinction: we don't think that we're in control as we're doing it.

So then an interesting question arises: Is anything in control? Why do we have these senses that we want to undertake a certain practice at a certain time? Why did you come to this meditation group at a certain time? Sure, you've got the story, you've got the thing that you put on, but there's something else, right, in you that's working.

And when we look back over our life, sometimes we realize, "Oh, I thought I was doing such and such, but actually there was some other force going on there."

So there isn't somebody in control, but wisdom and compassion will prompt us to do things that help further our path. That's actually their job. If we let our ordinary mind—that is to say, the one that sets goals—get involved in controlling our spiritual practice, it actually ends up obscuring the path. But if we open and let these wiser parts of ourselves, namely our heart, our wisdom and compassion, have the reins so to speak, they will follow the path in a way that's efficient for us and will help awaken us and help us let go.

We can take long detours if we follow what we think we logically ought to, or if we get emotionally caught up in what a teacher or community is doing to the point where we're not looking out for our own well-being. So a lot of the path then is about learning to hear this inner voice that's being offered by wisdom and compassion, the voice in the heart. And the good news is you can hear it long before awakening, actually, if you are willing to open to it and trust it.

This is the part where we have to think a little bit about faith. There is this inner voice. There is this sense in our heart that something would be nourishing for us or something would be good for us. And this is something that we can place our confidence in.

I want to tell a story about faith and about letting the path unfold without so many goals. It's a story from the Tibetan Shangpa tradition—the story of a woman named Sukhasiddhi.

She was a poor woman who lived with a husband and three sons. Things were not going well in their world—their business, their life. They were running out of money, basically, and they were down to their last portion of rice. The husband and sons said, "Well, we're going to go out and get work today, get some resources for our family." Of course, Sukhasiddhi stayed at home while they did this. The husband and the three sons went off in the four cardinal directions, saying, "We're going to do work and come back with some money. You stay here."

And so she did. During the day, a wandering spiritual seeker—the equivalent of the Buddha, somebody who's given their life over to meditation and just being a beggar—came by and knocked on the door and begged for food as a practitioner. She said, "Well, they're out getting money." And she cooked up the last portion of rice and gave it to him. Off he went.

At the end of the day, the husband and sons came home discouraged and said, "Well, we didn't get any work today, so how about the rice?" She said, "Oh, I gave it to a wandering mendicant who was a spiritual seeker." They were enraged that she had given away the last of the food, and they threw her out.

So she went off into the world and found that she had more resources than she thought. She was clever enough to beg for a while, and then she got enough money from that to buy some barley and malt and decided to make beer. You may be aware that beer is a symbol of wisdom in the Tibetan tradition—shocking for Theravadans, I know, but this is important.

She discovered she was pretty good at making beer, actually. She took it to the marketplace and sold it and made even more money, because it was really good beer. She just kept doing that. She discovered she had this talent, and it became her livelihood.

One day a very well-dressed woman showed up and asked for beer—a little surprising, this very well-dressed woman. Sukhasiddhi asked, "Is it for you?" The woman said, "No, actually it's for my teacher, who is an awakened spiritual teacher, but he likes really good beer, so I thought I'd get some for him." Sukhasiddhi said, "Well, in that case, why don't you just take it, since it's for your teacher." So she gave the beer freely.

Every day the well-dressed woman came back to get beer for her spiritual teacher, and Sukhasiddhi gave it on donation, just freely. After a while, the master said, "This is really good beer that you've been bringing me every day. Where do you get this?" She said, "Oh, there's this woman in the marketplace who makes it." He said, "Well, bring her here. I want to meet her."

So the well-dressed woman came and said to Sukhasiddhi, "My master would like to meet you. Why don't you come?" She went, and the master saw that she was very close to awakening. He gave her just a simple teaching, and she woke up and gained all the spiritual powers. Sukhasiddhi—that was not her original name; I don't know what her original name was—she was named Sukhasiddhi at that point and became a great teacher, one of the great female teachers of the Tibetan tradition.

There's a lot in this story, and we can't unpack quite all of it, but I would offer that what she was acting on was faith in the spiritual side of life.

What happens when your life falls apart is that the spirit comes knocking on the door—in the form of the beggar. And she didn't question it; she just fed it. The last of her rice, actually. It didn't produce an immediate positive effect. Maybe she got thrown out. But she didn't worry about that. She just went on, moment by moment.

And then there came another opportunity. Oh, this beer is for a spiritual master. She gave it away. She fed it. She didn't try to make money off of that. So when the opportunities presented themselves, she gave freely. And the result was that she ascended higher and higher spiritually and eventually was led to the place where the conditions were right for her to awaken.

Probably it wouldn't have happened if her husband and sons had made money that day. Probably not.

So she didn't have any idea that she was pursuing awakening. But she fed her faith along the way. She did what seemed right in each moment. And it had bigger effects than she could ever have imagined.

There's a picture outside the interview rooms at the Insight Meditation Society—I don't know if you've ever been there, in Barre, Massachusetts. It's one of the classic centers of our tradition. There's a picture that's one of those Japanese prints, very elongated, seeming to portray flower stalks and shoots. Maybe one of those ink ones where you blow on the ink; I'm not sure. But the caption says something like, "Try not to have any expectations." Most of the little ink trails or flower shoots are down near the bottom of the picture. And then there's one that goes all the way up, about six feet, to the top of the page. I think that's instructional for us.

So you remember the chicken image? We're back to the chicken. The hatching of chicks, sitting on the eggs, incubating them properly—it's a natural process. And so to what degree, we can ask ourselves, do we trust in our path as a natural unfolding process?

You can look at how long-time practitioners practice, people who've been at it thirty or forty years. For the most part, these people are very unpretentious. They pretty much go along with their life, and from time to time they undertake particular trainings or practices that seem moving to them—like they'll decide to go on a retreat with a particular teacher, or take a trip to Asia, or take three months off and write something. And then the rest of the time, it's going along with life. Going along with life.

Often, the result of these little things—"Oh, I'm going to do this retreat," or "Oh, I'm going to go to Asia"—often the result is surprising, even to thirty- or forty-year practitioners. They just have a feeling that some fruit is coming to ripen, and so they should go. What we see in this example is that truly we're not in control of this process. It's only a matter of how deeply we accept this.

So, relax. Relax. Just do the practices, and do them properly or rightly, and the path will unfold. Sometimes it will unfold easily and sometimes not so easily, but it will always be unfolding just as it can in a given moment.

That is my offering on the sense of goals in practice. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 223

Cooling the Fire

Andrea Fella · 43 min

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella reframes our understanding of awakening by returning to the literal meaning of nibbāna—not 'enlightenment' but 'cooling,' an ordinary Pāli word describing what happens when fire is no longer fueled. Drawing from canonical descriptions, she explains that this freedom is the extinction of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha), resulting in a heart that experiences no mental pain or grief. Rather than gaining something special, awakening is about releasing what constricts us.

Fella shares touching stories of two very different Burmese monastics she encountered—one radiating oceanic tranquility, the other bubbling with constant laughter even while discussing near-death illness. These contrasting expressions of freedom illustrate that liberation doesn't look one way; it allows our unique nature to shine through. She emphasizes that freedom from aversion doesn't mean indifference to suffering—rather, the unconditioned heart resonates deeply with the world's pain through compassion rather than resistance.

The practical heart of this teaching addresses how we work with greed, aversion, and delusion. Using the metaphor of tangled threads, Fella suggests that suffering arises when our natural wholesome wishes for happiness collide with the truths of impermanence and uncontrollability. The practice isn't to cut away these knots but to understand them—allowing mindfulness to gradually untangle the threads into a beautiful weave of love and wisdom. Like the Buddha's analogy of shipwreck debris slowly worn by sun, sand, and wind, this transformation happens gradually, often imperceptibly, yet inevitably when we maintain our practice.

So as Ted said, the title for this talk is Cooling the Fire. The inspiration for that name came from the word that is typically translated as enlightenment. When we talk about the Wesak Festival at the end of the month, we're celebrating the Buddha's birth, death, and enlightenment. Typically we do think about the Buddha becoming enlightened, and we might think about that as being the goal for the path. When Shaila invited this group of us to teach this particular series, she asked us to reflect about the goal—what we explore, what we think of as the goal of the path, and how we might find our way towards that.

The first thing I wanted to reflect on here is the Pali word that the Buddha used for his awakening: Nibbana. The literal meaning of that word is nothing like enlightenment. I don't know how people came up with that translation or why people use it, because the word itself basically means something like cooling—the act of cooling. I was told by one colleague that he understood this was a very ordinary word in the time of the Buddha, that you would speak about a fire cooling or the rice cooling. The nature of things when they're heated is to cool. That's just what happens when you no longer keep adding the heat. When you no longer keep adding the fuel to a fire, the fire goes out, the fire cools. And so the word for this freedom—what the Buddha spoke of as the possibility, the freedom that he discovered—it was a cooling of something.

When asked about what is cooled, I'll read some excerpts from the suttas about this word nibbana and what it means to have that freedom. These are from four different passages, but they weave together nicely:

"The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called Nibbana."

If we replace cooling there: the extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this is cooling.

"Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed, with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbana, immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise."

"And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing remains to be done. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so, neither forms, nor sound, nor odors, nor taste, nor contact of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is the mind, gained is deliverance."

"This is peace, this is exquisite. The resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

This is a description of what the Buddha understood to be the freedom that the path he found offered—this freedom, this release, this cooling of greed, aversion, and delusion. In one of the Buddha's early teachings, he used the analogy of fire for greed, aversion, and delusion. He said everything is burning with the fire of greed, everything is

burning with the fire of aversion, everything is burning with the fire of delusion. We could look at nibbana as the cooling of those fires, the cooling of the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion.

To me this conveys something completely different than enlightenment. When I first heard the term enlightenment and started practicing, I had this image of getting something, of having some particular state or being in some particular way. But these descriptions speak not of what one gains, but what one lets go of. That to me is interesting because it actually leaves a lot of room for what's here. When one lets go of greed, aversion, and delusion, it means that the goal—how we are, how we might manifest in the world having let go of greed, aversion, and delusion—there's a lot of room for many different ways that would look. And that to me is inspiring.

When I practiced in Burma, I met a number of very wise and very kind and very practiced people. And they were very different. One that I met—I'll tell these stories because it feels like it might give a little flavor. I was practicing and supporting a retreat in the northern part of Burma in the Sagaing Hills. That particular part of Burma has hundreds and hundreds of monasteries in the hills. You can just walk in the hills and move from one monastery to another. We knew some of the monks in various monasteries in that area, so we would take hikes in the hills and go visit them. At one point we were hiking—it took about thirty minutes or so to hike to this one monastery—and we were chatting along the way. As we approached the monastery gate, one of the people with us who had been to this particular monastery a lot turned to us and said, "We need to be in silence as we walk into this monastery. We need to be in silence as we walk through the gate."

And so we fell into silence. As I walked through that gate, just the setting itself was remarkable—kind of set in a bowl, with cliffs on three sides of the monastery, so it was nestled in this protected area. The cliffs had been whitewashed so that rainwater could fall down into a catchment system. Something about the visual and the feeling of walking in—I felt like I was being immersed in an ocean of tranquility. It was quite remarkable.

And then I met the monk that lived there. I got so happy just sitting with him. He was such a calm and peaceful person that I felt like this quality was being transmitted through his very being. I was simply happy sitting in his presence, feeling so at ease and so peaceful.

We went to visit several monasteries repeatedly during that time. I'll tell one story of another monk I met. He had a very lively mind and was so delighted by the world that he was pretty much constantly laughing. We came in one day—he was probably ninety

at this point. He had shriveled over the years that I had known him, and he looked like this little tiny being sitting in his chair. We knew he had been sick, and we asked him how his health was. He just laughed and laughed. I was hearing this through a translator, but it's so interesting how I feel like I heard it right from him. He said, "Oh yes, I've been really sick. I almost died the other day." I thought, wow—that's a happy guy. Something about him was so delighted, and it just made you delighted to be in his presence.

In both of these cases, such different expressions of freedom. This inspires me because it points to something important: whatever expression of the release of greed, aversion, and delusion happens here in this being, I can step into whatever that is. I don't have to model anybody in terms of how I engage. There's a way in which freedom, I think, will express itself in each of us in its own way.

In those quotes I read earlier, there are also some things I find deeply inspiring. The first is what the Buddha describes as the state of mind of one who is cooled, whose greed, aversion, and delusion has been released: such a one experiences no mental pain or grief.

Now, that might seem kind of unfathomable. Wouldn't one grieve if one lost a dear friend? Or saw the state of our country? Isn't grief a natural response to that? But I think the grief being pointed to here, and the mental pain—this is the suffering the Buddha spoke of—includes within it a form of aversion. The mind is rejecting something, pushing something away or holding on to something. The way things are, the way the world is, the fact that every single one of us—all of our family members, our parents, children, brothers, sisters, friends—every one of us is going to die, and we don't know the order in which that will happen: this is truth. The state of the world as it is right now has come to be. It is happening. It is truth in a way—this is what is here.

The resistance to what has already come to be is, at least in my understanding, part of what the Buddha is speaking about with this mental pain and grief: we are resisting what is already here. The heart is constricted or closed or rejecting something that is already present.

What the teachings also point to, though, is that when we see suffering happening in the world, if the heart is free from greed, aversion, and delusion—if the heart is not constricted by these forces—that heart feels suffering very profoundly. This is a place where we may need to come to a new understanding: what would it be to feel the suffering of the world very profoundly and deeply, without constriction?

The Buddha doesn't call that mental pain and grief. He calls it compassion—the heart that responds to the suffering of the world instead of fighting against it, instead of pushing against it.

When the heart that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion meets suffering in the world, the way that heart responds is qualitatively different. I feel like the heart constricted by greed, aversion, and delusion is somehow hard, encased, encrusted.

It feels stiff. It doesn't resonate in sympathy with what's happening. It may shake, or it may break, or it may prove very brittle.

The heart that has become free from greed, aversion, and delusion—my sense of that, just from little tastes maybe every now and then, little tastes of the heart that is freed from at least chunks of greed, aversion, and delusion—there's a feeling of resonance. There's a feeling of quivering. The heart resonates. It feels almost like a bowl of jello. It doesn't shatter when some kind of energy shakes it. It just vibrates and wobbles and wiggles.

So when the heart that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion is contacted by suffering, it resonates with that suffering. And it wants to act. It wants to alleviate that suffering. When that same heart contacts joy in the world, it also resonates with that very deeply, feeling the delight of empathetic or sympathetic joy.

The heart that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion is not the heart of uncaring indifference or non-action. It is the heart infused with the qualities of love, of compassion, of joy, of equanimity, of generosity—that connected quality.

And yet, the usual way that we engage, when our hearts are covered by greed, aversion, and delusion, when they're operating from that perspective, it's very difficult for that heart to fathom that there's something else, another way to act in the world. It's like we're blinded. The delusion embedded in aversion says, "You have to act on me in order to be okay in your life when things are difficult." The delusion embedded in greed says, "You have to follow through with me in order to be happy, in order to get the things that you want."

These states of greed and aversion have an embedded delusion in them that basically believes they are the reason why we do anything. And they can't fathom that if they go away, there would be anything that we would do. Wanting believes, "Why would I do anything if I didn't want?" Wanting is not going to tell you that if it goes away, there are other beautiful motivations for life and for connection and for engagement.

One piece that I find inspiring is this: no mental pain and grief. What might that be? Just to even contemplate what a heart free from greed, aversion, and delusion might look like—I find that inspiring.

The other piece that I find inspiring is this: "This is nibbana immediate. Visible in this life. Inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise." Visible in this life. To me, that points to the possibility of living in the world, of being engaged in the world from this perspective of the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. When I think of enlightenment, I kind of envision myself floating somewhere above the planet, not really engaged. But the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion—little tastes of moments of that in life, in engagement—reveals a possibility for being in the world, cooled, free from greed, aversion, and delusion.

So what does it mean then to come to this? What does it mean to find our way to becoming free from greed, aversion, and delusion?

Another teaching the Buddha offers around suffering points to a connection: when we are acting motivated out of greed, aversion, and delusion, we are destined to suffer. We will suffer. We may not suffer immediately, but we will. It's like we're setting into motion the seeds of suffering if we are acting out of the energies of greed, out of the energy of aversion, out of the energy of delusion. We're setting that suffering into motion.

There's an equivalence, in a way, between a mind with greed, aversion, and delusion and a mind in which there is suffering. This is the statement of the First Noble Truth: there is suffering, the truth of dukkha. And the Buddha encouraged us about suffering. The encouragement is to find our way to release from suffering, but the instructions are not "get rid of it." The instruction about suffering is to understand it.

This is our path. The whole of the Eightfold Path—wise view, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—is designed to help us come to an understanding of suffering.

So what does understanding mean? In a really simple way, all packaged together with the wisdom of the Buddha and his Eightfold Path, it's a simple instruction to be aware of the arising of greed, aversion, and delusion, and get to know what that experience is as a human experience.

This is important—that there's a sense of coming into awareness around these states of mind: greed, aversion, and delusion. Beginning to know: greed is happening right now, aversion is happening right now, delusion is happening right now.

And yet that may not quite be enough. One of my teachers has pointed out that if you go to somebody on the street who's yelling and screaming and say, "Hey, do you know you're angry?" they'll look at you like you're nuts. "Yeah, of course I know I'm angry." But they're not knowing anger in the way of understanding what the human experience of anger actually is. They are knowing anger in terms of what it's going to do for them and how it's going to get them what they want.

This is not the kind of awareness that will support becoming free from greed, aversion, and delusion, because essentially that kind of awareness of anger—"How's it going to get me what I want? How's it going to help me figure out this problem or get rid of this thing or make sure that person never bothers me ever again?"—if we're caught in that cycle, we are reinforcing that anger is what's going to make us feel better at some point.

We get caught on this cycle. Something happens, we get angry, we yell at somebody, and they go away. For a little while, okay, that feels better—they're gone. So we've gotten what we wanted. But there's been a lot of mess put out into the world in the meantime, and we have also cultivated this quality of anger internally.

What we're asked to do, what the understanding the Buddha is pointing to when he says "understand suffering"—it's not to understand it only intellectually. That's helpful; it's helpful to have a framework of understanding. The Buddha taught that aversion is a form of suffering, and it's useful to have that perspective. But that's not enough. Even that isn't enough. We have to actually do the work for ourselves and begin to experience and recognize that anger itself is already suffering. The feeling of anger, the human experience of anger, hurts. It creates pain internally.

This is what the Buddha asks us to do in terms of understanding what's happening in our minds—understanding greed, aversion, and delusion. He asks us to look at the human experience. What does it mean to be a human being feeling greed? What is that experience of greed?

We might not usually think about that. Typically with greed, again in terms of the reinforcement of greed, we think, "Get what I want—that's what makes me happy." We follow through on greed. We look at the things we want and say, "Yep, that's what I need and I'm going to go after it." In that going after, we are missing that the feeling of wanting is itself already painful. The feeling of wanting. When wanting springs up, there is already suffering there. There's already a feeling of lack, a feeling that something's wrong, that something's off.

As I mentioned earlier, when we are caught by that view of wanting, wanting is not going to tell you, "Oh, by the way, if you hang out long enough, wanting will go away, and that particular desire is no longer going to be a problem." Wanting is not going to tell us that.

So the instruction around exploring greed, aversion, and delusion in practice is to bring mindfulness to the experience. What is the experience of wanting? See if we can take our attention out of the thing that we want, or in aversion, the situation that we don't like. Take the attention out of that for a little while and turn the attention to the inner landscape. What is the experience that's happening inside?

Now, this kind of instruction can be challenging, particularly around social injustice. It might feel like, in removing—I said remove the attention from the thing that we are wanting to have or to get rid of and put the attention on the aversion itself. This is a beginning instruction.

This is an instruction that helps us become familiar with these qualities and states of mind. Over time, what we begin to do is recognize: okay, there's this thing out here, and here's my relationship to it. Yes, I don't like that. That's happening, and yes, that feels like a bad thing to be happening, and I don't like it. I want it to go away. So there's aversion there.

But there's also the possibility to know the aversion while we are engaged with the situation. It's almost like we've taken another step back. We have some sense of: yes, there is aversion happening, and this is what that aversion is in relationship to. We may be able to recognize that aversion puts filters on our mind and has us start to see things in a particular way. And seeing things in a particular way means we're also not seeing other things.

When we start to see the filters that aversion creates, we can begin to act in a way that takes this into account. This aversive state of mind is happening right now, so perhaps I should take some care about how I engage. As I said earlier, the absence of aversion in the face of even social injustice does not mean that we would not engage. This is hard to understand, but it is the way the heart works—when the heart does not have that encrusting of aversion and it sees suffering happening in the world, it will act.

When we're caught by aversion and thinking, "This is wrong, I hate this, I need to annihilate this situation because it is so unjust—I have got to bring everything that I have in terms of all of my anger to bear on this situation"—when we're caught by aversion,

that's the belief operating: that this is the only way something would change, if I act out of that aversion. It takes a little bit of a leap of faith to recognize that aversion is not the only motivator possible.

We need a little bit of care and caution when we see this, because as we go through this process of looking at greed, aversion, and delusion, it's not like one time looking at aversion will do it for us. It's a process. There's a gradual learning and a gradual releasing of these energies. There will be many times when we are engaged in the world and also experiencing aversion or greed. If we can have that step back and recognize, "Yep, I'm caught by aversion right now," that can help us balance the mind a little bit. We might recognize that part of what's going on in that mess around the aversion is also the contact with the pain of the suffering. The anger can be a kind of rejection of that pain. And yet the heart that is free from aversion is going to feel that pain and not resist it.

Embedded even in the aversive reaction, there is this movement of the heart towards wishing there not be suffering in the world, towards wishing that human beings didn't do this to each other. Recognizing that the anger is there, maybe we can connect to the thread that leads into that connection between us—the wish that beings be safe, the wish that beings have ease in their lives. Often the anger is tangled up with that wish.

In that tangle, I do sometimes speak about any form of suffering as a tangle between the deep, natural, human, wholesome wishes—to be happy, to be safe, to be at ease, to have health and well-being. This is the wish for metta for ourselves. This is wholesome. And yet those wishes come into contact with the way the world is: impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. Our minds get it all tangled up. When that wish for safety meets the uncontrollability of life, it feels like a problem. The threads get all tangled up there.

Any kind of suffering, my sense is, is a tangle between these threads of truth—the thread of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable, the ultimate nature of experience—and the deep wish for happiness, well-being, safety. Our mind just cannot comprehend how these can simultaneously coexist. We might think, and I've heard people say in meetings, "Yeah, I know it's all impermanent and uncontrollable, and so I shouldn't want that happiness." But no, that's not the way it works. That wish for happiness, for well-being for ourselves, is natural. It is not going to just disappear. There's a way we might use these truths to bludgeon ourselves. "Oh, you shouldn't want to be happy. You shouldn't want to be safe." Trying to go to emptiness or something. "Everything's impermanent—okay, yeah, I'm fine with that." Meantime, the part of us that wants to be healthy, happy, and safe is going, "What's going on here?"

And so on the other side of it, if we are connecting to those wishes for happiness and health and safety, and we see that things are impermanent, unreliable, we might feel betrayed by the world, or might feel like the world is just wrong.

So what might it mean to hold both of these? Because both exist—the love that's very natural, that's a part of our human wholesomeness and well-being, and these truths. The mind that can't comprehend that they can coexist gets tangled. And this is suffering. Anger is a tangle between uncontrollable and wanting to be happy, in a way we could say that.

And so we've got this tangle. We might think that what we need to do is get rid of the anger, get rid of the tangle, take some scissors, cut that knot out of the fabric. But what are we doing there? It's composed of these threads. The knot itself is the suffering, not the threads.

And so the practice of being with that anger, the practice of opening to it and understanding—this is the human experience of anger. My sense of it is it's kind of like a lubricant or something that allows these threads to untangle. And then we have a weave in our lives between love and wisdom. They're woven together, supporting each other and informing each other, but not tangled anymore.

So that practice of understanding suffering—that's my sense of what the Buddha is pointing to: to understand the knot has these threads, and that this can be known and can be seen. The understanding of that creates the conditions for the untangling. It's a very gradual untangling. And the Buddha pointed to that too, the gradual nature of the untangling.

At one point he gave an analogy of a shipwreck. Parts of a ship are strewn over a beach—the wood and the rigging, the rope—and he said the sun, the sand, the wind, the water, all the elements act on all those parts of the ship, and gradually, slowly, over the course of months, they wear away.

Unpacking that analogy a little bit, that's pretty much all he said—that the sun, the sand, the wind are like the mindfulness. But if we think about it, think about that rope on a beach. You go back one day after the shipwreck, and the rope is there. It's pretty solid. You can pick it up and it's hard to pull apart. Go back the next day—what's worn down? Can you see any wearing down that's happened? Probably not. But the inexorable nature of the elements acting over the course of months and months and months... you come back six months later, you try to pick up that rope, and it falls apart.

This is the way he described the practice working. This gradual unfolding.

Now to me, this actually is happiness-producing, this gradual nature of the path, because it fits my experience. I've had a few experiences where there's a kind of momentary seeing of something really clearly that lets something go. But the vast majority of the way that the practice has unfolded has been this very gradual releasing of greed and aversion and delusion.

Sometimes I look back at something, kind of in surprise at one point, seeing a pattern. Wow, yeah, that one—what happened to that one? I don't remember seeing it go, but I sure remember having it there. And not even being able to call it up in that moment. And it never returning. A particular hatred at a particular person. Gone. Replaced by mettā. Through this gradual path.

So I have confidence in this goal stated as the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion because of seeing, in small ways perhaps, the way they are released. We get flavors of this, we get tastes of it. Maybe just in a moment, for a second—seeing how the mind, when we meet aversion or greed, some difficult reactive state, with that curiosity of, "Huh, what's this? What's this state of mind?"

When we meet it that way, there is a feeling of a little space around it, not being quite so hooked in it, not quite so squeezed by it. We feel a shift. Sometimes we might even see a particular pattern, in a moment, just let go when it's met in that way. And again, a taste, a flavor of that possibility of being free from greed or aversion or delusion.

Just a little taste gives us the sense of that possibility. We get this little taste, and in this life, this possibility opens before us.

CHAPTER 224

Cooling the Fire

Andrea Fella · 43 min

In this illuminating talk, Andrea Fella reframes our understanding of the Buddhist goal by returning to the original Pāli term nibbāna, which literally means 'cooling' rather than the commonly used 'enlightenment.' Drawing from sutta passages, she explains that this cooling refers specifically to the extinction of greed, hatred, and delusion—not the attainment of some special state, but the letting go of what causes suffering. She shares inspiring stories of two very different Burmese monks she encountered, illustrating how freedom from these afflictions can manifest uniquely in each person.

Fella addresses a crucial distinction: the heart free from greed, aversion, and delusion is not indifferent but deeply responsive. When such a heart encounters suffering, it resonates with compassion rather than contracting in resistance. She uses the metaphor of a heart like jello that vibrates and wobbles rather than shattering—one that naturally moves toward alleviating suffering without the mental pain and grief that comes from fighting against reality.

The practical instruction centers on understanding suffering rather than eliminating it. Fella describes suffering as a 'tangle' between our wholesome wishes for happiness and safety and the truths of impermanence and uncontrollability. Through mindful awareness—meeting reactive states with curiosity about their human experience—these tangles gradually loosen. Using the Buddha's analogy of shipwreck debris slowly worn away by sun, sand, wind, and water, she emphasizes the gradual, inexorable nature of this untangling, offering encouragement that even small tastes of freedom point toward the full possibility of nibbāna 'visible in this life.'

So as Ted said, the title for this talk is Cooling the Fire. The inspiration for that name came from the word that is typically translated as enlightenment. When we talk about the Wesak Festival at the end of the month celebrating the Buddha's birth, death, and enlightenment, we typically think about the Buddha becoming enlightened, and we might think about that as being the goal for the path. When Shaila invited this group of us to teach this particular series, she asked us to reflect about the goal—what we explore, what we think of as the goal of the path, and how we might find our way towards that.

The first thing I wanted to reflect on here is the Pali word that the Buddha used for his awakening: Nibbana. The literal meaning of that word is nothing like enlightenment. I don't know how people came up with that translation or why people use it, because the word itself basically means something like cooling—the act of cooling. I was told by one colleague that this was a very ordinary word in the time of the Buddha, that you would speak about a fire cooling or the rice cooling. The nature of things when they're heated is to cool. That's just what happens when you no longer keep adding the heat. When you no longer keep adding fuel to a fire, the fire goes out, the fire cools. And so the word for this freedom that the Buddha discovered was a cooling of something.

When asked about what is cooled, I'll read some excerpts from the suttas about this word nibbana and what it means to have that freedom. These are from four different passages, but they weave together nicely:

"The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called Nibbana."

If we replace enlightenment with cooling there: the extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this is cooling.

"Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed, with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbana, immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise."

"And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing remains to be done. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so, neither forms, nor sound, nor odors, nor taste, nor contact of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is the mind, gained is deliverance."

"This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

This is a description of what the Buddha understood to be the freedom that the path he found offered—this release, this cooling of greed, aversion, and delusion.

In one of the Buddha's early teachings, he used the analogy of fire for greed, aversion, and delusion. He said everything is burning with the fire of greed, everything is burning with the fire of aversion, everything is burning with the fire of delusion. We could look at nibbana as the cooling of those fires.

To me this conveys something completely different than enlightenment. When I first heard the term enlightenment and started practicing, thinking maybe someday I'll attain enlightenment, I had this image of getting something, of having some particular state or being in some particular way. But these descriptions speak not of what one gains, but what one lets go of.

That is interesting because it actually leaves a lot of room for what's here. When one lets go of greed, aversion, and delusion, it doesn't look one way. The goal, or how we might manifest in the world having let go of greed, aversion, and delusion—there's a lot of room for many different ways that would look. And that, to me, is inspiring.

I met some people in Burma when I practiced there—a number of very wise and very kind and very practiced people. And they were very different. I'll share one story because it gives a little flavor.

I was practicing and supporting a retreat in the northern part of Burma in the Sagaing Hills. That particular part of Burma has hundreds and hundreds of monasteries in the hills. You can just walk in the hills and move from one monastery to another. We knew some of the monks in various monasteries in that area, so we would take hikes in the hills and go visit them. At one point we were hiking—it took about thirty minutes or so to hike to this one monastery—and we were chatting along the way. As we approached the monastery gate, one of the people who was with us, who had been to this particular monastery many times, turned to us and said, "We need to be in silence as we walk into this monastery. We need to be in silence as we walk through the gate."

And so we fell into silence. As I walked through that gate, just the setting itself was remarkable—it was nestled in a bowl with cliffs on three sides of the monastery. The cliffs had been whitewashed so that rainwater could fall down into a catchment system. Something about the visual and the feeling of walking in—I felt like I was being immersed in an ocean of tranquility. It was quite remarkable.

And then I met the monk who lived there. I became so happy just sitting with him. He was such a calm and peaceful person that I felt it was being transmitted through his very being. I was simply happy sitting in his presence, feeling so at ease and so peaceful.

We visited both of these monasteries multiple times, and I'll share one story about another monk I met there. He had a very lively mind and was so delighted by the world that he was pretty much constantly laughing. We came in one day—he was probably ninety at this point, and he had shriveled over the years that I had known him. He looked like this tiny little being sitting in his chair. We knew he had been sick, and we asked him how his health was. He just laughed and laughed. I was hearing this through a translator, but it's so interesting how I feel like I heard it directly from him. He said, "Oh yes, I've been really sick. I almost died the other day." And I thought, wow—that's a happy guy. Just something about him was so delighted, and it made you delighted to be in his presence.

In both of these cases, such different expressions of freedom. This inspires me because it points to whatever expression the release of greed, aversion, and delusion takes in each of us—I can step into whatever that is for me. I don't have to model anybody in terms of how they engage. The freedom, I think, will express itself in each of us in its own way.

In those quotes I read earlier, there are other things I find inspiring as well. The first is what the Buddha describes as his state of mind—the state of mind of one who is cooled, whose greed, aversion, and delusion has been released. He says such a person experiences no mental pain or grief.

Now, that might seem unfathomable in a way. Wouldn't one grieve if one lost a dear friend? Or saw something difficult, saw the state of our country? Isn't grief a natural response? But the grief being pointed to here, and the mental pain—this is the suffering the Buddha indicated. Included in that suffering is a form of aversion, where the mind is rejecting something, pushing something away or holding on to something.

The way things are, the way the world is—the fact that every single one of us, all of our family members, our parents, children, brothers, sisters, friends, every one of us is going to die, and we don't know the order in which it will happen—this is truth. The state of the world as it is right now has come to be. It is happening. It is truth in a way also; this is what is here.

The resistance to what has already come to be is, at least in my understanding, part of what the Buddha is speaking about in this mental pain and grief—that we are resisting what is already here, that the heart is constricted or closed or rejecting something that is already present.

What the teachings also point to is that when we see suffering happening in the world, if the heart is free from greed, aversion, and delusion, if the heart is not constricted by these forces, that heart feels the suffering very profoundly. This may require us to come to a new understanding—what it would be to feel the suffering of the world very profoundly and deeply without constriction.

The Buddha doesn't call that mental pain and grief. He calls it compassion. The heart that responds to the suffering of the world instead of fighting against it, pushing against the suffering of the world.

When the heart that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion meets suffering in the world, the way it responds is quite different. I feel like the heart that is constricted by greed, aversion, and delusion is somehow hard, encased, encrusted in a way.

It feels stiff. It doesn't resonate in sympathy with what's happening. It may shake, it may break, it may be very brittle.

The heart that has become free from greed, aversion, and delusion—my sense of that, just from little tastes perhaps, every now and then, little tastes of the heart freed from at least chunks of greed, aversion, and delusion—there's a feeling of resonance. There's a feeling of quivering. The heart resonates. It feels almost like a bowl of jello. It doesn't shatter when some kind of energy shakes it. It just vibrates and wobbles and wiggles.

So when the heart that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion is contacted by suffering, it resonates with that suffering. And it wants to act. It wants to alleviate that suffering. When that same heart contacts joy in the world, it also resonates with that very deeply, feeling the delight of empathetic or sympathetic joy.

The heart that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion is not the heart of uncaring indifference or non-action. It's the heart that is infused with the qualities of love, of compassion, of joy, of equanimity, of generosity—that connected quality.

And yet, the usual way that we engage, when our hearts are covered by greed, aversion, and delusion, when they're operating from that perspective, it's very difficult for that heart to fathom that there's something else, another way to act in the world. It's like we're blinded. The delusion embedded in aversion says, "You have to act on me in order to be okay in your life when things are difficult." The delusion embedded in greed says, "You have to follow through with me in order to be happy, in order to get the things that you want."

These states of greed and aversion have an embedded delusion in them that basically believes they are the reason why we do anything. They can't fathom that if they go away, there would be anything we would do. Wanting—the belief behind wanting is: why would I do anything if I didn't want? Wanting is not going to tell you that if it goes away, there are other beautiful motivations for life, for connection, for engagement.

The one piece that I find inspiring here is this "no mental pain and grief." What might that be? Just to contemplate what a heart free from greed, aversion, and delusion might look like—I find that inspiring to consider.

The other piece that I find inspiring is this statement: this is nibbana. This experiences no mental pain and grief. This is nibbana—immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise. *Visible in this life.* To me that points to the possibility of living in the world, of being engaged in the world from this perspective of the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion.

When I think of enlightenment, I kind of envision myself floating somewhere above the planet, not really engaged. But the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion—little tastes of moments of that in life, in engagement—reveals a possibility for being in the world and cooled, free from greed, aversion, and delusion.

So what does it mean to come to this? What does it mean to find our way to become free from greed, aversion, and delusion?

Another teaching the Buddha offers around suffering makes a connection: when we are acting motivated out of greed, aversion, and delusion, we are destined to suffer. We will suffer. We may not suffer immediately, but we will. It's like we're setting into motion the seeds of suffering if we are acting out of these energies. And so there's a kind of equivalence between a mind with greed, aversion, and delusion and a mind in which there is suffering.

This is a statement of the First Noble Truth: there is suffering, the truth of suffering. And the Buddha encouraged us about suffering. The encouragement is to find our way to release from suffering, but the instructions are not "get rid of it." The instruction about suffering is to understand it.

This is our path. The whole of the Eightfold Path—wise view, wise intention, wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood, wise effort, wise mindfulness, and wise concentration—is designed to help us come to an understanding of suffering. So let's talk simply about what this means.

So what does understanding mean? In a really simple way, all packaged together with the wisdom of the Buddha and his Eightfold Path, it is a simple instruction to be aware of the arising of greed, aversion, and delusion, and to get to know what that experience is as a human experience.

This is important—that there's a sense of coming into awareness around these states of mind: greed, aversion, and delusion. Beginning to know: greed is happening right now, aversion is happening right now, delusion is happening right now.

And yet that may not quite be enough. One of my teachers has pointed out that if you go to somebody on the street who's yelling and screaming and say, "Hey, do you know you're angry?" they'll look at you kind of like you're nuts. "Yeah, of course I know I'm angry." But they're not knowing anger in the way of what is the human experience of anger. They are knowing anger in terms of what is it going to do for me and how is it going to get me what I want.

This is not the kind of awareness that is going to support becoming free from greed, aversion, and delusion, because essentially that kind of awareness of anger—how's it going to get me what I want? How's it going to help me figure out this problem or get rid of this thing or make sure that person never bothers me ever again?—if we're caught in that cycle, we are reinforcing that anger is what's going to make us feel better at some point.

We get caught on this cycle. We get angry, something happens, we yell at somebody and they go away. And so for a little while, okay, that feels better—they're gone. We've gotten what we wanted. But there's been a lot of mess put out into the world in the meantime, and we have also cultivated this quality of anger internally.

What we're asked to do, what the understanding the Buddha is pointing to when he says "understand suffering," is not to understand it only intellectually. That's helpful—it's helpful to have a framework of understanding. The Buddha taught that aversion is a form of suffering. It's useful to have that perspective. But even that isn't enough. We have to actually do the work for ourselves and begin to experience and recognize that anger itself is already suffering. The feeling of anger, the human experience of anger, hurts. It creates pain internally.

This is what the Buddha asks us to do in terms of understanding what's happening in our minds—understanding greed, aversion, and delusion. He asks us to look at the human experience. What does it mean to be a human being that's feeling greed? What is that experience of greed?

We might not usually think about that. Typically with greed, again in terms of reinforcement, we think: get what I want, that's what makes me happy. We are following through on greed. We are looking at the things that we want and saying, "Yep, that's what I need and I'm going to go after it." And in that going after, we are missing that the feeling of wanting is already painful. The feeling of wanting—when wanting springs up, there is already suffering there. There's already a feeling of lack, a feeling that something's wrong, that something's off.

As I mentioned earlier, when we are caught by that view of wanting, wanting is not going to tell you, "Oh, by the way, if you hang out long enough, wanting will go away, and that particular desire is no longer going to be a problem." Wanting is not going to tell us that.

So the instruction around exploring greed, aversion, and delusion in practice is to bring mindfulness to the experience. What is the experience of wanting? See if we can take our attention out of the thing that we want, the situation that we don't like in aversion. Take the attention out of that for a little while and turn it to the inner landscape. What is the experience that's happening inside?

Now this kind of instruction can be challenging, particularly around social injustice. It might feel like we are—when I say remove the attention from the thing that we are wanting to have or to get rid of and put the attention on the aversion itself—this is a beginning instruction.

This is an instruction that helps us become familiar with these qualities and states of mind. Over time, what we can begin to do is recognize: okay, there's this thing out here, and here's my relationship to it. Yes, I don't like that. That's happening, and it feels like a bad thing to be happening, and I don't like it. I want it to go away. So there's aversion there.

But there's also the possibility to know the aversion while we are engaged with the situation. It's almost like we've taken another step back. We have some sense of yes, there is aversion happening, and this is what that aversion is in relationship to. We may be able to recognize that the aversion puts filters on our mind and has us start to see things in a particular way. And seeing things in a particular way means we're also not seeing other things.

When we start to see the filters that aversion creates, we can begin to act in a way that takes this into account. This aversive state of mind is happening right now, so perhaps I should take some care about how I engage. As I said earlier, the absence of aver-

sion in the face of even social injustice does not mean that we would not engage. This is hard to understand, but it is the way the heart works—when the heart does not have that encrusting of aversion and it sees suffering happening in the world, it will act.

When we're caught by aversion and thinking, "This is wrong, I hate this, I need to annihilate this situation because it is so unjust—I have got to bring everything that I have in terms of all of my anger to bear on this situation"—when we're caught by aversion, that's the belief that's operating: that this is the only way something would change, that I must act out of that aversion. It takes a little bit of a leap of faith to recognize that aversion is not the only motivator possible.

We also need a little bit of care and caution as we go through this, because looking at greed, aversion, and delusion is not a one-time thing. It's not like one look at aversion will do it for us. It's a process. There's a gradual learning and a gradual releasing of these energies. There are going to be many times when we are engaged in the world and also experiencing aversion or greed. If we can have that step back and recognize, "Yep, I'm caught by aversion right now," that can help balance the mind a little. We might recognize that part of what's going on in that mess around the aversion is also the contact with the pain, the pain of the suffering. Anger can be a kind of rejection of that pain. And yet the heart that is free from aversion is going to feel that pain and not resist it.

Embedded even in the aversive reaction, there is this movement of the heart toward wishing there not be suffering in the world, toward wishing that human beings didn't do this to each other. Recognizing that the anger is there, maybe we can connect to the thread that leads into that connection between us—the wish that beings be safe, the wish that beings have ease in their lives. Often the anger is kind of tangled up with that wish.

When it's tangled up like that, I sometimes speak about any form of suffering as a tangle between the deep, natural, human, wholesome wishes—to be happy, to be safe, to be at ease, to have health and well-being. This is the wish for mettā for ourselves. This is wholesome. And yet those wishes come into contact with the way the world is: impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. Our minds get it all tangled up. When that wish for safety meets the uncontrollability of life, it feels like a problem. And so there's a tangle. The threads get all tangled up.

Any kind of suffering, my sense is, is a tangle between these threads of truth—the thread of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable, the ultimate nature of experience—and the deep wish for happiness, well-being, safety. Our mind just cannot comprehend how these can simultaneously coexist. We might think, and I've heard people say things

like this: "Yeah, I know it's all impermanent and uncontrollable, so I shouldn't want that happiness." No, that's not the way it works. That wish for happiness, for well-being for ourselves, is natural. It is not going to just disappear. There's a way we might use these truths to bludgeon ourselves: "Oh, you shouldn't want to be happy. You shouldn't want to be safe." Trying to go to emptiness or something. "Everything's impermanent. Okay, yeah, I'm okay with that." Meantime, the part of us that wants to be healthy, happy, and safe is going, "What's going on here?"

And so on the other side of it, if we are connecting to those wishes for happiness and health and safety, and we see that things are impermanent, unreliable, we might feel betrayed by the world, or might feel like the world is just wrong.

And so what might it mean to hold both of these? Because both exist—the love that's very natural, that's a part of our human wholesomeness and well-being, and these truths. The mind that can't comprehend that they can coexist gets tangled. And this is suffering. Anger is a tangle between uncontrollable and wanting to be happy, in a way we could say that.

And so we've got this tangle. We might think that what we need to do is get rid of the anger, get rid of the tangle, take some scissors, cut that knot out of the fabric. But what are we doing there? The knot is composed of these threads. The knot itself is the suffering, not the threads.

And so the practice of being with that anger, the practice of opening to it and understanding—this is the human experience of anger. My sense of that is it's kind of like a lubricant or something that allows these threads to untangle. And then we have a weave in our lives between love and wisdom. They're woven together, supporting each other and informing each other, but not tangled anymore.

So that practice of understanding suffering—that's my sense of what the Buddha is pointing to: to understand the knot has these threads, and that this can be known and seen. The understanding of that creates the conditions for the untangling. It's a very gradual untangling. And the Buddha pointed to that too, the gradual nature of the untangling.

At one point he gave an analogy of a shipwreck. Parts of a ship are strewn over a beach—the wood and the rigging, the rope. And he said the sun, the sand, the wind, the water, all act on those parts of the ship, and gradually, slowly, over the course of months, they wear away.

Unpacking that analogy a little—that's pretty much all he said, that the sun, the sand, the wind are like the mindfulness. But if we think about it, think about that rope on a beach. You go back one day and something has happened there. The day after the shipwreck, the rope is there. It's pretty solid. You can pick it up and it's hard to pull apart. Go back the next day—what's worn down? Can you see any wearing down that's happened? Probably not. But the inexorable nature of the elements acting over the course of months and months and months... you come back six months later, you try to pick up that rope and it falls apart. This is the way he described the practice working. This gradual unfolding.

Now to me, this actually is happy-producing, this gradual nature of the path, because it fits my experience. I've had a few experiences where there's a momentary seeing of something really clearly that lets something go. But the vast majority of the way the practice has unfolded has been this very gradual releasing of greed and aversion and delusion.

Sometimes I look back at something, kind of in surprise at one point, seeing a pattern. "Wow, yeah, that one—what happened to that one? I don't remember seeing it go, but I sure remember having it there." And not even being able to call it up in that moment. And it never returning. A particular hatred at a particular person. Gone. Replaced by metta. Through this gradual path.

So I have confidence in this goal stated as the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion because of seeing, in small ways perhaps, the way they are released. We get flavors of this, we get tastes of it. Maybe just in a moment, for a moment, a second of seeing how the mind, when we meet aversion or greed, some difficult reactive state, with that curiosity of, "Huh, what's this? What's this state of mind?"

When we meet it that way, there's a feeling of a little space around it—not being quite so hooked, not quite so squeezed. We feel a shift. Sometimes we might even see a particular pattern, in a moment, just let go when it's met in that way. And again, a taste, a flavor of that possibility of being free from greed or aversion or delusion.

Just a little taste gives us the sense of that possibility. We get this little taste, and in this life, this possibility opens before us.

CHAPTER 225

Milestones on the Path to Freedom: Assessing Progress in Practice Wisely

Andrea Fella · 42 min

In this thoughtful talk at Insight Meditation South Bay, Andrea Fella addresses the delicate art of assessing progress in Buddhist practice. She distinguishes between day-to-day assessments of meditation and the longer arc of spiritual development over years or decades, offering guidance on how to evaluate progress without falling into common pitfalls of clinging or self-judgment.

Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Sumedho and her own experience beginning meditation through biofeedback for chronic pain, Fella emphasizes the importance of holding assessments lightly. She explores how the early stages of practice often reveal unflattering aspects of our minds, and why trusting the process of awakening is essential. The talk addresses how to relate skillfully to beautiful experiences like jhāna states and the brahmavihāras, as well as genuine insights—using a vivid metaphor of a hiker encountering a milestone on the Pacific Coast Trail to illustrate the danger of trying to "carry" our insights with us.

Fella offers a compelling alternative to the achievement-oriented language of "attainments," suggesting we view progress through the lens of conditionality (paṭicca samuppāda). She references the Saṃyutta Nikāya's description of stream-entry and offers practical markers for self-assessment: ethical purity, the weakening of greed, hatred, and delusion, the ability to meet suffering with compassion, and most importantly, the trail we leave behind us in the world. The teaching concludes with encouragement to hold insights as "sticky notes" that can always be revised.

Thanks to Insight Meditation South Bay for hosting me tonight and all the dedicated volunteers here. It's really touching to see the dharma service here. It's beautiful.

I am the last person in a series on goals that's been happening here at IMSB. My talk tonight is called "Milestones on the Path to Freedom," and it's about assessing progress in practice. You can assess it wisely or unwisely. Some assessments are the flip sides of goals—we set a goal to become more regular in our sitting practice, and then we can assess whether or not we're regular in our sitting practice. Others are more general, just a sense of how is it going?

I'll offer my perspective on these, and it is limited to my own experience and my own learning. I'm going to offer it in two broad areas. The first is assessing day-to-day practice of meditation. The second is more broadly looking at our progress over the arc of our practice. That can be a few years or many years, and I know for some of you it is many years.

The start of my own journey towards meditation was through the secular meditation doorway. Even though I'd been doing Tai Chi and yoga for years, I started sitting biofeedback meditation because of chronic pain. That's what actually got my butt on the cushion. I didn't really have any expectations about what was supposed to happen when I was sitting, and in retrospect, that was a huge gift. I'd actually been told by the physical therapist and the nurse who taught me, "Don't expect the pain to go away while you're sitting. You'll notice benefit over time, but don't look at it every time you sit." Sure enough, the pain didn't lessen for years, but the suffering started lessening much faster.

I gradually noticed that meditation was having these small but noticeable beneficial effects on my day. This typifies one approach you can take to meditating: hold it really lightly. Notice that you're doing it. Don't have any expectations at all for what happens on the cushion. But check in—how's it going on a day-to-day level? Am I feeling more grounded, more aware, more patient?

The Dalai Lama suggests looking back at one's practice regularly, about every five to seven years or so. Spacious. Big picture. The other piece to that is noticing the day-to-day. How am I showing up? Am I a little bit less anxious? Am I a little bit more grounded? Am I a little bit kinder in traffic? That's where the rubber hits the road for a lot of us. I know it does for me.

I notice for myself, and many other practitioners have noticed, that this kind of attention can be really helpful. As the practice starts to gain momentum, it's nice to take a slightly closer look. Unfortunately, most of what we notice when we take a closer look—or at least I should speak for myself—most of what I noticed when I took a closer look for the first number of years wasn't exactly good news. I've heard Joseph Goldstein and Gil both speak about this: the first few impressions we get of our minds aren't exactly flattering.

This can make assessment a little bit tricky because it's not always the most pleasant process to start to see that unfold. It's been really helpful for me to trust that the system will right itself, that the mind will change itself.

Ajahn Sumedho actually talks about this. He's quite eloquent, so I'm just going to read a bit of his passage here. This is from *Kamma and the End of Kamma*, for those of you who like citations, in a chapter entitled "Is There an End?"

He says: "If you just assess how you're doing in terms of daily occurrences, the conclusions aren't that reliable. The mind gets stressed out over having to handle many options and look out for potential mishaps, and also blown around by input that we have very little say over—such as the actions and speech of others, or the input of media, or just life on the streets. And then there are the physical ailments, which may bring up difficult and uninspiring mind states all of their own. Moreover, the ongoing process of meditation exposes some most ungratifying mental programs: escapist fantasies, finding fault with oneself or others, hunger for attention and praise, the need to be in control in all situations—they're all common enough. And along with it becomes the impression that this is what you are, and you should be something else, and you shouldn't be like this at all. Hence, there's a cross-current of mind states that well-meaning people go through when they attune to Dharma practice. It's because we're waking up, and waking up from the accident of life makes us aware of the bruises. We accumulate hurt over what we've been through and things that seemed like they might have been a good idea at the time but ended up causing us headaches. There's the need to feel good and on top of things, but an untrained mind constructs unskillful and unreliable ways of bringing that about. So in waking up, we need to meet our own tangles and dysfunctions with a willingness to glean some understanding from them. And that means taking refuge in the Dharma—in the understanding that it is exactly through the process of meeting stress, conflict, and dis-ease that something wider and wiser unfolds."

I know that was quite long, but I read it because when I first encountered this passage, it struck me that it gets to the heart of how assessment and practice interweave. There's a trust in the arc of the practice, ideally—a trust that the mind is opening to something wider and wiser precisely by doing that very counterintuitive move towards pain, towards suffering. And this makes assessment tricky, because generally we want to feel like we're moving closer to ease. Yet the process has all these bumps. "Oh, that's suffering. And so is that. And so is that."

So there's this—not quite paradox, but a kind of spaciousness required to gently hold that both things happen. The mind moves towards ease, and there are bumps and bruises, as Ajahn Sumedho calls them, along the way.

It can also be helpful to consider meditation itself in our assessment. So far I've been talking more about the antics of the mind, which one or two of you might have noticed during the sitting. But there are also little micro-assessments, little micro-noticings that

can happen during practice. This isn't so helpful to do if it becomes a discursive evaluation or a story about what's happening, but more a noticing about what's happening—a wise investigation. For example: Is the breath feeling easeful or not, if one is doing breathing meditation? Is there additional pleasure happening, if one is doing concentration meditation? Or simply noticing the conditions of each moment: "Ah, this conditions distraction; this conditions ease."

There are different assessments depending on the form of practice you're doing, and there are many forms of practice that work just fine. It's going to vary if you're doing mindfulness of mind practice, concentration practice, classic ānāpānasati. You can suss it out for yourself. But those little in-between goals and assessments of those goals are just fine, as long as they're held with a lot of space, a lot of lightness.

Some assessments are broader than any technique. How am I relating to this practice? Can I meet what's happening right now? Am I clinging? Can it be met kindly? And there's also practicing with your practice—that might not make a whole lot of sense, but what I mean is examining our relationship to practice itself.

For example, I went through some years of clinging to retreat practice. Not the most unwholesome thing to cling to, but it was still clinging. I might still have a little of that, come to think of it. And this gets to another piece: even the most wholesome goals, if there's clinging, become problematic. That's why it's so important to assess how I'm relating to my practice, and relating to the process of maturation itself.

This brings me to assessments over the arc of practice, as I mentioned at the beginning. This part of the talk is especially aimed at those people who have taken on a deeper or wider goal, something profound in their practice—perhaps even awakening as a goal, or at least held it as a possibility. Those in search of that heartwood that Shaila talked about in the first talk. And that involves assessing beautiful experiences that can arise on the path.

Some people can feel more ease, joy, even sometimes extraordinary bliss or calm can arise. Their presence or their absence can be an aid or an impediment to practice depending on how I relate to it.

What I mean by that is when these kinds of lovely experiences arise—even if it's just that sit where you felt like you were just in it, the whole sit until the bell rang—let it nourish you. That's an important part of this practice. Soaking in the good. And recognize that if it's clung to, it becomes a tripping point. With strong, mature awareness, the

inclination to crave these states or to hold on to them tends to fade, and eventually the wish to hold on to them past their usefulness dissolves entirely. That can take some time.

Some practitioners have goals to cultivate beautiful qualities—the brahma-viharas: loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, equanimity. Absolutely beautiful goals. Or the paramis, everything from generosity to wisdom, the perfections of those qualities. The same holds true, however, for those goals. Clinging to them, meeting them or not, can be painful. And allowing them to arise either as a result of hard-won practice or as a natural part of the progress can really be beautiful. In my experience, these beautiful qualities do arise as part of the maturation of the path itself. Either way, when they emerge, it's helpful to celebrate them. It's okay to be happy about being happy.

I'd also like to take a few minutes to talk about assessing insights. Here I'm talking specifically about Buddhist insights, not the psychological insights that colloquially we discuss, which are also very important. But here, more opening to the path unfolding in certain ways that the Buddha pointed to in the early teachings—noticing the arising and passing away of phenomena, or noticing disenchantment with things that used to enchant the heart and mind that aren't so useful anymore. Those kinds of insights.

To start, I'm going to offer what you could call a metaphor, but you can take it as a visualization if you want to. If you want to close your eyes and come along, you can.

Imagine traveling, maybe on the Pacific Crest Trail—a beautiful hiking path. The path goes up sometimes. It goes down sometimes. It wanders through shady forests of majestic redwood trees and pine and fragrant bay laurel. This path itself is more ancient still than even the massive trees, and the light in the canopy above is luminous and diffuse all around. At times the way is rocky, narrow, and difficult. Other times you can travel with ease through bright verdant meadows where birds sing and butterflies flutter.

After one particularly long ascent through the woods, you turn a corner, surprised by a magnificent vista ahead of you. Perhaps it's even a glimpse of your destination. One might wonder how far you've come towards that destination. There's no map, but off to the side you see a milestone, a signal of progress.

How might one relate to this whole scene? Is it more important to focus on the scene or the milestone? The pleasure of the moment, the awe, or the marker? You could even be a bit silly and pick up the milestone and take it with you to show other people that you've found it. Imagine how that makes the rest of the hike.

I bring that up because some of the most beautiful and inspiring moments along the path, these experiential insights, can have that quality. You just have to be there to feel it. And I'm here to tell you from personal experience that if you try to pick up that milestone and haul it along with you, it's nothing but trouble. It'll weigh you down.

This happened in my own practice fairly early, actually. It's common enough—many people have had this happen. One insight I had was very powerful and moving. It had a huge impact on my life. At first I didn't see it as anything I had done, and it kind of percolated through my system. But over time I was exposed to more and more skill-based teachings, and I started looking back to it more and more, with a little bit more attachment, a little bit more clinging. I reified this experience, tried to get back to it. Friends, that is a recipe for suffering.

So that's a very common pitfall of assessing insight. Don't lug around that rock if you can possibly avoid it.

Another pitfall is framing concentration states, insights, or even the process of awakening itself as attainments. I'm going to own my own perspective here. Some people find attainments to be very inspiring—the idea of certain levels of practice can really help focus one's efforts. For someone like me, however, it's not a useful way of framing the process of awakening. The concept of attainment can inspire so much energy, but it also has a strong tendency to evoke this problematic view of and focus on me, mine, I. My attainment. Not my attainment. I didn't get that attainment. Getting. The problem is in the word *getting*.

As Andrea Fella mentioned, the word "enlightenment" itself, just like "attainment," is not a very accurate translation of the Pali. Nirvana means something closer to extinguishing or cooling fire. That's nirvana. Attainment—I don't know the Pali for it, but I'm pretty certain it doesn't carry the same ring it does in English. These attainments can be a big obstacle to integrating the wisdom of insight, and they can very effectively block further spiritual maturation.

Our choices do matter a lot. Our effort and practice matters a lot. But it doesn't make much sense to take credit for it, particularly as the practice matures. So what's the alternative? The alternative is to consider conditions. Conditionality, conditioning the mind—you've heard those words before, many of you, I know you have.

While even insights can be dead weight if we try to cling to them or identify them as personal accomplishments, the same insight viewed as a process of unfolding conditions becomes something quite different. Yes, there is skill in choosing what part of the path to take. There's skill in helping to unfold our practice. We have our part to play. It's

a bit more though—here's a metaphor I like a lot, one Susie Harrington introduced me to. It's like a kayaker going down whitewater rapids. Yes, there's choice and there's definitely skill. But the water, the rocks, the weather, the snow melt—all of those things are conditions too. We can take some credit for our skill, but wiser still to look at the whole river and see the conditions and understand how we interact with them. This kind of perspective is wisdom, and it can help reinforce wholesome development in addition to making for a wiser assessment.

Conditionality can also help to undercut another problematic way that many practitioners identify with goals. I spoke before about falling short of a goal. That too is conditions. It doesn't need to be a story about me, how bad I am, the things I've done wrong. Instead, it might simply be the conditions in my life. Did I drink too much coffee before I got on the cushion this morning? Did I not get enough sleep? Is my job stressing me out? This is a more compassionate way to hold falling short of those goals.

When assessing assessment for yourself, you might consider criteria that make sense for you and your practice. I look to the suttas for ideas about how maturity is assessed. If you examine the end of the path as described in the discourses, they offer some pretty clear guidelines. Ethical purity is a significant one. How we relate to what's happening in our minds. And absolute trust in the Dharma.

I'm going to read a little bit from the Samyutta Nikaya. It's a conversation between one of the Buddha's biggest lay disciples, a man named Anathapindika, and Sariputta, one of the Buddha's most trusted senior disciples and teachers. In this particular vignette, Anathapindika is experiencing such severe pain he feels like his head is being crushed. He's not having a good day. Sariputta consoles him by reminding him that as a stream-enterer—someone who's already partially awake—he's utterly free of the bad qualities that lead to states of woe. And then he reminds Anathapindika that he possesses four very important factors.

Unwavering confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and the virtues dear to the noble ones—which means following all the lay precepts of not killing, not stealing, not becoming intoxicated, not using sexuality in an unwise way, and not lying. Moreover, he's certain to reach the fruits of the path.

I quote that briefly because it gives a picture of what's valued here: trust, ethical development, and a commitment to awakening itself are some of the pieces that are held there.

For me personally, I've got some others that I use, based on that framework. I assess my level of altruism—my willingness to serve, to offer, my generosity. I look at the strength of greed, hate, and delusion in my mind, as Andrea Fella talked about. It's usually rather humbling to examine. And I notice whether that's weakening, and how I'm relating to it. Can I just be with it compassionately and notice what's happening? Or does there have to be judgment—second, third, fourth arrows in addition to the clear seeing? The ability to meet suffering with compassion, to either do that or not, is for me a very good marker of how my practice is progressing on any given day.

And perhaps most important of all: What is the trail I'm leaving behind me in the world? What is my wake, inside my heart and outside? That's a pretty good one for me. It doesn't matter how good I feel on the cushion if what's happening off the cushion isn't so helpful.

The most important thing these days, though, has become to hold things lightly. Any more, it's just more and more about the joy of being on the path itself and noticing the contentment of that.

So in closing, I want to encourage you, in considering assessing your practice or setting new goals, to keep in mind conditionality. Notice how you're relating to your practice. Hold things lightly. Thanissaro Bhikkhu once told me to hold insights as sticky notes, so they can always be revised later. And above all, notice those choice points. And don't take it personally—any of it.

After sitting quietly for a few minutes, someone asked about wise reflection—one of the terms I had used—and whether it comes about through invitation or naturally emerges in meditation.

It can go either way, in terms of being invited or just emerging. What I've found for myself is that when the mind gets quiet enough, a certain kind of reflective capacity is just naturally there, and I allow space for that. So that's one form of wise reflection.

One of the most useful things in my practice—it happened sometime when I was in Burma, I don't actually remember which teacher invited this—was being told to take a few minutes at the end of meditation and schedule a date with yourself for wise reflection. Reflect back on how that meditation was, not from this point of I, me, and mine, but asking: What conditions arose? What went away? What strengthened? How was whatever you're working on? How was the concentration? How was the awareness? Allow time to use our natural intelligence as part of this practice.

It felt very liberating for me at the time to be invited to use that part of our minds that often just sort of gets quieted down—to reflect back after the fact.

Another question came about the Buddha's very succinct teaching that there are three goals in Buddhism: to abstain from evil, to cultivate the good, and to purify the mind. "This is the teaching of all the Buddhas" is sort of the ending refrain. The question was essentially: this is too many goals—how can we simplify this?

I think it's a beautiful question. I would encourage you to ponder for yourself if any of those goals hold the other two inside of them, and if you can use one as your North Star. I'm saying that not to be tricky, but because I've found that the practice is kind of holographic. If you look deeply enough into sila, the rest of the path unfolds. If you look deeply enough into bhavana, or what you were calling samadhi—meditation—the rest of the path unfolds. And so it is for all of them.

To allow yourself one simple goal can be a beautiful thing if it unfolds enough of what's important to you.

One of your challenges in the past has been considering goals, whatever they are, to be about I, me, and mine—having them be something concrete that's about your experience, your insight, your attainment. And what you've discovered, it sounds like quite beautifully, is that instead of thinking in terms of mine, you think in terms of this reservoir of peace, this reservoir of freedom from suffering that is available if you simply stop practicing clinging, if you stop practicing suffering. So there's a sense of abundance, right? That's very much about the letting go process.

I'm curious—does anybody else have thoughts on how you've used assessments or goals that's been helpful or not so helpful?

So you're noticing some clinging with your daily life practice, and it's around an app that gives you the number of days you've practiced in a row. You're noticing that if you don't sit today, it's going to ruin your record, your number of consecutive sits. I'm not sure how much that's clinging and how much it's skillful means. It sounds like a little bit of both, and that's it—that's exactly right.

There's craving that leads to the end of craving. There's desire that leads to the end of craving. The entire Eightfold Path is based on having certain kinds of desires, some of which are more wholesome than others at any given point. And in general, the principle is this: anytime we can trade a form of clinging or craving for a more wholesome form, we're going in the right direction. Thanissaro Bhikkhu calls this "trading candy for gold"—slowly trading the less virtuous motivation or the less virtuous feedback or experience for the more virtuous one.

We start where we're at. And if having an orientation towards making it to 365 days straight is helpful for you, that's where you're at. You're also commenting that using this technology and this form of motivation has helped you meditate every day, and that short periods many times accrue more benefit than sporadic longer sits—which has been my experience over time as well.

The observation here is that another way of relating to a milestone, besides picking it up and hauling it with you, is to be nourished by the fact that it happened and to allow it to build confidence. This is incredibly helpful. To me, conditionality and confidence can go hand in hand. It's confidence in the practice as it moves through your body, your heart, your mind. All of us are the Dharma. The Dharma expresses through each of our bodies and hearts and minds. And it's completely wholesome to have confidence in that, to let it be something that buoys you. It doesn't have to be a form of clinging. It can simply be growth in understanding the capacity of this individual to embody the Dharma.

Thank you all so much for your time and attention. It's been a pleasure to be with you.

CHAPTER 226

Refuge in Saṅgha with Andrea Fella and Amana Brembry Johnson

Andrea Fella · 1h01

In this collaborative dharma talk, Pam Weiss, Andrea Fella, and Amana Brembry Johnson explore the often-overlooked third refuge—the Saṅgha. Drawing from the Upaḍḍha Sutta where the Buddha declares that spiritual friendship is not merely half but the whole of the holy life, they examine how American individualism has shaped convert Buddhism's relationship to community.

The teachers share the powerful story of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's persistent petition to join the Saṅgha, with Ānanda serving as an ally who helped open the doors to women's ordination. This narrative illuminates how Saṅgha functions through mutual support, speaking up for unheard voices, and the courage to persist against resistance. Andrea Fella explores three layers of refuge—going for refuge, gaining full confidence through practice, and ultimately becoming a refuge for others through ethical conduct and embodied understanding.

The talk weaves together the teaching of paṭicca-samuppāda (dependent origination) with the practical reality that our inner patterns reflect collective conditioning. The teachers emphasize that mindfulness tools for meeting personal suffering equally apply to engaging with suffering in the world—not through passive equanimity, but through compassionate action. Amana Brembry Johnson frames Saṅgha as beloved community, a necessary refuge for those walking the radical, counter-cultural path of practice. The session concludes with Pam Weiss's reflection on love as a force—not mere feeling—that recognizes no barriers and breaks down the delusion of separation.

So this afternoon we want to talk a bit about the third of the three refuges or jewels, the Sangha jewel.

I sometimes think of this as the lost jewel. We've been talking about how Buddhism, or convert Buddhism, as it moves from one country to another and has landed in the United States, picks up the flavor of the culture or cultures that it comes to. And we've talked a bit about the impact of capitalism and democracy on the tone and shape of convert Buddhism here. There is another dimension of this culture, which maybe simply put is a very heightened kind of individualism in American culture, that has also

influenced to some degree how Buddhism, convert Buddhism, was initially translated into our culture. We have this kind of myth, perhaps, of ultra-independence. So this Sangha jewel is pointing us to something quite different than that.

There's a story in the Pali Canon of a dialogue between the Buddha and his attendant, Ananda. I love Ananda. He is, in my reading of these stories, kind of like this slightly bumbling, friendly, warm, but not super smart, nice guy. And he acts in many ways as the interface between the Buddha and his community, his Sangha. I always imagine it might have been kind of intimidating to bump into the Buddha. But if I might be afraid to talk to the Buddha, then there's Ananda. And Ananda's like this sweetheart. So he kind of helped in that interface.

So there's a story in which Ananda—who's not the sharpest tool in the shed—comes to the Buddha and says, "I had this big insight." It doesn't actually say that in the Pali Canon; I'm riffing a little here. So he had this big insight, and the Buddha says, "What is it?" And Ananda says, "Well, I realized that Sangha is fully half of the holy life." In other words, he realized how important Sangha was. And the Buddha reprimands him, as is often the case in these dialogues between the Buddha and Ananda, and he says, "Don't say that, Ananda, don't say that. You got it wrong again." And Ananda wants to know, "Well, how is it then?" And the Buddha says, "The Sangha is the whole of the holy life."

It's a strong statement. There is, at the very center of Buddhist teaching, this understanding of our interconnectedness, this teaching of what's sometimes called paṭicca-samuppāda, the interdependent web of being. That's really at the heart, in some way, of what the Buddha woke up to, what he saw. We could understand this as a description of what he realized in what I spoke about the other night as the third watch of the night—the truth of this dynamic, interdependent web of being.

Now, the Buddha did something quite radical in establishing his community, which is that 2,600 years ago in northern India, it was a very stratified class and caste system. Andrea was reminding me of this piece—how there was hierarchy within the Buddhist Sangha, but it wasn't based on one's prior position. So you could be a king or a merchant or a soldier or whatever, and that didn't determine your standing in the community. It was based on how long you'd practiced, how long you'd been there. That's an interesting reframing of how things were set up.

I think it's important to name that even though the Buddha opened the doors of the community to all different classes, there was one big category that got left out. And that was women. So in the beginning, women were not invited into the community. It was all monks and laymen, mostly monks.

And so there's another story that also features Ananda. This is a story in which Pajapati—the Buddha's mother died within a week of his being born, and he was raised by her sister—at some point comes and basically petitions the Buddha to allow women into the Sangha. And she comes, the story says, three times. Three times in Buddhist mythology is understood as a lot; three is many. So she came many times to visit the Buddha and to ask to be received, for her and women to be received. And the third time that she came—oh, he said no. She was not deterred. She came again. He said no. She comes a third time, and this time she brings her friends. This is another way of talking about sangha. So she brings this big group of women with her.

And coming to visit the Buddha was not an easy thing. They had to travel over dusty roads for many miles. So they show up, this whole gathering of women, outside the area where the monks are staying. They're in tattered robes, with swollen feet covered in sores from walking all that distance.

Ananda sees them and hears them, and he intercedes. Pajapati goes in and asks again, and the Buddha says no. The women—not yet nuns—are outside wailing and crying out. Ananda goes to them and asks, "What's going on? Why are you so upset?" And they say, "We want to be able to join the Sangha, to become part of the holy life."

So Ananda—the "not so smart guy"—goes in and, in my reading of it, he tricks the Buddha a little bit. He says, "Isn't it the case that women are equally able to attain enlightenment as men?" And the Buddha says yes. Ananda says, "Then you have to let them in. You have to do this." He kind of pins the Buddha in a corner. And so the Buddha says okay. And he does.

I love this story as a way of understanding this piece of Sangha: that we need each other. We need all of our voices. We might understand Ananda in this story as a kind of ally figure. He's speaking up for, giving voice to, a group of people whose voices aren't being heard. It's a beautiful expression of that.

And I think it's important to say that the misogyny you hear in this story has continued in the Buddhist tradition. It's not gone, but it is changing. It's changing in large part because of courageous voices like Ananda's, who are willing to stand up and offer support. And it's changing because of courageous voices like Pajapati's, who didn't give up. She was told no once, twice, three times. She didn't give up or let go or go away.

So this is a living aspect of our teaching—the full integration of Sangha as alive, essential, whole of the holy life, part of our practice, and the extension of including all of our voices in the various languages that we speak. There are important changes happening in the context of Buddhist teaching and Buddhism and Buddhist Sangha that we

are sitting right in the middle of now. This is a way of inviting you and me and all of us to wholeheartedly engage, to bring our care and our love and our voice to expressing, to becoming the fullness of the teachings as they continue to land here.

I had the opportunity to spend some time at the end of last year in Bhutan, which is a Buddhist country. There were many extraordinary things about that experience, but it had a profound impact on me in terms of what I'm talking about here. When I was in a culture in which the teachings were completely embedded in daily life, it was so moving. Buddhist teaching wasn't something rarefied that happened only in monasteries or retreat centers. It was expressed as a completely relational practice. It was expressed in how people took care of the temples and the statues and so on, but much more, it was completely infiltrated into how people related to each other, how they took care of each other. There was a kind of ethical purity that didn't come from trying to be good. It came from a deep understanding that we are deeply connected. And the same thing was true in the way the culture and community related not just to the human community, but to the animal community and to the earth itself.

For me, it helped me understand that there's a whole dimension of our nascent integration of convert Buddhism in America that is ours to be realized, ours to be expressed, ours to be fully embodied and fleshed out.

Maybe that's enough place to stop for now. We're going to share this talk in the spirit of Sangha. I was reflecting about the Sangha from the perspective of the analogy that is offered about the refuge in the Sangha being like the support of attendants who help us when we are ill, when we're needing to take our medicine. Yesterday I offered the analogy of the Buddha being like the doctor diagnosing the illness, the Dharma like the prescription—what we have to do, the actions we have to take to cure ourselves—and the Sangha like the attendants who help us and support us while we are taking the medicine. We need each other, as Pam was pointing to. We really need each other, as the story she's telling points to. And we see this in our own practice here.

We are a Sangha, and we support each other—not only in our practice, but quite literally in the preparing of food, the cleaning of dishes, the washing of bathrooms. Everything we do supports each other so that we can live with ease together. We have created this community of external support, and the internal work we do is also sustained by having like-minded people walking the path alongside us.

Because this is hard work. I think you've all felt that—the courage it takes to meet our own minds, the courage it takes to open to our struggles, our suffering, to really open to all of that messiness inside. It takes personal courage, and that courage is supported by having a community of practitioners with us.

I remember on one early retreat feeling like I was in the midst of some major meltdown, sitting there with my eyes closed. Then I opened my eyes and saw people sitting around me very quietly, just as you are sitting now. I had no idea what was going on in their minds, but simply looking at people sitting there, I thought, "If they can sit with whatever's going on in their minds, I can do it too." Some of you may have felt this flavor of Sangha support here in our community together.

This is a real part of our practice—that we support each other. When we find it challenging, when our courage is flagging, we might just look up and see somebody walking mindfully across the room, and our courage rises in that moment. We support each other in this way. We take refuge in the Sangha. We borrow the courage of others to help us.

In the texts, this is described as the beginning of refuge. In my exploration of the Pali Canon and the suttas around refuge, it feels like there are three layers. The first layer is this going for refuge—going for refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. This involves taking on trust that these will be supportive, using the support of the community, perhaps taking a leap of faith that the teachings make sense, and trusting what the Buddha said: "Yes, this seems like something useful to try." This going for refuge is almost like borrowing the confidence of others to begin our journey.

Then that deepens over time. There's a phrase that says as we practice, as we engage in these teachings, as we have enough confidence in them to actually practice, we ultimately gain full confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. This is the place where we have learned enough, where we have had understandings that transform us, where that shift of perspective allows us to see the teachings directly for ourselves at a very deep level.

This shift of perspective lands us into the third aspect of refuge, where we can become a refuge for others. The teachings explore this possibility—that we can understand the teachings deeply enough that we enter into the Sangha. Pam mentioned a couple of days ago the technical definition of refuge in Sangha: those beings who have had a deep understanding of what the Buddha taught, whether laymen or laywomen, monks or nuns. The Sangha of refuge is the community of people who have had this understanding. When we gain such understanding, we step into the place of becoming a refuge ourselves.

I'd like to explore that a little. There's one place where the Buddha encourages us to become a refuge for all beings, and the first aspect of that is ethics—engaging in harmlessness. Amana mentioned the other day, when talking about the precepts, that in engaging in harmlessness and ethical conduct, we are offering the gift of fearlessness to

all beings. This is that refuge. When we are committed to non-harming, beings can feel safe in our presence. This commitment to ethical conduct is one form of becoming a refuge.

So we walk the path. We engage in the inner journey ourselves. Much of what we learn in this setting is how to look internally, how to look at our own hearts and minds, how to see the way our own hearts and minds create such a mess in there. It takes the Sangha to support us in doing that, to have the courage for it. As we walk the path, we cultivate the qualities of heart and mind that the Buddha encouraged us to cultivate, cultivating that refuge in the Dharma.

One of the analogies I appreciate about the path comes from Stephen Batchelor, who pointed out something essential about following the path of the Buddhist teachings. Looking at the analogy of a path through the woods: in order for there to be a path, many, many people must have walked on it.

And so we are seeing the Sangha as we're walking on a path. We may not see them right in front of us, but the existence of that path through the woods is evidence of that community that has walked there. And then as we follow in that path, we in turn are keeping it clear for people following us. This is also a way in which the Sangha works—that we become a refuge by engaging in the path. We can't help but be a refuge because we are keeping the path alive for people to follow.

So there's this inner side of the practice, looking internally at our own mess and the suffering that's inside. And yet there's also a whole area of our relationship to the world, our relationship to the suffering in our world. I believe that the same tools that help us to meet the messiness of our own minds can support us in meeting, opening to, and engaging with the suffering in the world. To me, this too is a part of being a refuge—that we don't simply limit our exploration of suffering to our inner struggles, but we open our hearts to the world and explore what it means to meet that suffering, the external suffering, the outer world.

This is looking at practice internally and externally, the inner practice and the outer practice. Now, one of the reasons I think that the tools of our inner practice work so well in the outer world is because essentially our communities and cultures are created by a bunch of human minds interacting. And we ourselves are shaped by a bunch of human minds that have gone before. This is really spoken about in the teaching that Pam mentioned about dependent origination—this shaping of our minds by intentions and actions. It's not just about how it's happening inside, because we are not shaped in isolation. It's not just an individual thing. We are a collective. We are a community. And the shaping that happens here is a result of so much shaping that came before—my en-

gagement with my parents and their parents, and the cultures that they were shaped by. All the views, the ideas, the opinions, everything that has shaped me—I didn't make it all up. It was conditioned into me through the cultures. And so all of this mess that's in here has been shaped by a lot of mess that's come before. If I'm not waking up to this mess, then probably what's going to happen is I'll perpetuate the mess.

This speaks to the inner work, the waking up, the seeing of how the patterns and habits work. We see it's not just about me. We see it's a human thing. This is what we're learning when we see our own minds. Initially, it really feels very personal. It's like, "Oh, these are my struggles. This was my conditioning. These are my difficulties and problems." And eventually we begin to recognize, no, these are human problems. These are human patterns. That recognition begins to turn us outward also.

I remember on one retreat, I was sitting there recognizing that this quality of suffering happening in here was a reflection of suffering in the world. And I was like, "Oh my gosh." I had had a really privileged life—my parents loved me and cared for me—and I'm experiencing a lot of messy, yucky stuff in my mind. No wonder the world is so painful. No wonder. It's just seeing this confusion multiplied by eight billion. No wonder it's so challenging out there.

This opens our heart to some extent to compassion for the messiness of the world. We see in our own hearts the struggles that we have, and we recognize, "Oh yeah, other people too." When we're meeting suffering in the world, we are meeting greed, aversion, and delusion at work, habits and patterns at work. We start to see this. We start to see that the way our own mind works—just as one example, we see a thought arising in our mind and an impact, an effect of that thought. Whether or not the thought is true is kind of irrelevant in a way. My own belief, my own thought that I was a failure and was unworthy—those beliefs, those thoughts had an effect on how I engaged in the world, even when I could see them and think, "Wow, I don't even actually believe that." But still there was this effect. We see that our thoughts have a tremendous power.

The truth of a thought doesn't actually necessarily mitigate its effect. And likewise in the world—the beliefs we have, the views we carry about other people, about all the fake news that's out there. In some ways, the effect of fake news, the effect of views and opinions, even if they are not at all based in reality—the effect is real. Just like the effect of our own thoughts on our hearts and minds is real. And we see that. We wake up to that.

Some of this exploration around bringing mindfulness to the ways our minds work helps us see into how suffering is created, and gives us perhaps a little bit of capacity to hold some of the messiness in the world. Now, this isn't about non-action. My sense is

that engagement with the world can become a refuge. I do think that the tools of mindfulness, of balance, of equanimity, of compassion can be applied in meeting the suffering of the world.

And yet, what does it mean to meet injustice in the world with equanimity? My sense of that is not that it means we sit back and say, "Oh yeah, things as they are. People being slaughtered. That's what's happening." That's not the way equanimity expresses itself, in my understanding.

Equanimity expresses in a kind of recognition that this is what is happening. So there's a true acknowledgment: yes, this is the condition. And rather than trying to deny that it's the condition, we come into alignment with this is what's happening. The heart that is able to hold that is not one of passivity. That heart that is not pushing away or holding onto, that is in that place of "this is what's happening"—it has a kind of movement to respond. To respond with compassion, not with anger, not with hatred, but with compassion.

And that's another way that this practice, the inner practice that we do, unfolds. We've talked about holding all of our messiness and seeing that a transformation happens because our hearts and minds can hold that with balance. The compassionate response to that, the inner compassionate response, is a releasing of suffering. Externally, it may look more like taking action, not simply holding it with equanimity and it magically releasing. It probably looks more like stepping into action through compassion.

Refuge. Refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. I want to enter this from one of the perspectives of what dukkha is. And what's come up throughout the retreat, for me, has been the delusion of separation. This is one of the aspects of dukkha—that there are separate individual whole pieces, when in fact we are all just aggregates of each other, pieces of each other.

I wish I had brought this quote from Martin Luther King. I haven't memorized it, and I should, because I like to refer to it a lot. So I'm going to just talk about it a little bit. He said that we are part of a single garment, and each of us are individual threads of that garment. Without each thread, there would be no garment. And so this illusion of separateness creates a lot of suffering.

To go back a little bit further to refuge: refuge is a condition of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger, or trouble. From dukkha. Refuge is an asylum. It is a sanctuary. It's a safe haven and a port in the storm. And so when we take refuge in sangha, we're really taking refuge in beloved community.

I remember in my twenties and thirties, I used to fast a lot because I thought that was really the healthy thing to do—to detox the body and cleanse. And a lot of times I felt like I was looking through a peephole out at the world, by myself, because I really didn't have a lot of people around me who were also doing that.

And I found it very difficult to do it on my own. People were asking me, "Well, why are you doing that? Why are you eating like that?" They were questioning me and challenging me and not supporting me, really.

And to fall into community, to fall into sangha, where we can rest and be supported in our journey towards liberation, to go up against the conditioning that is out there—the conditioning of unsafety, of not being sheltered, of not being cared for, of not being considered, of not being included.

I love the story that Pam brought of Ananda and giving you a bit of Ananda's personality in it. And the Buddha saying, Sangha is the whole of the Dharma. The whole of the Dharma. How far can we get without each other?

I want to bring up another thing that Pam was touching on throughout the retreat when she spoke of seeing the sky through a straw. How much of the whole picture can you get from seeing through that straw? And she followed it up with: it is only together that we see the whole sky. And it's only together that we are whole.

So as we undertake this journey towards liberation, we are weaving ourselves back together, recognizing that there's no space between you and I, that we are all of this. And also understanding the importance of creating safety by developing the moral compass, the ethics that Andrea was just talking about. Not to harm, not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to violate other people's bodies sexually, not to violate ourselves sensually—taking in too much visually, through hearing, touch, taste, smell.

It's challenging to walk this path. Though we may seek the fruit of liberation, we're wading through a lot of murky water. There has been a path, as Andrea pointed out, trod down where we can see it, but it's still a dense forest growing all the time, every day. And it takes beloved community to traverse this territory. This is taking refuge in the sangha.

I wish I could remember those words of Martin Luther King—just the intricate web that we are with each other.

I think of my children. I have a bunch of grandchildren. And I think of how deeply, tenderly I love them, because I take them as my own, as a part of me. And in that, I provide a refuge for them. I protect them. I keep them safe. I harbor them. I give them a

port in the storm. And if we could all take refuge in each other in that same way, we begin to create the conditions of this world in the way we want to live—in harmony and peace and compassion, kindness, care for each other.

So I don't have much more to say about refuge in the sangha, except that it is a beloved community that supports us and floats us in a tumultuous world, a world on fire. And the very process and act of practicing is a radical act today. It is so radical. It is so against the stream. And community is so necessary to be able to paddle upstream.

*

As you were speaking, I'm remembering this African proverb that says: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

So this is a long path. As you described, the forest keeps intruding, growing back, getting messier. And this truth of our connection—it's not a metaphor. It's not an analogy. It's not an image. It is really what the Buddha woke up to.

So often in the teachings, we talk about the absence side—this sort of emptiness side of the truth of how things are—that there is an absence of a separate, solid, permanent self.

The Buddha called this Anatta, which was later expanded to be understood as a teaching that there is no separate, solid, unchanging anything. This is the teaching of Sunyata.

And sometimes when we meet that side of the teaching, it can feel scary. It can feel kind of cold, if that's a word to use—like, yikes, nothing. Which of course doesn't mean nihilism; I don't mean that. But still, there's the letting go side of the practice, there's the shedding, there's that.

But that's not the only side. There's another way of going in. I think of that sometimes as the wisdom side of the teaching. But there's another side, which is what we're talking about here. One side is: no, there's no separate solid me. That's one way of saying it. There is an absence of that. But what is there a presence of? What there is a presence of is this web of connection. That's what there is, not what there isn't. This web of connection that we are made of.

It's interesting because we have this metaphor—some of you may have heard it—of the two wings of the bird. One wing is compassion and the other wing is wisdom. And you need both wings to fly. That's where freedom comes from. If we have too much wisdom without compassion, it gets kind of scary, cold, sharp. If we have too much com-

passion or kindness without wisdom, we have what Pema Chödrön calls idiot compassion. We're trying to do well—this speaks to our efforts of engaging in the messy world—but we don't have the wisdom to actually do well without either doing more harm or harming ourselves. So we need both.

But I've been enjoying actually intentionally using this other side, this interconnected side, as a way to talk not just about compassion but about love, which is not a word we use that much. And I don't mean love as a feeling. This is a really important thing. But love as a force.

This is from Maya Angelou. She says, "Love recognizes no barriers." Love is what breaks down that illusion of separation. She says it jumps hurdles, leaps fences, and arrives at its destination full of hope. If we only see the wisdom emptiness side, the absence-of side of our practice, it's easy to lose hope. We need to keep filling ourselves with love in order to be able to stay in it—to go far, not just to go fast.

And this is embedded in the teaching of refuge in Sangha. It's the truth of the fact that we are actually joined at the hip—that there's no way, in fact, for me to wake up and be free while other people suffer. If I am a sensitive human being and there are people suffering, I feel it.

And so just as Andrea was saying in such a beautiful way, we have this opportunity in the context of a supportive community to cultivate this capacity to be with our own suffering, which frankly feels like just about enough sometimes, doesn't it? Like okay, that's about as much as I can handle. No more. But we don't get that, because pretty soon we're going to walk out the door and there are going to be a few other people there, and they probably won't be in silence. And they may not have taken up these ethical precepts that Amana recited on the first night.

So we have to understand how it is that we extend that out. And we don't extend it out by walking around saying, "Oh, there's not really a me here. No self, no me here, stomp, stomp, stomp." No. We can understand it by understanding and feeling the truth of how to be with this universal suffering that's ours as human beings. And to do our best. One of my old teachers used to say the whole of our practice can be summed up like this: not making things worse. It sounds sort of simplistic, but pretty good actually, right?

So we move back into the world tenderized. We move back into the world, hopefully with some wisdom, with some insight that we've gained into how we work and how to work with our own suffering. But we don't stop there. We take that because we understand our connectedness, and because it's not just wisdom but also love that is shot right through the center of this practice.

do our best to meet ourselves and each other and the earth itself with this understanding of interdependence, this understanding of needing each other.

And we can begin not just to tolerate various other people, just like we're not just going to tolerate our own boredom or sleepiness or restlessness or anger or grief. It's not good enough to tolerate. We actually have to be interested. We have to reach across the aisle and say, "Who are you? Tell me. I want to understand. I want to know."

We have to be willing to be with and listen deeply so that we are touched by, so that we are shaped by, so that we begin to feel those threads. Because that's what we are anyway. It's just a matter of sliding in, you know? If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. We are together. I paraphrase, but that's what the Buddha said. And because of that, we have the capacity to go a long, long way.

We continue to not just be impacted, but to also impact the world—to love what we see, which doesn't mean saying, "Oh yes, everything is fine." Sometimes that love is fierce. But it comes from love, you know? A fierce love that says no is still coming from love. It's not coming from greed or hatred or delusion.

So, just in case what I'm saying sounds like, "Oh no, I'm not like that"—actually, you are. And the fact that you've been here sitting with yourself for all of these days is an enormous act of love. So please don't miss that. You could not think so, but that's just what you think.

So let's sit for just a minute together.

Thank you for listening.

Notable Dhamma Teachers

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella

Precise, penetrating teachings on mindfulness of the mind, the hindrances, and not-self

226 talks · Andrea Fella

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity.
Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.

dharmaseed.org